

THE END IS NEARISH

I come from a long line of crystal-ball gazers most of whom eventually lost their faith in crystal. Take my uncle Ted, for instance who in the early 1940s was projected by his high school peers to be the “Least Likely to Succeed.” True to form, Ted was expelled from Gordon Military College in his freshman year and took up welding. A perforated eardrum kept him out of the military when the army was accepting anyone standing more than 5’, weighing at least 105 pounds, and having twelve teeth. Ted says that initially he believed his peers’ predictions, but that all those veterans who needed houses after the war made success in the building business so easy even a “failure” like himself could succeed. As an independent building contractor today, Ted is worth a vast fortune, owns three homes, uncounted automobiles, an airplane, and recently set up an educational foundation with an endowment of ten million dollars. I realize that success is measured in different ways, so I should add that Ted is also married, has three children (all successful themselves), and six grandchildren. So much for the accuracy of yearbook predictions. Some would say that the very gloom of the forecast launched Ted’s career, but that would make crystal balls ironic. Forecasters cannot have it both ways—if the weatherman announces that it’s going to rain, and the sun shines, consumer confidence is not bolstered knowing he may have been teasing.

Another uncle, an exception who never lost the faith, once phoned a psychic hotline and learned that he had a “better than average chance of winning the Publishers’ Clearing House grand prize.” Uncle Bill, who was close to senile in his eighty-fourth year, calculated that he could guarantee a victory if he purchased every subscription Publishers’ Clearing House offered—at the time 120! When he lost, he was despondent, of course, but he had plenty of magazines to console him. I told him that phone psychics, who gross about a billion a year in this country alone, are just in it for the money. He said that wasn’t the case because if they were, they wouldn’t stay on the line for as long as you needed them. Aunt Laurie, Ted and Bill’s sister, also shared a faith in clairvoyance but lost it about five years before her death. In her mid-80s, she voluntarily surrendered her driver’s license after a near accident. On a five-lane highway, she had approached a green light in rush-hour traffic wanting to make a left turn. The turn arrow was not lit, but since she was first in line in the turn lane, she thought she could sneak a left when the light turned red. We’ve all been there. But when the light changed, the cars to her left and right started across the intersection so quickly (or maybe she was just too slow), she thought she’d better wait, so she backed up a few feet to wait for the green arrow. While she was sitting there, a complete stranger drove up on her right, rolled down her window, and asked, “Are you in ‘Drive,’ dear?” Laurie looked at her automatic-transmission indicator, and seeing that she was still in “Reverse,” went suddenly cold. She realized that if the light had turned green a few seconds earlier, she would have accelerated directly into the car behind her. For days she told this story thinking her anonymous benefactor was a mind reader until she realized that the woman had merely seen her backing up at the light and then noticed that her back-up lights remained on when she forgot to shift into “Drive.” Laurie’s Samaritan has the eyes of a lynx, but she’s not a seer. The only 20/20 forecasters I know of are the meteorologists stationed at McMurdo Sound, Antarctica. Their daily forecast is “cold.”

They've never been wrong.

Edellyn, another aunt but on my father's side, was surprised to be told by her college roommate, an accounting major, that she might be diabetic. Publicly my aunt ridiculed the prediction, but privately she worried. After a fretful week, she went for a blood test because she had been feeling somewhat feeble and feverish. The blood work revealed she had, indeed, developed a case of diabetes. For a couple of years Edellyn told people of her roommate's uncanny diagnostic ability, until a doctor asked her if she recalled ants around the toilet.

"As a matter of fact," Edellyn replied, "we did have ants in that dorm room. We sprayed; the school sprayed, but nothing seemed to help. The ants always came back."

"Well, there you have it," her physician opined. "The ants were attracted by the sugar in your urine. Your roommate wasn't Nostradamus, but by any chance, was she related to a health-care worker?"

"Yes," Edellyn said, "her mother was a public-health nurse."

Very often, what appears to be a product of pure intuition turns out to be a subconscious reading of subtle but empirical clues. (The Greeks called ants "piss prophets," by the way, largely because of their "uncanny" ability to diagnose disease.) Though an infestation of ants is not very subtle, few people associate them with human disease. Why the roommate never revealed how she knew what the prognosis would be remains a mystery. I suspect she enjoyed the sibyl's throne and didn't want to relinquish it. The Italian astrologer Girolamo Cardano was so disappointed when he awoke in good health seventy-two hours before the day he had predicted he would die, he committed suicide.

