

"If I Knew You Were Coming, I'd Have Baked a Cake": The Folklore of Foreknowledge in a Neighborhood Group

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IN 1705, THE BRITISH ANTIQUARIAN JOHN BEAUMONT OBSERVED THAT:

To say absolutely, that all dreams, without distinction, are vain Visions and Sports of Nature . . . and to banish all Divination from the Life of Man . . . is contrary to Experience and the common Consent and Agreement of Mankind.¹

The focus of this essay is this "common consent and agreement" about knowledge of the future, as it is understood by a group of elderly women in my own hometown, and the ways in which I believe that the women's social situation and moral code shape the folklore that they share. I want to begin rather obliquely, however: first looking at past traditions in order to get a historical perspective on the present, and then, by way of further contextualization, describing my research strategy and the study group members themselves.

Historical Perspective

Perhaps the best place to begin any survey of British traditions is with John Aubrey, that curious and often credulous seventeenth-century antiquarian, whose *Miscellanies* were written in 1696. This work is a collection of current rumors, legends, and personal experience stories on supernatural topics, orally told and jotted down as he heard them. Three chapters are directly concerned

with omens, foreknowledge, and divination. A remark in Chapter 3, "Portents," sets the tone of what is to follow:

How it comes to pass, I know not; but by Ancient and Modern example it is evident, that no great Accident befalls a City or Province, but it is presaged by Divination, or Prodigy, or astrologie, or some way or other.²

Chapter 4, "Omens," contains a multitude of such examples. The fall of Charles I, for example, was said to have been presaged by numerous strange happenings: in 1642 a group of partridges attacked a hawk, and this unnatural act was taken to signify that the country would turn on its monarch; at the beginning of the "Long Parliament," a scepter fell off a statue of the king; and it "was commonly known" that the top of the king's staff fell off at his trial.³ According to Aubrey, the life of James II, another deposed king, was equally presage-filled: at his coronation his crown was knocked from his head by a courtier;⁴ when he entered Dublin after his return from France in 1689, his mace-bearer stumbled and the little cross on the top of the mace fell off. ("This is very well known all over Ireland," says Aubrey, "and did much trouble King James himself with many of his Chief Attendants."⁵) In Chapter 5, "Dreams as Omens," the list of significant events continues: Lady Seymour dreamed that she found a nest of nine finches and she subsequently had nine children; the Countess of Cork dreamed of her father's death while he was actually dying; Sir Christopher Wren dreamed (correctly, as it happened) that his fever would be cured by eating dates, and so on.

A hundred years later, people were hardly less influenced by the desire to predict death and foretell the future, despite the supposed enlightenment and rationalism of the eighteenth century. Visions, apparitions, and wraiths continued to hold number-one place as omens of death; mysterious lights, fires in the sky, night birds seen during the day, unaccustomed breakages, and noises of various sorts—especially footsteps and mysterious creaks and bangs around the house—were all intrinsically ominous; and any ordinary thing in an extraordinary context was commonly interpreted as signifying disaster or change. In 1787, the antiquarian Francis Grose was able to compile a three-page inventory of contemporary omens of death, which included items such as hearing screech owls, hearing three knocks at the bed's head, rats gnawing at the bed-hangings, having a bleeding nose, the breaking of a looking glass, coffin-shaped coals in the fire, winding sheets on candles, corpse-candles and phantom fire, and, of course, the tick of the death-watch beetle.⁶

The eighteenth century, however, was a time in which a different emphasis began to develop. This was largely a product of the rational-mechanical

worldview brought about by the Scientific Revolution. As far as supernatural beliefs were concerned, the effect was not to abolish traditional concepts altogether, but to restrict their more extravagant expressions. As time went by, accounts of omens, signs, and warnings became less dramatic and their range more restricted. The most striking effect, however, was the gradual internalizing of supernatural experience.⁷

By the mid-nineteenth century, therefore, there were two main strands in British folkloristic writing about foreknowledge: on the one hand, accounts of divinatory practices and the interpretation of signs and tokens; on the other, accounts of visions, dreams, and "presentiments." For example, in 1866 William Henderson, one of the best-known British collectors of regional folklore, compiled a large list of death tokens—deformed lambs, hens laying an all-female brood, the tick of the death-watch beetle, and the noise of a house falling down. On the other hand, in 1848 Catherine Crowe collected seventeen narratives about "Allegorical Dreams, Presentiments" and thirty-one pages of accounts of "Double Dreaming and Trance, Wraiths."⁸ Both these strands of tradition continue to be actively transmitted in our own century: the one relying on the interpretation of external stimuli, the other dependent upon a sensitive response to personal events—"internal" events such as dreams, visions, "hunches," and strange perceptions or states of mind.⁹

