

How to survive the Pretty Big One -- running, screaming and praying

Al Martinez, Los Angeles Daily News, 3-21-10

I had a neighbor once who would observe gloomily every time the weather changed: "Earthquake weather." It didn't matter whether it was changing from storm to drought or was one of those days when the Santa Anas blew. It was always earthquake weather.

It would seem that his philosophy of doom has permeated television news. Anchors and reporters are already warning that we should be prepared for either the Big One or a lot of little ones in view of the horrific earthquakes that struck Haiti and Chile and the much smaller one that rocked us slightly the other day.

Since seismologists are quick to report that one quake had nothing to do with the other, one must assume that my former neighbor was right: It's the change in the weather that is precipitating tremors in our area. Spring has sprung, and we're in for hell on earth.

As a result, we're all being told to prepare. If you're in a high rise at the time that is swinging and swaying like a ballroom dancer, I guess the best you can do is scream and pray and maybe dive under a desk when the sky begins to fall.

At home, we are told to have a sturdy table to crawl under, which I thought I had until I noticed one day that it seemed to buckle when the cat jumped on it. If the table cannot bear the weight of a small animal, it is not likely to be a safe haven when the heavy beams of one's ceiling are crashing down.

Once we were told to stand in the doorway when an earthquake hit. But then I guess someone was crushed by a door swinging shut from the power of the quake, so doorways were discarded as safe locales. They went the way of Quirky Quake, the short-lived iconic cartoon symbol of earthquake preparedness in L.A.

After the Pretty Big One in '94 toppled buildings and cracked the freeways, there was hardly a person in my neighborhood who wasn't preparing for the Really Big One by stocking up on canned foods and water, a battery-powered radio with extra batteries, warm blankets, a first aid kit, some kind of pry bar, a week's supply of Viagra and plenty of wine.

In times of stress, I am willing to forgo my preference for dry martinis in favor of red wine because of wine's well documented healing properties. But I stocked up on vodka too, just in case the calming qualities of the wine didn't work. I had plenty of vermouth since its minimal usage can make one bottle last 20 years. I had a friend who, when he mixed martinis, didn't even use vermouth. He just ran the capped bottle over the shaker and whispered "vermouth." He tried whispering "olives" once but that didn't have the same effect.

The neighbor who warns of earthquake weather totally missed anticipating the 6.7 Northridge monster, because there was no weather change to alert him and it occurred at about 4:30 in the morning when everyone he might have warned was asleep. It hit with a thunder clap, shaking our house like it was a tepee in a hurricane. I hit the deck running.

There is nothing in any preparedness manual that I know of that suggests running, screaming or praying during times of earthquakes; it's just instinctive. "You added one more element to that," my wife suggested later:

"Leave your loved ones behind to fend for themselves." That was instinctive too. I leaped out of bed and was halfway out the door when I heard her pathetic cry, "Wait for me!"

I explained later that I had simply gone out to make sure no trees were failing, thereby assuring her safety as she exited the premises, as cops like to say. "I fully intended to return for you when it was safe for you to leave the house," I said.

"Sure you were," she replied knowingly, "but only after testing the stability of the trees and maybe the safety of your wine supply."

At least I didn't scream.