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Premonition! Foreseeing What Cannot Be Seen

An article in the March 4, 2019, *New Yorker* gave the regrettable impression that some people could do what science—and common sense—say cannot be done: see something (usually a tragedy) before it has occurred. (The magazine followed other outlets that have recently hawked paranormal claims—*The New York Times* regarding UFOs in 2017 and 2018 [Nickell 2018a; Nickell and McGaha 2018] and CBS's *Sunday Morning* touting ESP in 2018 [Frazier 2018].)

At issue here is the aforementioned *New Yorker* article, Sam Knight's "The Premonitions Bureau." While one might expect therefrom a lesson in critical thinking regarding pseudoscientific views, Knight has adopted a "who-knows?" attitude, for which I intend this article as a corrective. (Thanks to psychologist Stuart Vyse—author of *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* and a fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry—for suggesting this topic to me.)

Aberfan Disaster

Knight focuses on the work of an eccentric psychiatrist, John Barker, who was a member of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR). Founded in 1882, the SPR studies spiritualism, hauntings, thought transference, and the like. Its members tend to be credulous, despite some exposés of fraudulent mediums.

Barker became impressed by premonitions that were reported in the wake of the Aberfan disaster of 1966 in South Wales. Sliding coal slurry engulfed a school, killing 140, including 116 children. Barker came to believe the premonitions were evidence of the paranormal. He subsequently dedicated himself to collecting such reports in his British Premonitions Bureau, hoping to prevent future disasters. But after two of his most promising informants predicted his own untimely demise, he died—though not by a nonexistent "gas supply" or "a dark car" as one psychic had suggested but, later, from a brain hemorrhage at home. (Other premonition registries have since followed.)

New Yorker writer Knight seems not to understand the critical-thinking adage, "incredible claims require incredible proof." He remarks, "Premonitions are impossible, and they come true all the time. The second law of thermodynamics says it can't happen, but you think of your mother and then she calls."

Major Problems to Consider

Evaluating premonitions—whether they come as dreams, hunches, or some other form—is essentially a study in matching something reportedly imagined with something that subsequently happened. There are really few rules as to how much evidence is required, for example, or how close a match must be. Such problems will become clearer as we look at some of the factors that may be involved. I illustrate each with a case in point.

1. Alleged premonitions that are reported in the wake of an event are not proof of anything, because they may be mental confabulations constructed after the fact.

From time to time, people have fearful dreams, as well as fleeting feelings of dread and momentary musings of possible future happenings. If nothing comes of one of these it is forgotten, but should there be some momentous occurrence, it can draw such a feeling from memory or even imagination. Soon one has confabulated a tale that blossoms in the subsequent retellings. (*Confabulation* is a term psychologists use to refer to confusing fact with fiction. Unable to retrieve something from memory, the confabulating person, perhaps inadvertently, manufactures something that is seemingly appropriate to replace it. "Thus," explain Wortman and Loftus [1981, 204], "the man asked to remember his sixth birthday combines his recollections of several childhood parties and invents the missing details.")

Consider an anecdotal case provided by a Shanghai jurist. Sir Edmund Hornby related how, years earlier, he was awakened one night by a newspaperman who had arrived belatedly to get the customary written judgment for the next day's edition. The man—looking deathly pale—would not be put off, and Hornby provided him a summary, which the reporter took down in his pocket notebook. After he left, the judge related the incident to Lady Hornby. The following day, however, he learned not only that the man had died during the night but that his wife and servants were certain he had not left the

house. Yet with his body was discovered a notebook containing a summary of Hornby's judgment!

This case of an apparent premonitory apparition was reported by psychical researchers, but it soon succumbed to investigation. As it turned out, the reporter did not die at the time Hornby gave (about 1 AM) but much later—between 8 and 9 AM. Moreover, Judge Hornby could not have told his wife about the visitation, because he was then between marriages. Finally, although the tale depends on a certain judgment that was to be delivered the following day, no such judgment was recorded. When confronted with this evidence of error, Judge Hornby admitted, "My vision must have followed the death (some three months) instead of synchronizing with it ... ." Bewildered by what had happened, he added, "If I had not believed, as I still believe, that every word of [the story] was accurate, and that my memory was to be relied on, I should not have ever told it as a personal experience" (Hansel 1966, 186–189).

