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The Coming of the Zeroes

Joshua Matthews

to my children

I am preparing for the end of the world. So is everyone else.

But there are different ways to plan.

Recently, a relative wrote a note to our family, which asked us to consider investing in a disaster plan. Buy freeze-dried food, the note said, and store it in our new megafreezer. If things get bad, you can come live out here. We're going off the grid, buying solar panels, drilling an artisanal well. Should the banks close, or the dollar go to zero ... or should you have a flood or fire or cyclone hit your house, you would be ready.

That note was written out of love, as is this note to you.

Another relative is studying how to form a local militia, in the middle of a major city. His family raises chickens in a small backyard, beneath a children's playhouse, in a large residential neighborhood.

Yet another relative makes dandelion wine and wants to live in a commune in her old age. (They still have these today; they probably always will.) She's headed there as protection against the lack of social security, although she knows no one there. The idea is that you go live in a remote village with a hundred people, you work and feed each other from subsistence farming, you hope you like your neighbors.

My plan for the end may not be better or saner. It is, as I have learned, more fun.

My memory of *The Brothers Karamazov* is nearly twenty years old now, but when I read it in the spring of 1999, it made then the greatest of impressions on me, though my memory of its contents may not be true then or ever. I was curled up in a lime-green chair, next to a decades-old radiator that wheezed gently and in regular, soothing pulses, a time that passed too quickly in the old Purdue library, where I neglected my homework for Linear Circuit Analysis. The fluorescent lights glowed

just brightly enough at 7 a.m. to illuminate those faded words in the yellowed paperback, up in the cold corner of the third floor, where no one would appear for several hours and the scent of waxed linoleum soaked the stale air.

There was something enchanting about Alyosha Karamazov that only I (as I thought then) understood, which the lights and the radiator's pulses perhaps helped reveal to me. Alyosha, the novel's main character, endures turmoil mostly by hearing it out. The people in his life, all on the brink of personal collapse, talk endlessly to him. His juvenile father, his wanton brother Dmitri, his atheistic brother Ivan, each talk and talk for paragraphs in Dostoevsky's book, exposing themselves in long expostulations, questioning, belching words out into the air sometimes only because they need to be heard and believe they deserve to be heard. Alyosha sits with them, loves them, for hundreds of pages. He listens, he prays, he says almost nothing. He turns to the church and believes, in spite of Ivan's sensible portrait of a Grand Inquisitor who views the incarnated past as relevant in no way to the present terrifying era of the world. Ivan, terrified, sees nothing but nihilism; Alyosha serves Christ and loves his brother. Why?

You must understand that I should not have been reading this book, would fail Electrical Engineering 221 if I kept reading it, would face the greatest of uncertainties, no future plans, should I keep turning those yellowed pages at 7 a.m.

Then the book was pleasure. Only later did I learn that it is preparation for disaster.

That summer (in 1999), I took a job where I played a small part in saving the world from disaster. In this year, 1999, the great worry facing everyone in the computer industry was whether a programming glitch would change things for the worse. This glitch was called Y2K. In its essence, Y2K was about whether older computers would understand the change from the year 1999 to the year 2000. The problem was that some computers had only space for two digits in the year, the last two. If 99 changed to 00, on midnight of January 1, 2000, then those

computers would think that 00 meant 1900.

What would happen if computers had the wrong date? That mystery had enough people, in fact much of the world, worked into a state of worry. No one exactly knew, but many had their guess, what a computer at a nuclear power plant, say, would do if it thought the year 2000 was instead 1900. Errors, power loss, meltdowns. Anything terrible was possible.

If our power grid, our banking system, our global industrial heartbeat depended on computers believing that the year was 1900, we faced the end of western civilization. Those two zeroes were the harbingers of the end.

Not many people thought this, only a minority were panicked, but enough did to inspire a yearning for survival learning, stocked pantries, bunkers—for the kind of quaint lifestyle that recalled the year that the computers would think that we lived in. If we were to return to 1900 by mistake, perhaps we should embrace what we thought 1900 was. Simple, primitive, old, isolated.

As I write, Y2K has been dropped down a memory hole, rarely discussed and almost completely forgotten, yet it may have something to do with why your relatives, friends, and neighbors—who lived through the Y2K scare—act the way they do, worried about disasters that have not materialized.

Then again, it may have nothing to do with that. Nothing as in 00. This is the sign of a digital age, a key piece of a long binary number. Those numbers, making up all digital communication, are floating through the air wirelessly right now. They go in us and through us. Maybe they are us. If you are reading this on a device, this note to you is composed of 1s and 0s, and of so many 00s.