The first strand is now chiefly represented by astrology, fortune-telling, or visits to psychics or mediums. Surveys in Britain and the United States between 1925 and 1985 show levels of belief in astrology and fortune-telling between 7 percent and 30 percent of the sample population. In 1925 H. K. Nixon surveyed American students' beliefs and found that 29 percent had faith in astrology and 25 percent in fortune-telling; twenty years later a similar questionnaire in the United Kingdom gave rise to figures of 18 percent for astrology and 20 percent for fortune-telling; British sociologist Geoffrey Gorer had very similar results in 1955 with a nationwide survey (20 percent belief in astrology, 30 percent belief in fortune-telling); and more recently, a survey by sociologists of religion at Leeds University in the United Kingdom found 14 percent belief in astrology and 35 percent belief in fortune-telling, also with a large-scale survey by professional interviewers. The lowest figures were obtained in surveys of student populations in the 1950s; an American survey of 1952 showed only 7 percent belief in astrology and 5 percent belief in fortune-telling, and a British survey of students in 1956 showed levels of belief at 6 percent for both fortune-telling and astrology. The variations in the findings are teasing: without more information than can now be retrieved about these studies, it is impossible to decide whether they reflect genuine differences between differing populations or at different times, or whether they are a function of the

methodologies employed. Nevertheless, even the surveys that returned the lowest percentages do at least show that the subject is familiar and that divinatory practices have not completely disappeared in our materialistic age.¹⁰

The second strand finds its principal expression nowadays in the concept of extrasensory perception (ESP), and here, levels of belief are significantly higher. For example, in Britain, the Leeds team found that 54 percent of their respondents believed in clairvoyance and 61 percent in telepathy. These findings fit well with Leea Virtanen's study of ESP in Finland in the 1970s, where she was able to collect no fewer than 1,442 individual reports.¹¹

In my own work, it quickly became obvious that both strands of tradition were regularly discussed and were part of a vivid, constantly negotiated folklore. Not only were my informants totally unsurprised by my questions, but they immediately fell into a specialized vocabulary for discussing these matters, which I myself was able to acquire after only a few days' exposure to it.

This vocabulary not only includes neologisms such as "a psychic sense" and "a telepathy with the future," but ancient terms such as "a sixth sense" or "second sight" that the women use totally without embarrassment, one even attributing her psychic abilities to being a "seventh child of a seventh child." Their conversation on the subject is full of vague generalizations and references to what "they" or "people" say—"they do say that . . ." or "you hear people say these things" or "there are people like that . . ." and so on—which all strongly suggest that the topic is often talked over within the family and social circle. There is also the otherwise curious lack of descriptive detail about what the experience of having a premonition actually entails. The emphasis of the story is almost invariably upon the circumstances of the experience, not on its nature. Underlying this strange—to the researcher—neglect is surely the speaker's assumption that the nature of the experience is too familiar to need spelling out. The gaps in the stories indicate the narrator's reliance on shared knowledge: in other words, on a common folklore. And finally, when dissenting women challenge the general belief, they use well-established counter-arguments that strongly recall the reasoning that David Hufford calls "traditions of disbelief"¹² and sound somehow "rehearsed," so that the listener feels that this reasoning has often been employed in similar discussions. Apart from obvious objections—for instance, that such beliefs are superstitious and open to religious objection—the dissenting women assert that omens are "sheer imagination," or they allege that premonitions are "really" due to a variety of natural causes (low spirits, poor health, atmospheric conditions, chance reshaping of the previous day's events), or that they are the working out of observations and impressions unconsciously acquired over the course of time. All the evidence thus points to there being an established folklore about forewarnings

in this group, which is subject to the sort of discussion, scrutiny, and debate that keeps the traditions in the forefront of conversation and thereby ensures that they are not only kept alive, but also continuously updated.