Predictions become more dangerous when clues are open to arbitrary or subjective interpretation. My wife, Ingrid, was a victim of such a prediction as a child. In the fourth grade, she came to school in Wolsdorf, Germany and was confronted by a friend in the schoolyard. The friend had made a small paper device that in America used to be called a "cootie catcher." It's folded from a single piece of paper in such a way that it fits over the fingertips of one hand, and depending on how the fingers beneath are moved, it's capable of opening in one of two ways. American kids who have these innocuous devices usually run amok collecting invisible "cooties" from their victims in their origami-style "catcher." In Germany, though, in the hands of budding psychics, the gizmo once had an eschatological function. Standing by the swing set, my future wife was casually asked her birthday, the numbers of which were then totaled to indicate how many times this device was to be opened and closed. When the schoolmate concluded, she poked the device in Ingrid's face and said, "See the red? You're going to hell!" The prognosticator then showed how her birthday sum insured that because she was "blue," she was heaven bound. As often as the device was fed Ingrid's odd sum of five (she was born on the 23rd), "Hell" was her ultimate destination. Needless to say this prediction caused my wife-to-be a great deal of worry until she confided in her mother what had been bothering her. A simple demonstration of odd and even numbers sufficed to lift the sinking heart that the forecast had caused her.

One of Steven Wright's stand-up routines goes something like, "I'm a peripheral visionary. From time to time, I get sidelong glimpses of the future. Sometimes I'm right; sometimes I'm wrong. It's a lot like guessing." Actually guessing is more accurate than some soothsaying: Punxsutawney Phil's Groundhog Day predictions, for example, have only a 39% accuracy rate over 114 years. But guessing whether spring will be early or late is profoundly different from stating unequivocally the fate of someone's immortal soul,

and for this reason my wife and I were careful never to tell the above story to our own children before they could handle it. In fact, I was careful to avoid any mention of such hocus pocus, but you can't inoculate your kids against every germ. Once I went up to the tree house where I knew our son was playing with the neighbors' kids to call him for lunch, and I walked in on an impromptu séance. A child had drowned in Lake Hartwell a few days earlier, and this innocent threesome was trying to make contact with their school chum's soul to find out how he liked heaven. I excused myself for interrupting the session, but after lunch, I asked our son where he'd learned how to conduct a séance. "Oh," he said, "all the kids do it."

Children are often the focus of prognostications made or caused by their elders, and these speculations, which soon become unpaid debts, can be heavy burdens to bear. Think of Oedipus hearing for the first time the famed prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. These words came as such a shock they recklessly led the young man to abandon home and family, climb a mountain, kill the first man he met old enough to be his father, descend the mountain, and marry the first nubile woman he met. Yet impulsiveness was only part of this young man's problems. Unknown, of course, to Oedipus was the information that the man slain and the woman wed were his natural parents, but what the son may never have realized is that he'd already fulfilled the oracle's prophecy. Figuratively fulfilled it that is. Indeed, he satisfied the god's command as every child fulfills it because every one of us labors under the same curse. All of us one day will "kill" our mother and father with disappointment in some form, yet even as their hopes lie dashed, we are "married" to our parents for as long as we live, for in many ways the umbilical cord is never completely severed.

Unlike hindsight, however, prescience is not 20/20, and timing has much to do with the success of the rain dance. Aeschylus knew that as well as Sophocles did, but he still went outside on the day the oracle said a falling house would kill the writer. Logically enough, he assumed that the house was his own and an earthquake would rattle his foundations as they frequently do in Greece, so he spent the day taking a walk so blithely unaware of any danger that he didn't even wear a hat, much less a helmet. Legend has it that an osprey flew over and, mistaking Aeschylus' bald crown for a smooth rock, dropped the turtle he was carrying. The blow, of course, killed the careless playwright who was slain by the turtle's falling "house." If a tree had fallen on him, the "house" surely would have been a bird's or a squirrel's. If a landslide had buried him, some pantheist would have claimed that the hill was a god's house. Indeed, is there anything that cannot be construed as a "house"? I've read of meteors arriving on Earth after striking Mars a glancing blow "housing" evidence of some extraterrestrial organism or another.

Of course, the oracle was always right; her life and livelihood depended on it. We know that Heinrich Himmler's astrologer died in a Nazi concentration camp, but I know of no other prognosticator who perished as a revealed fraud. The longevity of prophets is largely a factor of their language: it's hard to build a case against anyone whose diction and syntax are a Rorschach. One ancient Greek prophecy urged an army general to lead his men immediately across the river that ran beside his camp because, the oracle reported, "The army that crosses the river first will destroy an empire." Win or lose, the oracle was correct unless someone called a truce. But if hostilities ensued, as they did, one empire or the other was lost, and the oracle was left smelling like a rainbow. Cash offerings were left

at the door unless one wanted to risk angering the oracle, who may have been a bit testy sitting on a tripod all day inhaling sulfurous fumes. Others say the aging virgin smelled a rotting python carcass or chewed hallucinogenic laurel leaves. Whatever it was that caused her trance, few dared to challenge her.

