Wyomingites are making eclipse plans. Many of us intend to see it, even if that means traveling and dealing with the crowds. Others will leave the state to avoid the crowds, while some will just hunker down in place and get on with life.

Some Americans apparently suffer from “eclipse anxiety,” the uneasy feeling that an eclipse is more than a natural phenomenon but a sign of something important, even a disaster.

If we imagine ourselves back in time, this is understandable. Prior to our modern, urbanized life where lights are always on and we cower in heated or air-conditioned buildings 90 percent of the day, our ancestors lived a rural existence. Farming and agricultural activities put the vast majority of people outside most of the time.

They became highly aware of the movements of the sun, moon and stars because they saw them every day, at least when the weather did not interfere. They knew the sun shined every day, traversing the sky from east to west on a predictable course. They could even tell the time of day from its regular movement.

So, a sudden disappearance of the sun would be upsetting, even terrifying. It would represent a departure from the way people knew the cosmos worked. The sun was predictable. Since almost no one would have experienced an eclipse before in their lives, the eclipse would demonstrate that the eternal patterns of the natural world, the world which their God (or gods) created, could be altered. And, that can’t be good.

A quick survey of the world’s religions reveals three main responses to eclipse anxiety.

First, the most common response is that an eclipse comprises a portent of a tragedy. Sometimes, this is a natural event, like a drought or flood, but usually it is a political event such as the death of a ruler or the defeat of an army in battle. Some Christians believe that the unnatural darkness that followed Jesus’ death was an eclipse.

So, when an eclipse takes place, religious figures work to ameliorate the coming disaster. Priests offer sacrifices to the gods. The ancient Greek historian Herodotus states that, when an eclipse occurred during a battle between the Medes and the Lydians, they quickly negotiated peace.

Secondly, other religions downplay the notion of an eclipse as a portent. In Islam, when an eclipse happened on the day Muhammad’s son Ibrahim died, many followers interpreted the eclipse as predicting the death. Muhammad denied this, saying, “The sun and the moon are two signs amongst the signs of Allah. They do not eclipse because of someone’s death or life. So, when you see them, invoke Allah and pray till the eclipse is clear.” An eclipse, in his view, was an opportunity for prayer -- nothing more.

Similarly, Navajo traditionally stayed inside their homes during an eclipse, singing special songs and fasting. In their view, the world goes out of balance at an eclipse, and they help bring it back into line.

Finally, many religions realized that eclipses could be predicted. After all, the sun moves predictably along the ecliptic path, and the moon is only five degrees off from it. Even though they move at different speeds, they cross paths on a regular basis. From there, it is simply a matter of observation and math. Once you work out the pattern and know the date of one eclipse, you can calculate the others.

Many ancient cultures built observatories to assist them in this process. Ancient Britons built one at Stonehenge, while others are known from Babylonia, Mesoamerica and Asia.

Today, the math for predicting solar eclipses is widely known. It is based on the elliptical movement of the earth around the sun; the elliptical movement of the moon around the earth; and the tilt and wobble of the earth itself. With the right data, a high school student can work out the date of past or future eclipses. So, even though our ancestors thought eclipses broke their experience of nature, eclipses are actually one of nature’s cycles.

Furthermore, while eclipses are rare for individuals, they are a common occurrence. Despite what the hype about America’s 2017 eclipse may lead you to believe, solar eclipses happen two to four times every year somewhere on Earth.

Note: This essay draws upon “How Eclipse Anxiety Helped Lay the Foundation for Modern Astronomy” by Maya Wei-Haas (Smithsonian.com) and NASA’s eclipse website (https://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/eclipse.html).

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