However, some changes are apparent. The first, most obvious one, is a preference for the visionary over the divinatory tradition. I shall deal with this in some detail later. At present, however, I want merely to observe that this seems to be a general trend. Ninety percent of the accounts that Virtanen collected, for example, were of subjective experiences, and only 4 percent featured objective signs (omens). Fifty-six percent related "dreams" and "intuitions."¹³ The second change—a terminological or classificatory shift—was clearly observable in my own work, but it is impossible to say whether it is a general trend, for, as far as I know, there is no other study that has looked at the language by which traditions of foreknowledge are discussed. In the nineteenth century and earlier—unless the folklorists and antiquarians who tell us of these traditions were mistaken or imposed their own, inappropriate, classification system on the material they collected (which is always possible)—people would have seen omens and tokens as examples of external signs signifying future events. The women of my study group, however, would seem to see the ability to perceive omens as a receptive power like ESP. For example, visionary perceptions, disembodied voices, mysterious noises around the house, all of which consistently appear in folklore collections as "omens" of death or danger, were often cited by my informants as instances of "premonitions." Conversely, the clearest account of what a folklorist would call a "premonition" (i.e., a precognitive intuition or signal) was cited as an example of an "omen" of death. Where clear distinctions are made, omens, premonitions and telepathy seem to be differentiated by virtue of the gravity of the outcome. Forewarnings about really bad things tend to be termed omens; warnings about lesser events are thought of as premonitions; and advance information about happy or trivial or undisturbing things is termed telepathy. If this classificatory shift is a general trend, it can be seen as the result of the continuing process of internalizing and subjectifying traditional supernatural beliefs; if it is special to the group of women I studied, it provides further evidence of the greater value they place on the subjective tradition.

Before going on to look at the folklore which the women of the study group share, however, I would like to discuss the research itself, in order to paint the specific contextual picture.

Research Context

Since the subject of my research might be thought "delicate" or controversial, I had to find a venue conducive to personal conversation, and an intermediary to introduce me to potential informants and put them at their ease. After several

false starts, I eventually hit on the idea of asking my father, who after fourteen years at the same podiatrist's clinic was nearing retirement, to let me talk to his patients during clinic hours.

My father's practice was a large and thriving one, situated near the shopping center of a middle-class suburb of a large northern city. His patients used the same doctor, shopped at the same local shops, and were part of the same social network. The majority also attended the local Methodist church, as he did. So his patients formed a fairly homogeneous social and cultural group based on the local neighborhood. With their permission, I simply sat in on their treatment, told them what I was researching and how I was planning to use the material, and recorded everything that was said. In the course of the five months I worked in my father's clinic, I interviewed 120 people of both sexes and of all ages from sixteen to ninety-five. The majority (ninety-six) of these people were elderly women, so this was the group I chose as my primary informants. Nine interviews had to be discarded for technical reasons, so the discussion that follows is based on the responses of eighty-seven women aged sixty to ninety-five years.

My father was able to give me at least a minimum of demographic information about the majority of these women—their approximate age, their marital status, and their domestic circumstances. This information is expressed in Table 1. As far as religion was concerned, my information was a little more impressionistic, drawn in part from my father's personal knowledge and in part from what was let fall during the conversation, or could be deduced from it. On this information, I concluded that all but one woman had some religious faith; one was Roman Catholic and one was Presbyterian, a handful were at least nominally Church of England, and perhaps a dozen were Jewish. The majority, however, were Methodists attending the same local church as my father himself.

These women were knowledgeable about every aspect of traditional beliefs about foreknowledge and, with very few exceptions, were happy to discuss these matters with me and tell me their personal experiences. In all, eighty-one expressed opinions about astrology, sixty-nine spoke about premonitions, sixty about omens, fifty-nine about fortune-telling, and forty-seven about telepathy. In the course of conversation, they told 111 stories, fifty-one of which were memorates about these matters (the remainder concerned death, bereavement, and the spirits of the dead).

Beliefs and Stories about Knowing the Future

It would appear from these interviews, conversations, and stories that these women are familiar with both the divinatory tradition and the visionary one.

Table 1:
Characteristics of 81 Women in the Neighborhood Group Studied*

Marital Status and Domestic Circumstances	Age: 60-70 Years N = 29	Age: 70-80 Years N = 44	Age: 80-90+ Years N = 8
Single			
Living alone	2	7	1
Living with family/friends	3	3	0
Married			
Living alone	0	0	0
Living with family/friends	14	10	2
Widowed			
Living alone	8	20	3
Living with family/friends	2	4	2

* The author interviewed 87 women, but data about marital status and domestic circumstances were unavailable for six of those women.