A good though circumstantial case can be made that at least some of the oracles were outright frauds. It's likely that at least one of the Delphic sibyls used carrier pigeons and some trusted associates (oracles in training) to bring word of what King Croesus was doing on a given day—making a turtle and lamb stew—in the monarch's very risky attempt to prove the seer wrong. Moreover, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* states that the Temple of Dionysus at Corinth was turning water into wine long before Jesus attended the wedding at Cana. Apparently, there is some archeological evidence consisting of pipes and vats which once allowed priests to “make wine” from outside a sealed temple by operating some concealed controls. The water was drained from one vat, and the wine flowed in from another.

My own experience with oracles began when I was fourteen. On the grounds of the Muscogee County Exposition and Fair, a gypsy palmist told me that what I'd taken as an extraordinary “love line” was really quite short. This interpretation proved false when I met the lovely Ingrid; to date we've been married for over forty-three years, and my teeth have been set against prophets for even longer. Nevertheless, I've slowly come to the conclusion that I may be prescient myself; it's just that I'm so far sighted that nothing has come true yet. H. G. Wells is the first futurist I know of who used the trick of dating one's predictions so far in the future that no one in all likelihood will remember Wells or his projections when the time comes. At the present, 3000 to 4000 years appears to be the limit of our cultural memory, so Wells' predictions for the year 800,000 AD in *The Time Traveler* appear safe.

Seriously, though, I do have premonitions. Once as I approached a red light, an interior voice said, “Put the car in neutral.” I hardly ever follow my father's advice to save some wear on the clutch by placing the transmission in neutral while stopped in traffic, but for once, I heeded the advice. So there I sat musing cloud formations when I suddenly noticed the light was green. Embarrassed (there were cars behind me now though no one was honking), I pressed down hard on the accelerator, and though there was a mighty roar of my Tercel's sixty-five horses, I went nowhere. Just as the racket subsided, a white pickup sped brazenly through the red light from my left. I stared after its dust in disbelief. If I had not put the car in neutral as the voice told me, I very likely would have pulled into the path of the scofflaw, who may have sensed that I was going nowhere. Technically, I was in the right, but I was nearly dead right, so the incident gave me considerable pause. Indeed, I have seen the future, and in it I am dead. The wild card is knowing how far in the future that sad event lies, and I have no desire to know that date anymore than I want to see the video of my prostate being reamed out which is also in the near future, one of my favorite oxymorons.

Guard as I may against the nonsense of the modern entrails reader, I find myself subconsciously reading the “signs” in the chaos of daily life. I recall that just before going in for my doctoral orals, I stopped by the canteen and bought a Coke from the machine that once had taken my money and given me nothing in return. As I stood before this unreliable vendor, I thought, “If this sucker works today, I'm in like Flynn.” (I often forecast in clichés.) Whatever convinced me that this refrigerated roulette wheel knew my ineluctable fate, I do not know, but just then the paper cup dropped with a reassuring rattle, a few hollow ice cubes followed on cue, and the cup then filled to the brim with my soda. Not

a drop was wasted. I walked off to meet my inquisitors with a renewed confidence born of a newfound proficiency in the strange language God uses to communicate with mortals. There is no doubt that a psychic like a trusted priest or teacher can lift one's spirits even if all they do is listen and dispense caffeine.

Yet if I am a medium, I am not a happy medium. I still firmly believe that there is no way to examine the railroad tracks and determine which way the last train passed unless it is within earshot. If tea leaves, playing cards, dice, fire, excrement, mole and freckle patterns, stomach-gas rumblings, dreams, stars, and tabloids have our fates recorded, I should have died seven years ago. In late 1993, the *National Enquirer* published a list of predictions, one of which said, "In 1994, a South Carolina teen will detonate a nuclear device in his basement killing thousands." If there was such an explosion, I must be living upwind from ground zero. However, there never has been a Hiroshima-style disaster in South Carolina though the Air Force accidentally dropped an "unarmed atom bomb" on tiny Mars Bluff in 1958. "Only" the non-nuclear portion of the device exploded injuring a family of six and leaving their home in ruins on the brink of a 60' wide and 30' deep crater that once was their garden.

