

Conversations with My Dead Mother

Why We See Signs and Omens in Everyday Events

BY JESSE BERING

Shortly after my mother died, I began to experience certain events that challenged my otherwise skeptical beliefs about the afterlife. To any objective observer, these events wouldn't seem particularly profound; some were in fact so subtle and mundane that they wouldn't have even registered in my consciousness under normal circumstances. But in the wake of my loss, my mind freighted with grief, these banal happenings took on special significance. It was as though my mom—or rather, her spirit—was attempting to part the veil between this world and the next, intent on communicating with me, her stubbornly atheistic child.

The morning after she passed, for instance, I awakened to the faint, melodious sounds of the wind chimes that hung from a tree branch just beneath her bedroom window. It was a still morning, but surely a breeze must have stirred it. My knee-jerk thought was not at all in keeping with my beliefs. “That’s her,” I said instinctively to myself. “She’s telling me she’s okay.”

One evening, as I lay reading in bed, I heard a loud crash—the sound of broken glass. Rushing downstairs to see what had caused it, I found that a stained glass window, an extraction from an old church that I’d propped up decoratively on a shelf, had somehow fallen and shattered on the concrete floor. My mind raced to find an explanation. The cat, perhaps? But the cat had been sleeping soundly at the foot of my bed and had jumped at the sudden noise just as I had. I still can’t be certain, but in all probability, I’d merely left it leaning precariously on the shelf, with an eventual disastrous tumble being inevitable.

Yet just as with the wind chimes, it wasn’t the logical explanation that first leapt to my mind. Rather, it was a supernatural one. My mother hated that stained glass window. “It’s not for me,” I recalled her saying when I first eyed it at an antique shop in Louisiana a few years prior. “But go on, get

it if you like it.” And now there it was in a thousand broken pieces on the floor. I should add, this also happened on her birthday—the first since her death—and she’d been occupying my thoughts that whole day. In any event, the rationalist in me rejected any such supernatural attributions out of hand. Still, it certainly *felt* like a sign.

There were also the conversations we’d had on her deathbed. A secular Jew, she was agnostic about the afterlife. “Who knows,” she’d muse. “But it’s you I’d come back to...your brother and sister, they already believe. They wouldn’t need any proof. If I can, I’ll give you a sign.”

So, was I just being dense now? The thought of my kind, gentle mother trying desperately to get my attention from the other side was emotionally evocative, and guiltily I began to feel like one of those stereotypical hardheaded—and hardhearted—science types who refuse to open their minds and acknowledge the numinous.

Ultimately, it’s a philosophical question, whether such things have a paranormal element to them. I didn’t believe they did then and I don’t believe they do now. But what does it matter what people say they believe? The fact that my mind so naturally gravitated toward seeing such events *as if* they were signs fascinated me. And as a cognitive psychologist, I wanted to get to the bottom of these strange subjective phenomena. What is it about the human mind that so effortlessly translates natural events into messages from another realm—even despite our best attempts to deny that there’s any message in them at all?

Throughout my work in a field called the cognitive science of religion, I’ve argued that seeing meaning in natural events (colloquially, what most people would call “signs” or “omens”) requires a special form of human social intelligence. The technical term for the psychological capacity in question is called *theory of mind*.