In 1999, the number 00 meant dread, the coming of catastrophe, the sign of the approaching nothing that would wreck everything.

My job, as an intern at a computer consulting firm, was to test the city of Kokomo, Indiana's computer systems for the Y2K problem. Our firm's name was Momentum, represented graphically in the logo by a stickman dashing to his left. This logo, as I later learned, was unintentionally appropriate; the left so often (in film) is the direction of disaster, the direction of the past.

Despite the threat of doomsday, I found myself aloof and dismissive of Y2K. Every computer I tested for the city of Kokomo did not have the

Y2K glitch. They were all fine, they all understood what the year 2000 meant. There are four digits in a year, these computers said, not two. No 00. In Kokomo, there was, as I observed, no Y2K problem whatsoever.

As a cynical young man, I extrapolated this observation to the rest of the world. Y2K was about people making money off of the fears of others.

That summer I was buried in the world of the modern office, which endears itself to no one. In spite of my Y2K findings, and in spite of the boredom this world induced, we had regular meetings with the city administrators, with each of whom I had to meet individually as well. They were a crew rivalled in appearance only by the bar scene in *Star Wars*, and the meetings felt little different than that moment when poor young and ignorant Luke Skywalker is assaulted in that bar by an old scoundrel with a hog's nose and a giant thing resembling a fly.

In these meetings we had to discuss preparedness for every disaster scenario you could dream of. What if on January 1, 2000 the city's sewage stopped working? What if the stoplights went dark?

Some of these meetings were led by my boss. He was an admirable alpha male, a conservative Catholic and a tough Scots-Irish type schooled in the corporate ranks of Proctor and Gamble. Other meetings were led rather unfortunately by Momentum's star consultant, Wayne Hoppe, who introduced me to the idea of contingency planning. Poor Wayne's manner was the opposite of my boss's, and inappropriate for these meetings of administrative misfits. He smiled all the time, spoke all too gently, and in general acted like Mr. Rogers—the host of a children's program in my youth—seemingly more interested in puppet shows and toy trains than the end of the world. It was always a great surprise to me to think of Wayne as a NASA programmer in the 1960s, a man responsible in a small way for the moon landing, programming the earliest computers via punchcards. Now he had descended to the small world of contingency planning for a non-event in a small Midwestern city, trying to rally bureaucrats who resembled space aliens to the cause, few of whom cared about their jobs, let alone Y2K anyway.

At one meeting, a large ox of a man named Larry Sanderson interrupted him.

"Look, Wayne," he bellowed, "The Sewage department don't care. Everything'll work on January 1. We don't need to be contingent for crap."

This was an inadvertent allusion to the city's sewage system.

"Well, um," Wayne said, looking hurt. "We either craft a contingency plan, or we deal willy-nilly with catastrophe. Do you remember your Bible, the story of Noah the prophet?"

At "willy-nilly" I was nearly out, but once this conversation turned pseudo-theological I had to stop listening. Our meetings were always filled with these sorts of absurdities. The truth was that Larry, as gross a figure as he looked to me, with his double-chin and multiple gold-plated bracelets, had a strong point. It seemed to me that our computer consulting firm was making money off a potential crisis, but not a serious one. There would definitely be a year 2000, and we would all be just fine. We would not be returning to 1900, ever.

After all, I am a child of the digital age. I need binary numbers. I am dependent on ones and zeroes.

I had already grown weary of modern office life even a few weeks into this job, a weariness that surely contributed to my flippant dismissal of the Y2K crisis as a legitimized scam. Our office had two rooms, my boss in one and five of us in another. Of the five, two were interns, and the other three were young professionals, all in their twenties.

It was here I learned about adult drudgeries, why and how mid-life crises occur in ordinary working lives, and how to bemoan the hour of 10 o'clock. Because at 10, only an hour-and-a-half had passed, yet the mornings always felt like days without end. To combat this feeling when the boss was away, the older employees shut down our office and led us in a rousing game of office football. This only consisted of flicking a small piece of diamond-shaped paper into various ad-hoc goals. Yet our leader, Phil W., took a psychotic joy in playing this game. He danced around the room like an orangutan when he scored.

A few years later, when my boss was elected mayor of Kokomo, Phil W. the orangutan was appointed deputy mayor. I didn't have to doubt when I heard that he was involved in various scandals that tarnished my good boss's reputation.