My wife's Magic-8-Ball is not much better than mine, but she's a believer nonetheless. One evening after supper, she went for a walk in our neighborhood. As she passed by a vacant, over-grown lot and its two beetle-infested pines, she felt a distinct shiver and consciously quickened her step to put some distance between her and the looming trees. Less than six hours later, a windstorm blew the larger of the pines down across the street that my wife had recently traveled with sudden trepidation. In the safety of our bedroom, we heard the explosive sound of the trunk snapping. It is sometimes said that the present is pregnant with the future, and indeed, on closer inspection the present was about eight months along that night. My wife had heard the weather reports of an impending thunderstorm, we'd agreed that the lot's out-of-state owner should cut his trees, the pines had been without bark or needles for at least three years, and the wind was beginning to gust as she made her way around the neighborhood. Subconsciously, she assembled the data, read the clues, and realized that nature might soon be making its will known. But to her, dodging the falling tree was a miracle, and I could not convince her otherwise. Frankly, I didn't try very hard because I dearly wanted to believe someone other than myself was looking out for her, just as a "clairvoyant" drink machine had once comforted me.

When my rational nature manifests itself in a classroom full of young fundamentalists, however, the class often stirs uneasily. I recall telling twenty freshmen after Elvis Presley died that contrary to received opinion some adoring fans were convinced their idol was alive based on (among other things) the fact that "Elvis" can be scrambled into "lives." I said that "Elvis" is also an anagram for "Levi's," but that coincidence meant neither that he was alive nor that he'd morphed into a pair of relaxed-fit denim trousers. (Remember that this was the "Fat Elvis.") Indeed if anagrams were perfect predictors, "moon stasers" would be an anagram for "astrologers," not "astronomers." A few days later, one of my freshmen told me he expected to be raptured away with the rest of his small-town congregation over the weekend and not to expect him at the next class. I assured him that the Rapture was an excused cut and wished him Godspeed. I never saw the young man again, so I cannot say with certainty if he was assumed into heaven or not. It did not make the papers.

Living in the Bible Belt, I've grown accustomed to ministers preying on the fears of

their flock, but occasionally there are incidents that no amount of rational analysis can entirely explain. Dr. Wolfgang Fernow, a music graduate of the University of Freiberg and a reasonable man, believes in humanity's intuitive power because it once saved his life. Off and on, he has spent the better part of his life trying to understand how it worked for him. Wolfgang was arrested after the Second World War simply because he was a German male. He was sixteen and had successfully dodged the draft for about a year living with his parents in a forest retreat near Wurzburg, but he could not escape the post-war Allied search for Nazis. Despite his protests of innocence, he spent about a year in a dismal French war prison outside Lyon. He had been anemic before his arrest, and the prison diet only worsened his condition. In April of 1946, however, word came that repatriation was at hand for a select few. Buoyed with hope, he fell into a ragged formation, marched to the Lyon train station as the French hurled rocks and insults, and strained to hear his last name called by a French official who apparently had no German. When the last name was read and "Fernow" had not been called, Wolfgang, near panic, pressed his way to the front and said in broken French, "'Sernow,' please check under 'Sernow!'" The bureaucrat, apparently moved by the boy's pallor, did as requested, found the name, checked the serial number on his roster against one that Wolfgang handed him, and allowed Mr. Fernow-Sernow to board the train with his last ounce of strength. To this day, Wolfgang credits an intuitive flash of supernatural origin with saving his life.

I've never had the heart to tell my friend that a capital "F" written in the Sutterlin cursive style of pre-war Germany looks strikingly like the Latin capital "S" that most French were using in the 1940s. That possibly explains how the mistake was made on the roster in the first place; it may also explain how Wolfgang knew where to look if he'd seen any cursive French in prison. Wolfgang, however, says that he had nothing to read for the duration of his incarceration. He had picked up a few words of French from the guards that enabled him to make his desperate and apparently inspired plea.



Consider a newborn babe; call him Ralph. If he is normal, all of his senses are intact from the start. Put some salt on his tongue, and he'll spit it out. Place some milk there, and he'll suck. Blow some cigar smoke into his bassinet, and he'll turn his head away. Shine a light into his eyes, and he'll shut them. Drop a heavy book on the kitchen floor or draw some blood from his heel, and he'll cry. Now consider an infant born deaf, blind, and unable to taste, smell, or feel; call him Steve. Most of his reflexes are fine, so he's breathing and his heart is pumping, but that's about all. Does either one of these infants have a "sixth sense"? In either case, we simply cannot know. If Steve has a premonition, how would he know it, much less communicate it? If Ralph has an intuition, he should eventually develop the means to make it known, but it's always going to be subject to scrutiny and doubt by people like me.

Nevertheless, when the bullet with my name inscribed on it is fired, I can only hope I have the faith and foresight to duck. Perhaps the voice that told me to put the car in neutral at the stop light years ago will speak again.