Most of the women I spoke to had tried the former and experienced the latter; in their own eyes, they were expert witnesses.

The folklore that shaped their experience and was transmitted among them was not simply a descriptive body of information, however; it was judgmental and evaluative. Though they were equally knowledgeable about the divinatory and the visionary routes into knowledge of the future, they did not value them equally. Very large numbers of the women had some interest in astrology and fortune-telling, but they were shamefaced about this behavior and few would admit to believing in these things. Nearly two-thirds of them, for example, were dismissive of astrology, saying "I read it but I don't believe it"; only 2 percent said they believed in it completely and only 25 percent admitted even partial belief. The percentage of disbelievers rose to 75 percent in the case of fortune-telling; only 15 percent of informants were sure that it would work and only 9 percent thought it might do. About seances and mediums, the vast majority were very skeptical and disapproving.

When they discussed the visionary strand of traditional lore, however, their shamefacedness disappeared and they were willing to admit that they had considerable belief. More than half were convinced, for example, that telepathy is possible and that they had experienced it themselves (only 10 percent thought it did not and could not occur). More than half also believed in omens of

death, and half of them could cite personal examples. More than three-quarters of them thought it might be possible to be forewarned that "something's going to happen" by premonitions; and 43 percent of them were certain that such things did happen. They interpreted these experiences as evidence that they had some measure of ESP—that, as they expressed it, they were "a little bit psychic."

On the face of it, these differing attitudes, though in line with the findings from Leeds and Finland, seem strange and perhaps contradictory; why should these women so value the visionary tradition and be so wary and skeptical of the divinatory tradition? However, there is a rationale at work here, one that is revealed when looking at their conversation and narratives in more detail.

Stories about "being a little bit psychic" typically feature women who, while engaged in their ordinary routine about the home or the office, suddenly "feel" or "know" that "something" is going to happen, or perhaps see or hear something unusual and unaccountable. After a short time, three days or three weeks, someone dies or has an accident or is admitted to the hospital or gets married, just as was foreseen. The storytellers are invariably precise about places and times and persons, insisting almost dogmatically upon orienting the events with circumstantial details. Storytellers who earnestly espouse the worldview being explored in the story they are telling—whose credibility and self-respect are dependent upon it, like witnesses in a courtroom—pin their hopes of being believed upon demonstrating the wealth, accuracy, and internal consistency of the circumstantial detail they can provide.¹⁴ And so it is here. Almost always the scene is set in "the daily round, the common task," as the narrator walks down the road, does the shopping or the housework, lies in bed or (in one memorable case) uses the bathroom; and the precise date is clearly remembered. The events are said to have happened "in January 1971," or "three years ago last November," or "only yesterday morning." The feeling or knowledge relates to some member of the family, most commonly mothers, sisters, husbands, brothers, and nephews, or to some close friend. Usually its precise meaning cannot be identified immediately; only subsequent events reveal its significance.

Only a few of the stories feature objective tokens of death, but when they do, these signs are very traditional ones—the sound of a brick hitting the wall, bangs in furniture, broken mirrors, the scent of flowers. More commonly, the forewarning comes in the form of strange physical or emotional states. The women say things like:

I do believe in premonitions, and the feeling I get if it's something not very pleasant is a coldness, a chill. Suddenly, for no reason at all—I can be so happy and

everything seems all right and then suddenly (and it's a horrible feeling) really physically go quite cold and shudder, and then whatever it is, I think about it.¹⁵

If there's anything going to happen, then my tummy gives a sort of roll and I say, "Hello! What's going . . . something's going to happen today!"¹⁶

I think one has a very strange feeling when something very important is going to happen, that you can't explain. Can't explain it. Almost as if one's on the edge of a cliff and you *feel* that something *terrible* is going to happen, but you can't put your finger on it.¹⁷

I do know that different things have happened and I've seemed to . . . at the back of my mind, it's as though I've seen something before.¹⁸

Alternatively, they simply say: "I get such a queer feeling," or "I know what's coming," or "It has come true just as I dreamt it." Or they may tell an illustrative story, such as these two from different women, which between them cover some of the more common themes:

Well, the only personal experience I have had . . . One day, in the office, I was going past one of the girls—nor a young girl—and I knew nothing about her personal life except she lived with her parents and was very good to them, very devoted. And as I passed by her, I turned round to her and said, "Rita, someone's going to ask you to marry him!" I *felt* the . . .