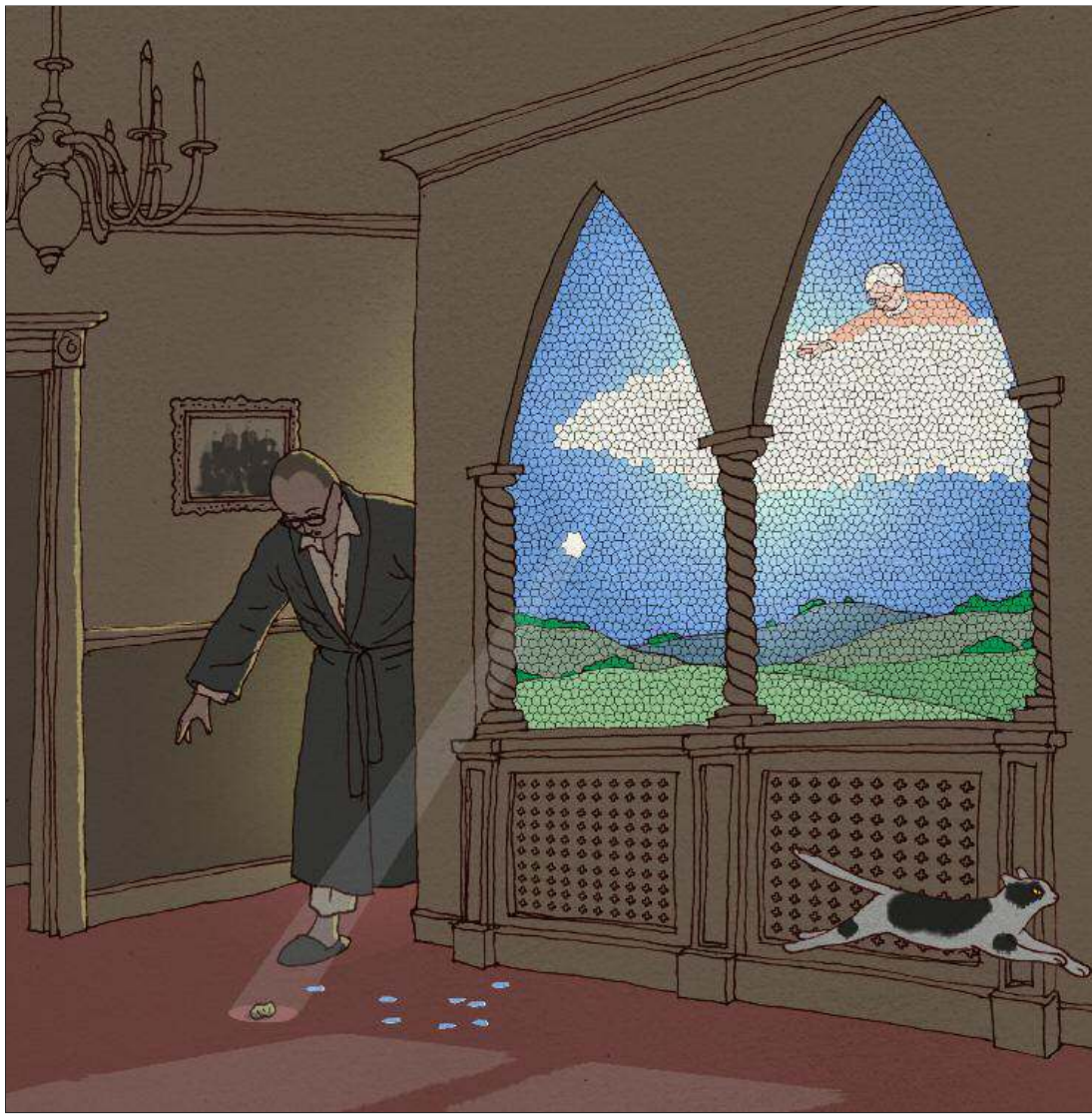


Illustration by Izhar Cohen

In the everyday social world, we use our theory of mind constantly, and it's especially easy to grasp the concept when applied to other people's unexpected behaviors. Let's say, for example, that you're out for a stroll at the park one sunny day, minding your own business, when you notice a naked man staggering out from behind some bushes ahead of you. And now he's heading your way. Now, consider the dilemma. Does this person need help? Perhaps he's the victim of a crime or is caught in the grip of a psychotic episode? Or is his strange appearance and behavior more sinister? What you see is a body with all its sinews and muscles and eyes darting this way and that. What you don't see, what you can't see, is the mind that stirs behind those eyes, causing the curious body before you to behave the way it is.

After all, mental states are abstractions that cannot be directly perceived; similar to other causal properties such as gravity and mass, they're just theoretical constructs. Intuitively, your theory of mind kicks in, and probably frantically in this case, with you trying to infer what's going on in that head of his. Essentially, this social cognitive capacity allows you to think about what others are thinking.

With a theory of mind, we're better able to explain and predict other people's actions because we're putting ourselves in their shoes (or bare feet) and trying to see the world from their perspective. We may get it wrong—we might assume he's a pervert when in fact he's the subject of a cruel prank—but the fact that, all day long, we're busily trying to decipher unobservable mental states such as emotions, intentions, and beliefs is why the evolutionary

scholar Nicholas Humphrey referred to our species as the animal kingdom's "natural psychologists."

