

## ***A MESSY SPECIES***

**by Michael Ventura**

*Austin Chronicle – December 22, 2006*

Civilizations are usually better off dead. Especially empires. Greek civilization is pretty cool, what with all those plays, philosophies, geometry and democracy -- none of which prevented Athens and Sparta from tussling, and after that their civilization just kind of poofed. But their rep gave Macedonia's Alexander the Great some class. In return he spread their ideas and troubles throughout the known world. Still, for the Greeks themselves it was mostly poof. So their smarts didn't do them much good, not in terms of "having a civilization." In fact, one of the great lessons of civilizations is that smarts don't count for much in the long run; no civilization has been smart enough not to screw up and fall. The Greeks left us a great shelf of books, though.

Which is what civilizations end up doing after they're done causing trouble. They leave some books, some art, some ruins for the future to unearth. And they leave some lessons, usually about what not to do -- lessons ignored by the new civilization that is so sure it's smarter than the last. And what happens to the people who do a civilization's dirty work when their civilization tanks? The common folk, like us, schlep on. Hang around. They're a little lost sometimes because, for so many, what they thought was their personal identity was mostly just a symptom of their civilization. But that hangover wears off in a few centuries. After all, Greeks still do whatever Greeks do, and picnic at the Parthenon. Egyptians, Persians, Romans, Mayans, the English, they're still around, mostly just getting by and looking for new ways to get into trouble. For instance, Persians (we call them Iranians) want their own nuke, which is a prime product of our civilization, a civilization that (not a moment too soon) is on its way out. We'll leave lots of books and movies and the blues and the Net and the bomb and (unless the planet decides differently) we'll still piddle around, waxing nostalgic over lost glories like '69 Chevies and Louis Armstrong and Marilyn Monroe. But we won't cause as much trouble for other people -- which is what civilizations are really good at. We'll keep our trouble local. And we'll still do some notable stuff. Hey, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the Greeks had great poets again -- it was about 2300 years since their last great poets, but Cavafy, Seferis, and Ristos almost make up for that gap. And the trouble Greeks cause now, you never hear about it, 'cause it stays Greek.

Some civilizations leave something behind to spook the future. The Mayans left prophecies and a calendar. If by some good fortune (which I'm about to ruin) you haven't heard, the Mayan calendar ends on December 21, 2012 -- the winter solstice, no less. According to Mayans, after 2012 there's zilch. No more history-as-we-know-it. Well, December 21, 2012, is just six years from yesterday (if you're reading this paper on its publication date). I don't worry about what I can't influence but for anyone who does the Mayan calendar is something to bite your lip about. Mayans were crackerjack astronomers. They invented the zero before anyone else, which, as usual, did their civilization no good in the long run. Centuries before Copernicus the Mayans could predict eclipses, so they knew that the solar system revolves, and who knows what else they knew? According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, six years from now the Mayans thought that "the present world... is doomed to end in cataclysm... of a markedly direful character."

Isn't that just like the Brits? "Markedly direful." It's possible Mayans knew of an asteroid or comet that we don't, with which we may collide on 12/21/12. Some think "markedly direful" is a shift of earth's magnetic poles. And some think, well... hit the Internet, read the bilge. People will think anything that satisfies them emotionally. We're that kind of species. Which may be good, because if we weren't our civilizations might last longer and cause even more trouble.

Some think 2012 will bring "the return of universal telepathy, a self-reflexive consciousness [you mean we're not self-reflexive enough?!]... a return to the sacred domain of inner technology." That and more (if you can stand it) can be read on [www.13moon.com](http://www.13moon.com), one site among many. Some intelligent gents and gals of my acquaintance believe a more seemly version of the above, to the effect that after 2012 humanity will finally, slowly or swiftly, blossom into its

full potential, if such a thing exists. It would be cantankerous not to root for their point of view, though history argues for a darker prospect. Still, one truly marvelous trait of our species is that we never give up, not about the big things. We dream, and we act upon our dreams. Which often, in the process of causing more trouble, also creates great beauty. They go hand in hand, beauty and trouble, always. Beauty and trouble are the building-blocks of civilizations. So no need to tell us “Dream on,” we can’t help dreaming on, punch-drunk or not, and there’s something loveable (if not particularly successful) about that.

But back to that Mayan calendar... my reference books don’t note whence comes the phrase “a fly in the ointment,” but it’s a useful image: a pesky bug stuck in undefined goo. A bug in the Mayan’s goo is inadvertently hinted at on 13moon.com: Mayan “messengers” deposited their “calling card” upon “a series of super-sized stone monuments and pyramids” on which their celestial prophecies got writ. The Brits demurely note that “the amount of labor involved [in the construction of those pyramids] would have been enormous and so would have the social controls necessary to see the job through to its completion.” For “social controls” read “slavery.” Slobs like you and me don’t schlep and sweat to build pyramids unless someone threatens to kill us. So one must wonder why hip people, who seek release from the slavish ways of our present empire, find solace in ancient prophecies of a slave empire. Aristocracies lie, and concoct systems of lies, to control the likes of us. They do it now and did it then. How Mayan beliefs served to control the common Mayan Jane and Joe, we don’t much know. But beliefs carved in stone, even lovely beliefs, don’t often originate or conclude in peace and harmony.

Or is Mayan math, like ours, a closed system, referent to itself, useful for some things and not for others, handy as a hook for mythology and useless at predicting the future? They had a circular sense of time and 2012 could be merely the circumference of that circle. But it’s much more fun to think that history is about to end or that humanity is about to change its basic nature.

No doubt a civilization is ending. Western civilization -- and its American subset -- can no longer dominate the world. No one knows what the next civilization will look like but everybody loves a happy ending, especially when the story is one’s own. Which explains all versions of: “It’s a GOOD thing the world’s a mess ‘cause it means things are about to get BETTER!” Christians look toward a Second Coming after Armageddon, and Jews look toward a first. Many of all faiths believe human consciousness is evolving (though, speaking as a writer, it’s hard to see how writers have evolved since Shakespeare). Some believe we’d all be better off if we knew how better to raise our children, especially our male children. Or science will improve us. Or we’ll be better as the galaxy shifts into Aquarius. Or something. What all these beliefs have in common is the notion that, through divine or human agency, humanity is perfectible.

An extraordinary belief, when all humanity’s ventures indicate that it is not perfectible. In fact, our Founders wrote our constitutional checks and balances to protect us from our flaws, because they believed our flaws incurable. Few are so practical. Why are so many unable to accept that what we are *is* what we are? A messy species, hard to please, brutal and beautiful, creative and constantly in trouble, never giving up on the big things, always fascinating (at least to ourselves) and always shimmering with a quality that is essentially unknown. That unknown quality, which we sense and try ineffectively to name, is what makes us able to say anything about ourselves. Anything at all. “Made in God’s image” or whatever. We know what we do, but many of us cannot quite bring ourselves to conclude that what we do is what we are. And is all we are.

A high school kid once said to me, “Humanity has no opposite.” We have no correlative or check on what we may think about ourselves. Civilization by civilization, we see ourselves anew, make ourselves up, get into and out of trouble, all the while doing what we do and, very often, hoping what we do is not what we are. Or not all we are. We insist on this. Over and over, this way and that, civilization after civilization. And it may be true. Or it may be just another thing we do.

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