And then, the next day, she came in and said the man next door, a widower, had asked her to marry him. And they got engaged.

Now that's the only thing I know of personally.¹⁹

Well, I think I believe in that. One particular occasion was Mrs. Robertson [the doctor's wife]. Well, you know, she was in hospital, going in to have her hip done. And when the matron came down the ward, she came to her bed, and Mrs. Robertson turned round and said to her, "You've no need to tell me. It's my husband. He's died."

And he was killed, he had a coronary on the road.

And she did, she turned round and said, "You've no need to tell me. I know it's my husband and he's died." And he'd just collapsed at the wheel, veered to the side.

And that's the only one that I've known.²⁰

When we look at the women's stories and conversation about fortune-telling and astrology, however, we find that they not only have a quite different atmosphere, but also a quite different type of detail. Rather than trying hard to convince their hearers through a wealth of orienting detail, tellers of fortune-telling stories have a "take-it-or-leave-it" attitude to their narratives. The scene-setting of their stories is considerably vaguer and more general. Narrators are content to say that the events happened "ages ago," "when I was younger," "once," or "one time I remember." Though the events took place away from the ordinary environment, the location is seldom described in any sort of detail.

The *dramatis personae*, too, are only vaguely spelled out—often as not, they are simply described as "we," "this woman," or "she." Almost invariably, the account is very objective, so we do not get to understand the narrator's frame of mind, motivation, or reactions, either. We are simply told about the message which "this woman" delivers. So the total effect is impersonal and distanced.

Another interesting observation is that the predictions featured in these stories are quite different in several ways from the forewarnings afforded by involuntary psychic experiences. In the first place, the message about the future is quite clear and distinct, given the ambiguity common to these occasions. The messages refer primarily to the domestic affairs, health, and finance of the narrator herself, or occasionally of her female relatives. Only time will tell whether there is "anything in it": several narrators say they are still waiting for the husbands, money, or success they were promised! The air of objectivity is enhanced by this slight element of suspense, which narrators exploit by telling the story in strict chronological order without asides or digressions, and by structuring it according to a neatly matched before-and-after pattern. These are all rather good stories technically, but the cumulative effect is of detachment, the narrators perhaps taking most pleasure in simply "telling the tale."

Barbara's story is typical of accounts of visits to fortune-tellers. She does not even date the story; she refers throughout to the fortune-teller as "this woman" and is equally vague about other aspects of the scene, except that the clairvoyant had a "caravan" which suggests that the events took place during a seaside holiday. The *dramatis personae* are characterized so vaguely that it is often difficult to disentangle who's who. Only the fortune-teller's message is reported, and we are told nothing about how she arrived at her prediction. Again, there is no subjective comment to form a digression, and it moves briskly on in lively and fairly impersonal dialogue.²¹ Finally, Barbara blames her friend for the escapade and reports that she found it all "quite amusing."

We went to a caravan . . . "Oh," my friend [said], "we're going to this palmist!" you see. But anyway, my brother at this time had put his shoulder out and he'd been to the hospital. Anyway! This er—she told me about "someone in your family who's got this shoulder [trouble]." And then she said to me, "Do you know a policeman?"

I said, "No!"

"Well!" she said. "You *are* going to know one."

Well, I thought it was quite amusing.

And when we got home from this holiday—we were staying at Marlborough—I called over to our next-door neighbour to say we were home, you see, and a *strange* voice answered me, "Oh, do you want Mrs. Warburton?"

And it was this fellow who was [staying] there.

And when Mrs. Warburton came to see me, she said, "That's Perkins. He's a policeman."

Absolutely spot on, wasn't she?²²

A story—one of only three on the subject of astrology—told by Norah is similarly distanced, vague, and impersonal: it seeks only to entertain for a moment. Whereas Barbara's story is about family and (future) friends, Norah's is about finance; between these two women they cover the topics that occur most frequently as predictions about the future.

I read my horoscope but it's just like water off a duck's back, isn't it? I don't believe in it, really. Because once my horoscope told me that I should buy some Premium Bonds,²³ and I went out and bought them, and they've never won *yet*!

Yes, I remember reading it and it said something about buying some Premium Bonds, and I went out and bought some *like a lunatic*! And I just went *out* and bought this five pounds' worth of *Premium Bonds* but I never won!

