

Thanksgiving in a post-communal age

Jamie Manson | Nov. 20, 2009

Just in time for the Thanksgiving holiday, Hollywood offers us two big-budget disaster films that are sure to fill us with the spirit of the season.

Both "2012," which opened last weekend, and "The Road," which opens on the eve of Thanksgiving, are two of the latest cinematic forays into a world ravaged by apocalyptic catastrophes. Where extreme special effects of "2012" may be more reminiscent of the graphic destruction depicted in "The Day After Tomorrow" and "I Am Legend," the weightier contemplation of the erosion of humanity in "2012" is more in line with 2007's "Children of Men." (Both films are the cinematic realizations of contemporary literary gems, penned by Cormac McCarthy and P. D. James, respectively.)

Though one film falls under the category of a pornography of disaster, and the other could be considered more philosophical in its aspirations, a corresponding theme runs through both: a small group of individuals are left alone to struggle for survival in a rapidly deteriorating, chaotic world.

Though disaster films have been an important part of the genre for decades, I often feel that movies with this theme have over-populated theaters in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001. It shouldn't be surprising. That terrible day turned our worst nightmares and unthinkable disaster scenarios into a frightful reality. Anxieties that were formerly irrational suddenly entered the world of possibility. Though movies are traditionally considered as escape from the boredoms and worries of real life, these films almost seem to serve the opposite purpose: they allow us to overdose on cataclysmic scenes, perhaps with the hope of numbing our fears about their real potential.

What is sad is that the moments of destruction seem to be the only images left in our collective memories -- or at least the memories of those who are creating and consuming big-budget cultural expressions of catastrophe. Though the horrific images of 9/11 have burned permanent marks in my mind, I also remember the remarkable spirit of community that overcame our nation of proud, rugged individuals. One of my most powerful memories is the endless lines of blood donors that formed outside of the Red Cross. Weeks before 9/11, the Red Cross was at a critical shortage of blood supply, one of the worst in its history. Yet, hours after the disaster, and for the weeks that followed, a record number of individuals lined up to give of their very bodies so that others might live -- without concern about the "average wait time."

The Thanksgiving holiday weekend has become a prime moment for large studios to release blockbuster films. Movie-going, it seems, has become as traditional as the turkey dinner. But I wonder if the themes of these particular films, and their scheduled release dates, aren't also a sad commentary on how alone and how anxious we must feel during the season that is supposed to be marked by harvest and gratitude.

These feelings of isolation aren't simply the result of the 9/11 tragedy, of course. For decades, Western society has experienced a gradual but radical shift from a communal way of living to the individualistic model that we experience today.

In the communal model, people are bound together, and they put the needs of their family, community, or village ahead of their own self-interest. Individuals are expected to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of the group to which they belong.

In our present culture, the needs of community no longer compel us in the same way. Today, we rarely live in the same neighborhoods as our extended families, we are not expected to share meals together each evening, and many of us are forced to put the caretaking of our children and elderly into the hands of strangers.

There are, of course, benefits to our post-communal way of life: individuals experience much greater personal freedom and opportunities to pursue their own aspirations. Men and women are no longer forced into specific roles in society based on their gender. But in wake of all of this self-determination, the value that we place on community has gradually eroded, and a toll has been taken on our capacity to care for one another.

In times of fear and tragedy, individuals turned to the community for support and security. As communities dissipate, so does a vital source of strength and comfort. In many ways, a meal is a ritualistic expression of this idea. During meals we are compelled to pay attention to one another, to give of ourselves to those seated around us. We are not simply fed in body during a meal, we also feed one another through the presence that a meal invites.

While we are proud individualists -- and well we should be -- more than ever we are hungry for community, most especially for the stability and support that it offers. In a post-communal age, we are faced with the challenge of redefining what community means. It may no longer necessarily consist of blood relatives. My own family no longer spends holidays together. Our village was dissolved by years of unresolved anger, jealousy, and fighting. My mother and I will spend Thanksgiving with my partner and three close friends who generously offer us the love that traditionally should have been provided by the family. The ritual of the holiday can help us to recognize who our community is, and what truly feeds us, not simply in times of chaos and devastation, but in ordinary, day-to-day life.

In some ways, Thanksgiving is a symbol of a time when community was vital to the well-being of the individual, and meals reinforced the sacred bonds of presence that are essential for the cultivation of the human spirit. Today, Thanksgiving also presents an opportunity for us to relearn how crucial community is to our very survival. Or, we can just go the movies.

[Jamie Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology, personal commitments and sexual ethics with Mercy Sr. Margaret Farley. A writer based in New York, she is the former editor in chief of the Yale magazine Reflections. As a lay minister she has worked extensively with New York City's homeless and poor populations. She is a member of the national board of the Women's Ordination Conference.]

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