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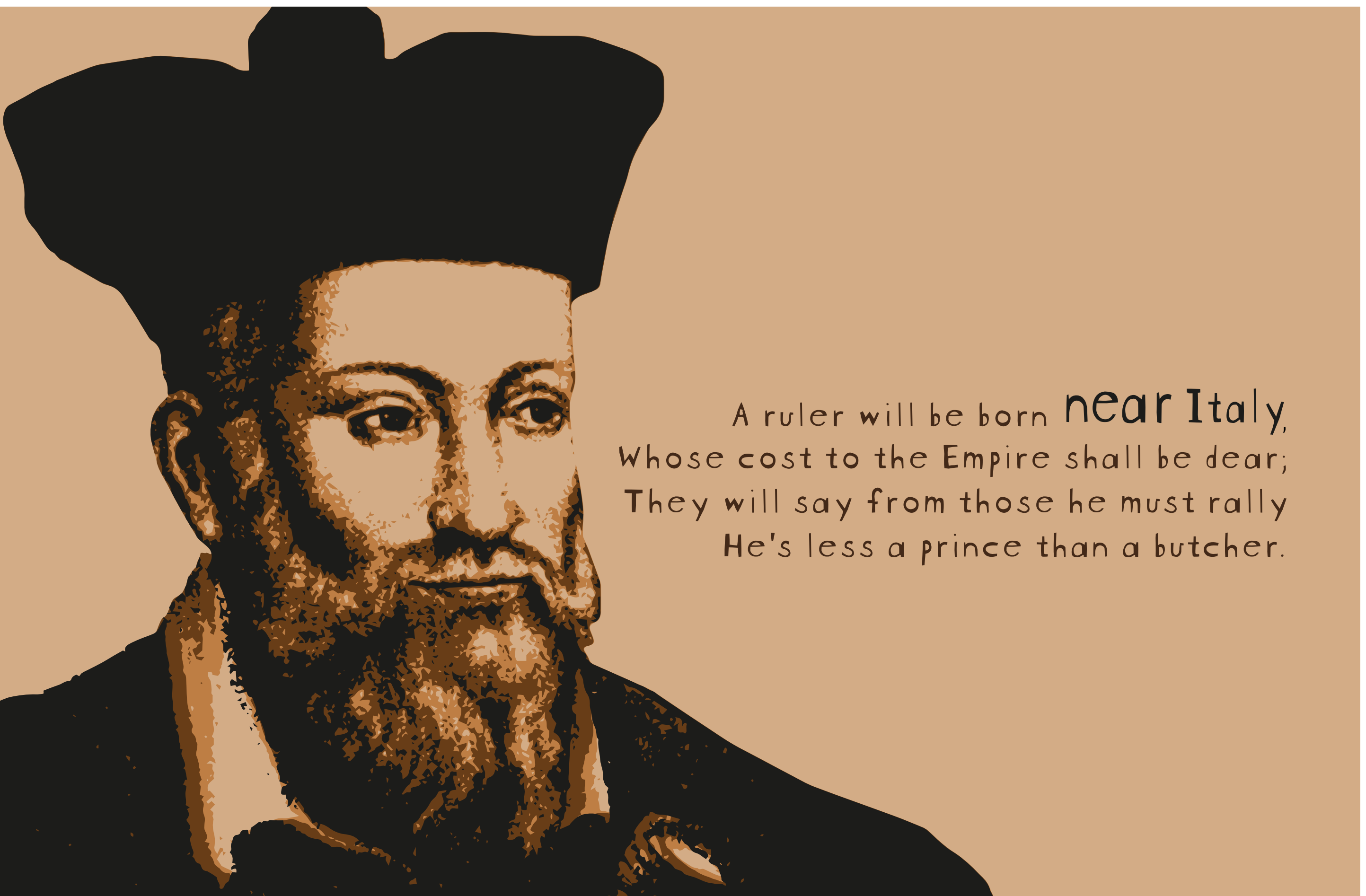
2. Some prediction accounts may be misleading in their details.

An example concerns the late psychic Jeane Dixon. Many people still believe that Dixon scored a psychic coup by forecasting a sensational event: the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Actually, however, she merely claimed that a president elected in 1960 would die in office—an assertion based on certain astrological notions. But she nullified her forecast in 1960 as the election drew close, publicly predicting that Richard M. Nixon would become president. If Nixon had instead been elected and died in office, no doubt Dixon would have then claimed to have predicted that (Nickell 1994, 166–167)!