So I don't think I'll believe in it *again*!²⁴

Overall, then, we find two very different types of experience told in very different ways. In stories about "being a little bit psychic," the women are careful to date the events clearly and to specify both the places and people involved. They try by all means to make the story both real and convincing. They tell of insights that came to them unbidden, as they went about their ordinary lives. In most cases these insights are purely subjective—a mood, a feeling, a sudden knowledge; in the few cases where something more objective is seen or heard, it is only the narrator who perceives the omen and who can interpret its significance. The women to whom these things happen are regarded as being more than usually sensitive, or, at least, in a more than usually sensitive mood or condition. Their premonitions are invariably other-person-centered: their concern is never with their own fate. In most cases, the other person whose distress or need they are responding to is a male member of their immediate family. All the accounts are thus highly subjective and show the narrators as caring, intuitive, sensitive, loving, and responsive to the needs of their family and menfolk.

In contrast, in telling stories about fortune-telling adventures, the women are much more careless and happy-go-lucky, taking little heed, it seems, whether they will be believed or not. They are vague about details, not specifying very precisely who were the characters involved or where the events took place. Rather than telling their listener how they feel about the visit or the predictions, they concentrate on repeating the message they were given and saying whether it has (yet) come true. They construct these stories dramatically, keeping to chronological order and endeavoring to present an entertaining

account of their visit. The predictions almost invariably concern their own, not another person's, fate and keep to a range of topics conventionally considered to be feminine preoccupations.

When we list the main characteristics of the two sorts of events and the corresponding stories like this, it becomes plain that they are based on a common evaluative folklore of the "proper" way to handle encounters with the future. We can see, on the one hand, that involuntary ESP experiences, as this group of people see them, are geared toward the concerns of a person other than the self. On the other hand, one goes to a fortune-teller out of concern for one's own fate; it is a deliberately chosen action, and it involves invoking acquired skills rather than passively responding to involuntary feelings, sensations, or perceptions. All this strongly suggests that the women are using their stories as vehicles of moral judgments, accepting elements of the traditional folklore which fit in with their values and rejecting those that run contrary to them.

Traditional Values and Roles

As mentioned earlier, the women I studied were all over sixty years old at the time I talked to them; most were in their late sixties and early seventies, and the oldest was ninety-five. Eighty percent of them were married or widowed, and most had families. Even if they were unmarried, few had led independent lives; most of the single women, for instance, had devoted themselves to caring for their parents. For the entire group of women, the death of parents or husbands had often not substantially changed their situation, however, for half of them now lived with younger members of their family, and they were still deeply enmeshed in family cares and duties.

Like it or not, for reasons of age, class, and religion these women's lives were geared to traditional roles and pursuits: we can assume that they had been taught as children, and had grown up believing, that the ideal member of their sex is an intuitive, caring, unassertive person for whom direct action, independent thought, and concern with self are unbecoming and whose "natural" role is as support, nurse, and helpmate. These traditional views would be specially enhanced for those women whose lives were centered around their church; they would not only be constantly in the company of the like-minded, but their views would be colored by moral considerations, their ideals about the relationship between men and women being modeled on their view of the relationship between humans and God. I believe that, in some ways, their beliefs about involuntary ESP allow these women to square the circle in terms of these traditional ideals and roles.

This becomes clear by examining some of the other narratives I was told during the course of my fieldwork, especially widows' stories about the deaths of their husbands. A very common experience was to have been faced with some difficulty or dilemma in the months following their bereavement. This difficulty was mentally referred to the lost spouse, and the widows received an "answer" to their problems. In distress, for example, the women might speak aloud to the dead man, or even pray to him; their prayers seemed to be answered, and the difficulty resolved, when they physically "heard" a reply or "heard a voice in their heads" or the answer was "put into their heads."²⁵ Though this experience would seem to be common in bereavement, it is capable of receiving an interpretation in addition to the usual psychological one that dwells on the altered state of consciousness of the newly bereaved person.²⁶

The women's glosses to these stories emphasize their helplessness and weakness in the face of their troubles, and firmly attribute their subsequent ability to resolve their problems to the intervention of supernatural forces. "I couldn't have done it under my own steam," they say. "I had help given, and I firmly believe that my husband was beside me telling me what to do." In each case, the insoluble problem involved doing something previously regarded as exclusively a husband's task—filling in income-tax forms, moving to another house, winding up a relative's estate, and so on. In listening to these stories, the overwhelming impression is first of the women's lack of confidence in their own abilities to do these "men's jobs," a lack of confidence so acute that it leads them to attribute even the smallest personal success directly to the man, even though he is dead; and second, perhaps more unkindly, a suspicion that they are disclaiming responsibility for stepping out of role by interpreting their new ability as a more-or-less temporary gift—"You do!" they say. "You get the strength *given* you!"