What does all of this have to do with the human habit of seeing signs in natural events? Theory of mind strikes at the heart of it. A common feature of most supernatural agents, be they God or ghosts, is the presumed presence of a consciousness without a physical body. And since they lack bodies, we can't reason about what's on their mind by inferring things from their overt behaviors, facial expressions, or words. Instead, we perceive them as communicating with us through natural events. In the absence of a theory of mind, wind chimes are just wind chimes, and the rude cacophony of glass suddenly breaking is, well, just that. But with it, when the emotional climate is just right, these types of things can take on special significance. They seem to be *about* the communicative intent of an immaterial being. They jump-start our psychological theorizing. "What is she trying to tell me?" we may find ourselves asking. "What does she mean by this?"

Does everything happen for a reason? Of course! Why else would we be doing science? Science is reductionistic; our mission is to drill down incrementally into fundamental causal reasons for natural phenomena. But that's not what most people tend to mean when they ask this kind of question. Rather, it's not about scientific mechanisms for them; it's about creative design. They want to know if things are happening because there's an immaterial mind at work behind the scenes, causing the events in our lives *intentionally*. In the religious or spiritual realms, the question of meaning involves addressing "why" things happen rather than "how" they happen.

I've revealed my own prejudices already; I believe the "why" question is actually a nonquestion, one triggered by our species' overactive theory of mind spilling into a mindless domain. Ultimately, though, it's up to each of us to determine if our personal experiences (especially those that deviate from our expectations) are orchestrated by invisible supernatural beings trying to give us signs from the other side. Even if it's misplaced, it's hard to put a muzzle on this search for meaning.

It also seems to emerge around the age of seven. In a study published in *Developmental Psychology*, my coauthor Becky Parker and I told three- to nine-year-old children that an invisible woman named "Princess Alice" would be communicating with them somehow. We then triggered fabricated "anomalous" events in the room, such as

a picture falling or a table lamp switching on and off. Only the 7-9-year-olds interpreted these things as messages from Princess Alice. In fact, some of these older kids saw signs in occurrences that we hadn't even planned. One little boy told us that the bell tolling in the university clock tower was Princess Alice "talking" to him; an eight-year-old girl likewise saw Princess Alice's guiding hand in a spider spinning its web in the corner.

From an adult psychiatric point of view, this type of thinking can get really, erm, insane. People suffering from schizophrenia, for instance, often display debilitating *apophenia*—seeing patterns of meaningful connections in completely unconnected events. "Theistic and philosophical phenomena populate their hallucinations," writes the psychiatrist Jonathan Burns of those with this disorder, "while the frantic search for, and misattribution of, intentionality . . . lie at the heart of symptoms such as thought insertion, ideas of reference and paranoid delusions."

Yet most of us—skeptic and believer alike—have at some point in our lives succumbed to this form of superstitious reasoning. It's typically harmless enough. Sure, we can dismiss such thoughts as silly, but sometimes it's cognitively effortful to refrain from it. A flat tire on the way to the airport or a pigeon defecating on our shoulder as we're walking to a job interview can seem to be the universe's way of helping us to avert disaster. It's only when people begin stitching their own warped view of morality into the cosmic fabric that we run into serious trouble at the societal level, with religious fanatics preaching to gullible acolytes that, say, a devastating earthquake is "about" God's discontent over gay marriage.

A final note about that Princess Alice study. Despite our earnest attempts to debrief every child who participated—explaining to them that Princess Alice was just make-believe, and even showing them how we made the light flash on and off and the picture fall—she nonetheless "stuck" for many kids. That is, they appeared to take her home with them. For years, in fact, parents would report to us how strange events in the house were being blamed by these children on Princess Alice.

Whether they were facetious attributions or not I cannot say. Still, I admit it's not displeasing to contemplate the idea that, somewhere in the Ozarks, a clandestine cell of twenty-somethings gathers at the altar of a powerful invisible princess.

In fact, I can picture my mom, Alice, smiling upon such a scene, too. **S**