3. Some longstanding premonition stories may have been altered over time.

An example, one of the best-known reputedly precognitive dreams in history, was related by President Abraham Lincoln—first to his wife, then again to Ward Hill Lamon, his close friend and bodyguard. As Lamon later reconstructed the president's words, Lincoln had, some ten days previously, gone to bed when he soon began to dream and felt "a death-like stillness" about him. Hearing "subdued sobs, as if a number of people were weeping," he left his bed and wandered downstairs, through room after room of the White House. Finally, he arrived at the East Room where he came upon a catafalque "on



which rested a corpse wrapped in funeral vestments." He asked one of the soldiers standing guard, "Who is dead in the White House?" The soldier answered, "The President; he was killed by an assassin." The story may be true, but in any event, I discovered Lamon had added a sequel that is invariably ignored. After Lamon was told of the dream and had expressed his concern, Lincoln pointed out: "In this dream it was not me, but some other fellow, that was killed. It seems that this ghostly assassin tried his hand on someone else." Thus, Lincoln had not thought he foresaw his own death but instead that of another president (Nickell 2001, 112–113). That changes the whole tale.

In any case, it is hardly surprising that Abraham Lincoln should have dreamed about assassination—even his own. Prior to his first inauguration in 1861, Pinkerton detectives (including America's first female detective, Kate Warne) had smuggled Lincoln into Washington, D.C., at night to avoid a change of trains in Baltimore, where an assassination plot had been uncovered. In time, Lincoln received numerous death threats and on one occasion had a hole shot through his top hat by a would-be assassin (Nickell 2001, 113).

4. A psychic's story may have been inflated by the insertion of an alleged precognitive vision.

I encountered an example of this upon appearing with a psychic on the *Mark Walberg Show* (televised in 1996). The supposed visionary claimed he had solved over a hundred homicides, and I challenged him to name one. He cited the case of two young women in Harrison, New York. The psychic, Ron Bard, claimed that he was able to psychometrize (object-read) a key on one victim's body. He foresaw, he claimed, the case being solved by his directing police to a certain door in the South Bronx where "the key worked in the lock and that's how we found the murderer." In fact, newspaper accounts and a letter to me from the Harrison police chief told a different story. Bard had not had any involvement, though his mother had tried to insinuate herself as a psychic in the case. The only key in the case belonged to one of the victims, and the case was solved, the chief told me, by "diligent police work, not visions" (Nickell 2001, 210–213).

5. A prediction made in advance is subject to retrofitting (after-the-fact matching). That is, once an event has occurred, details may be interpreted in various ways to better harmonize the prediction with the event.

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Such is the explanation for the supposed accuracy of many of Nostradamus's prophetic utterances. Born Michele de Notre-Dame (1503–1566), but better known by the Latinized Nostradamus, he was a French astrologer noted for his quatrains (four-line rhyming verses). Written in vague, symbolic language, they could be interpreted in different ways at different times. Therefore, with retrofitting, an event could look in hindsight as if it had been predicted by the supposed seer. For example, quatrain I:60 reads (in my own translation from Middle French):

> A ruler will be born near Italy,
> Whose cost to the Empire shall be dear;
> They will say from those he must rally
> He's less a prince than a butcher.

The phrase "near Italy" covers a lot of ground, from Austria and Corsica to France and Switzerland to Greece and Yugoslavia. The verse is usually held to refer to Napoleon (1769–1821), but other candidates include the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand II (1578–1637) and even Adolph Hitler (1889–1945). (See Nickell 2010, 34–35.)

6. In the process of retrofitting, the retrofitter may seek credit for details that were not actually specified.

Consider, for instance, a prediction by professional psychic Bernice Golden (whom I knew personally). She forecast on December 20, 1981, that "major difficulties may arise concerning an important nuclear power plant that could cause more static than ever before." Note the vague "difficulties" and "static" and the equivocal "may."

I'll wager Golden was as shocked as anyone when a steam tube ruptured (which she did not foresee) at the Ginna nuclear power plant east of Rochester (that went unnamed), sending radioactive steam into the air and forcing an emergency declaration—none of which she specified. (The Three Mile Island accident had occurred in 1979, stoking public fears, and there had already been another plant accident before Golden's prediction [Nickell 2018b].)

A retrofitter may also be guilty of omitting details that have proven to be erroneous—especially any that would cast doubt on a supposed prediction.

