



Once Upon a Time, The End

*Those that can make you believe absurdities
can make you commit atrocities.*
Voltaire

† THE SMALL GROUP OF DEVOTED followers gathered around Chicago housewife Dorothy Martin sat in stunned silence as the clock on her suburban living room wall struck midnight on the twentieth of December, 1954...and nothing happened.

Many had left jobs and spouses and given away all their money and possessions in order to await the arrival of alien beings from the planet Clarion, who Martin had assured them would descend at that appointed hour, carrying the faithful few off in their flying saucers just before huge floods engulfed the planet Earth.

Finally, four hours after their scheduled departure time, Martin broke her silence.

As the group readjusted their bras, belts, and zippers—having been instructed to discard any metal objects which might interfere with the aliens’ telepathic radio transmissions—their tearful host revealed the reason why their intergalactic rescuers had failed to appear: Apparently it had all been only an elaborate test of faith, and the group’s advanced state of enlightenment had saved the entire planet from a watery destruction!

Surprisingly, only one or two of Martin’s followers were unconvinced by this perfectly rational explanation. Among them, however, was social psychologist Leon Festinger, who had secretly infiltrated the group. Festinger would later write about Martin—using the pseudonym of Marian Keech—in his groundbreaking 1958 book, *When Prophecy Fails*. (Not surprisingly, Festinger is credited with coining the psychological term ‘cognitive dissonance.’)

Following publication of Festinger's book, the group predictably collapsed under the weight of public ridicule. Martin fled to Peru to warn the clueless natives about the imminent re-emergence of Atlantis, before later resurfacing in Arizona, where she joined crackpot L. Ron Hubbard's nascent pseudoscientific movement, Scientology.

It seems that for as long as people have inhabited the world, they have anticipated its imminent demise. (In fact, the oldest known apocalyptic prediction is depicted on Assyrian tablets from 2800 BC.)

In what may be the earliest example in European folklore, a Frankish villager wandered off into the forest in 591, only to be accosted by a swarm of ravenous flies. Overwhelmed, the poor fellow completely lost his mind and returned to his village clothed in animal pelts, claiming he was Jesus Christ, sent to gather his flock before the coming Rapture. (Perhaps resenting the competition, a local bishop hired a gang of thugs to capture the Lord of the Flies, who they rapturously hacked into little bits.)

The failure of one apocalyptic prophecy not only failed to deter its devoted followers but in fact spawned several entirely new religions. When the world failed to end as predicted in the 'Great Disappointment' of 1843-44, Massachusetts preacher William Miller's tens of thousands of followers splintered off to found the Seventh Day Adventists, as well as the obnoxious door-knockers known as Jehovah's Witnesses.

When the next fateful year of 1874 passed without the desired fireworks, the latter's charismatic founder, Charles Taze Russell, explained that Jesus had indeed returned, but was invisible to all except the truly devout. (Predictably, few dared admit to being lacking in the requisite level of faith.)

The founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, had declared way back in 1832 that 1890 would be the year of Jesus's long awaited return engagement. (Later jailed for fraud, Smith somehow failed to predict his own deliverance by an angry mob at age 39.) Russell revised the fateful year to 1881... then 1914...and finally, 1918. (The latter dates spanned World War I and the Spanish Flu epidemic, events that while apocalyptic for many, fell short of being world ending.)

Our own time has seen the horrors of the Peoples Temple—in which 914 adults and children committed suicide in the jungles of Guyana in 1978; the Branch Davidians, an offshoot of the Seventh Day Adventists—75 of whom died in the FBI standoff at Waco in 1993; Aum Shinri Kyo—whose poison gas attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1994-95 left 19 innocent people dead; and—neither least nor unfortunately, last—Heaven's Gate, 39 of whose members committed suicide in 1996, fully expecting (like Dorothy Martin) their spirits to be carried away by aliens hiding in the wake of an approaching comet. It was probably no coincidence that all of these cults were acting in anticipation of an impending Bible-inspired Day of Judgement.

One is tempted to blame these kinds of incidents on the delusions of a small minority of misguided religious fanatics, except that millions of people alive today are expecting an imminent Biblical apocalypse. In a 2012 global poll, fully one out of 7 people said they thought the world would end during their lifetime—and rather ominously, Americans topped the list of doomsayers at 22%.

Since their government has the means to fulfil their death wish many times over, one can only hope their gloomy prediction won't one day become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Just call it a bedtime story for humanity.