The reason I was absorbed by *The Brothers Karamazov* in the Purdue library and was cynical about Y2K leads back to a college course titled "Nuclear Weapons and International Politics," which changed my life. The lecture hall of 70 students was

usually only half-full.

There was no good reason for me to take this class, other than that it fulfilled some sort of requirement.

The class was about the possible end of civilization. For the first time, I learned about the theory of just war, mutually-assured destruction, the impact of fallout, and dirty-bomb backpacks. It was my first hard look at the Cold War of the mid-twentieth century. We heard about the threat of the hijacking of planes, which could be used as weapons, a threat manifested on September 11, 2001—it was not a terrible shock to me when it occurred; most people were unprepared psychologically for that disaster.

Our professor, a policy consultant to the Israeli government, directed us to ask why these threats exist. This key question, "why?"—more potent than the questions our modern office faced of "how?" or "how much?"—leads us straight to the human condition. His recommended reading list was filled with philosophy.

In a practical class, that list makes no sense. Who would read from it? Who needs it?

I had never read books like that. I tried them.

From that reading list, I made many friends—Gasset, Pascal, Girard, Kierkegaard—who spoke to me as I lounged in that lime-green chair by the radiator in the library. This was, it seems to me now, the way to study possible disasters, and perhaps to study how to avert them.

Here I interject a brief, but in retrospect, crucial incident that has since affected my life. In the spring of that year, on the university campus, right next to our dorm, I first saw riot police lining the street. They appeared to be modern knights with protective shields and large batons, aligned like a phalanx. Like something out of a dream or a TV newsbroadcast, the riot police were there because my peers had rushed into the campus streets—the women's college basketball team had won a national championship, a team that the rioting students had never cared about until they had such a chance to act violently together. They crowded around each other, found old couches and burned them, then knocked down light posts and kicked in car windows. They danced in swarms.

Why would they delight in destroying their world? How did they know they could form a mob with power? For an instant, for nothing, smart people had transformed into something lower than

beasts, bringing nothing but nothing. Destroying only to destroy, out of a false joy.

Besides our dorm, someone had knocked over a streetsign, twisted and bent somehow by the mob. We picked it up and decorated our dorm room with it. The sign said 1900 Park Avenue.

This year, 2015, an unknown human set fire to our barn. This person almost burnt it down; for what purpose, no one knows. Someone snuck in at night, dumped accelerants, and lit it. The barn, you will recall, was our garage, the old carriage barn accompanying our house. It was built in 1914.

We thought we were prepared for that. We had insurance. The insurance probably will not cover all of the repairs. I'm told that it doesn't sometimes.

People—the relatives who sent us the note of love that would save us from disaster—told us how great an event this would turn out to be. After all, we would get a new garage, for free or at a discount. When the first thing that somebody tells you after a disaster is how great the disaster was for you, you will wish that they had read the *Brothers Karamazov*. You will wish that you had Alyosha Karamazov listening to and praying for you.

Out of the destruction of the barn, nothing good came. You remember that, don't you?

You remember the hayloft in the second story and the troughs for the horses to eat out of—your cat slept in there. You remember the outhouse in the back corner of the barn; the bikers who biked across Iowa used it. You will remember the way that the plastic car you rode in—the same one I rode in as a child—melted onto the steel frame of your

bikes. You may recall the large depression I showed you in the steel shelf. That was where the plastic gas can had melted at 700 degrees. You remember walking through the barn and looking at all of this, then leaving it only to smell of the scent of charred wood clinging to your clothes.

The policeman who told me about the arson asked how someone could destroy a grand old building, something connected so strongly and obviously to the past.

I look at that barn now, staring at destruction that seems to have no purpose. Maybe the person who lit it did not want to see a remnant from 1900 anymore, did not like anything too old, wanted to watch something old down to nothing. Wanted everything to be in and of the digital age. Maybe the person was one of the rioters. Maybe he or she loved 00.

January 1, 2000. The New Year came and went. No signs of disaster. We all moved onward into the new millennium. People ate their stale stockpiled food. Their bunkers sat unused.

I keep reading from my professor's recommended reading list. I have tried to avoid the boredom of the modern office. I remember *The Brothers Karamazov*. As I grow old, I am less enamored of the digital age, for I have seen what 00 can do.

Children, do not love the world nor the things in the world. The world passes away, but you that do the will of God abide forever.

So prepare for the end of the world, but prepare in the proper way. I hope that you find a good book and a cozy chair.