7. An old psychics' trick is to make shocking predictions to attract attention, later shrewdly counting the hits (exaggerating and retrofitting as necessary) and simply ignoring the misses.

This technique makes wild guessing a rather safe practice. A credulous public helps by remembering or forgetting accordingly.

One such practitioner was the late psychic Dorothy Allison, who claimed she had a "vision" about a missing five-

year-old boy. Not only did her pronouncements cause police to waste considerable time and resources in following up on her claims, digging up a drainage pipe for example, but the boy's body was actually found floating in a pond, by a man seeking a spot to bury a dead cat. Nevertheless, Allison cleverly revised the facts and converted her failure into a seeming success, mentioning details of the boy's clothing she had supposedly foreseen accurately (Dennett 1994, 45–46).

8. Hoax stories are not infrequently told by various alleged psychics, astrologers, fortunetellers, and the like to boost their images.

Not surprisingly, several seers predicted the assassination of Ronald Reagan—based on the same astrological notions that Jeane Dixon had applied to the 1960 election. However, while most soothsayers merely gave vague renderings of the stock prediction, California psychic Tamara Rand provided astonishingly accurate information regarding John Hinckley's attempted assassination of President Reagan on March 30, 1981. Reportedly, on a January 6 radio talk show, Rand (real name Naomi Randall) predicted that Reagan would experience a "thud" in the chest toward the end of March, that there would be shots fired "all over the place," and that the attempted assassin would be fair-haired and have a name "something like Humbly—maybe Jack."

Unfortunately, the astonishing accuracy was due not to psychic powers but to a deliberately concocted hoax. The tape was actually made the day *after* the assassination attempt, not three months earlier as claimed (Frazier and Randi 1981). The talk show host, Dick Maurice, and his producer, Gary Greco, had been approached by Rand, who said, "This could make me the Jeane Dixon of the eighties" (Nickell 1994, 166–167).

9. Alleged precognitive visions can be part of a larger scam.

One of my favorite examples (due to the irony of the outcome) is that of the late, notorious Sylvia Browne. Early in her career, long before adding an *e* to her surname, she and her then husband sold securities to a touted gold-mining venture. Browne claimed to strongly foresee that the mine would pay big dividends. However, although telling a couple their $20,000 investment was to be used for immediate operating costs, the Browns transferred the money to an account for their Nirvana Foundation for Psychic Research. Browne not only failed to foresee her and her husband's own resulting bankruptcy but also their subsequent felony convictions (Nickell 2012, 249–250).

10. Then there is the common problem of determining probability. As Martin Gardner (1986, 8) observes, "There simply is no way to evaluate the degree to which a dream runs counter to ordinary statistical laws." (When, for instance, there are numerous opportunities for an unusual event—a plane crash for example—it becomes likely to happen. This is the principle known as the law of large numbers [Wiseman 2010, 153].)

In his *The Wreck of the Titanic Foretold?*, Gardner examines what he terms, "The single most impressive example of seeming precognition of the *Titanic* disaster, or any other disaster." It is a short novel *Futility* by Morgan Robertson, published in 1898, fourteen years before the sinking of the *Titanic*! Consider just a few of the numerous parallels between Robertson's fictitious wreck *Titan* and the *Titanic*:

- The *Titanic* was 882.5 feet long, the *Titan* 800 feet.
- Both ships were all steel, considered unsinkable, and described as the largest passenger ship ever built.
- Both had too few lifeboats.
- Both began their fatal voyage in April, and both impacted an iceberg near midnight.

Of course, we must assume the novel had not been read by those designing and naming the later ocean liner.

(As an example of the many questionable "precognitive dreams" that came in the wake of the *Titanic*'s sinking is one attributed to a woman who lived in New York City. Unpublished until 1949, that tale does not even give the names of the persons involved. Nevertheless, it asserts a woman awakened her husband the night the *Titanic* sank to say she dreamed her mother was in a lifeboat, although, supposedly, she had never told her daughter she had booked the passage. Though unnamed, she allegedly did survive the disaster [Gardner 1986, 7–23].)

A Final Word

The foregoing examples illustrate several important considerations regarding alleged precognitive visions and dreams, but they are not intended to represent a complete list. Reports of alleged premonitions should be examined on a case-by-case basis, always remembering claims that seem too good to be true (as, for instance, in the story by Judge Hornby in number 1 above), may well be just that. ■

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