I want to suggest that narratives about involuntary ESP are structured and presented to others in a broadly similar way. Telling stories like these is one way a woman may claim status and yet not challenge the conventional perception of her proper role. Being capable of having such experiences—being "a little bit psychic," in the women's terminology—confers authority on its possessor, but not improper power.

This is so because being "a little bit psychic" is a "gift" in the sense of an unsought handout, as well as in the sense of a natural talent: indeed, women's discourse often stresses that at times it is an unwelcome gift, a burden—it's a "horrible feeling," a "strange feeling," "something not very pleasant," "I wish I didn't have premonitions, it's like prophesying evil all the time, isn't it." Properly used, the gift confers only passive power—if that is not a contradiction in terms. A woman who has a premonition can *do* very

little about it. It is a glimpse into a future where, in their words, "what will be will be, and nothing will alter it." Often, the most that may be done is to prepare oneself psychologically.

I collected very few stories in which women make physical preparations in response to a supernatural warning: a woman who has a premonition that visitors will call bakes some extra cakes; two women agree not to talk to each other because the psychic one has dreamt that they have had a quarrel; a mother waits at home because she is confident that she will hear that her daughter has been involved in an accident. Most often it is psychological preparation that the foreknowledge provides: a sister "sees" her brother with "his leg all shriveled up" before he steps on a land mine; a wife "sees" the accident her husband has been involved in; an aunt has a dream that her nephew has been blinded in the war, and so on. Psychic gifts seem thus specially tailored to the traditional female role, because they demand patience, watchfulness, compliance—not action.

Running like a thread through many of my informants' conversations was the concept of predestination, with its passive-compliant corollary, complete acceptance. As they see it, the future is already ordained and nothing can turn it from its course. It advances on the individual like the infamous "irresistible force." People, however, are by no means "immovable objects"; like trees in a gale, they must bend and submit or be broken. Many of my informants had adopted this philosophy as a coping strategy against the vagaries of chance and fate, the sense of their own powerlessness, and the tragedies of their lives: in submitting to their fate, they said they are "given the strength" to endure it. Psychic gifts, by forewarning the individual of trouble to come yet allowing no remedy by action or interference, increase that passive strength. They also bestow the ability to perceive hidden order in natural chaos. It is easier to say with Milton's Samson that "just are the ways of God and justifiable to Man" if you feel that God does have a purpose. Psychic powers bestow that assurance. If things were not part of God's plan, the reasoning goes, then events would not be predestined: if events were not predestined, then one could not receive any forewarnings about them. The fact that "sensitive" and gifted people do receive such forewarnings proves that there is a divine plan, and ultimately proves that there is a divinity. It would seem that by increasing the recipient's "passive resistance" to turmoil and sorrow, psychic gifts convey the power to deal with major life events on the terms that these women most approve of.

These alone are considerable benefits, but women with "the gift" have more mundane and worldly advantages over their ungifted sisters. In a very direct way, being "a little bit psychic" guarantees approved feminine virtues, especially those good old standbys of intuition, sensitivity, and tenderness. All the

accounts of ESP which I collected are highly subjective and show the narrators as caring, sensitive, loving people who are responsive to the needs of their family and their menfolk. In addition to being handed this informal badge of feminine merit, the possessor of psychic powers has other social advantages, most notably that her abilities confer considerable prestige and authority; as Alma in one of the stories below says, "Whatever I said she took for gospel."

Negative Aspects of Psychic Power

The flattery and attention may be pleasant and may give a welcome sense of power and control, but my informants feel that being "a little bit psychic" places them in moral danger. It is to this danger that I want to turn now, in order to examine the negative aspects of their beliefs in psychic powers. These negative aspects are not only potent and painful, but more than anything else, I think, they help point up the functional picture I have attempted to paint, because they show women stepping out of the traditional feminine role and seeking power, fame, and glory for themselves. They also allow us to disentangle the reasons for the women's negative attitudes to astrology and fortune-telling.

As we have seen, women's ideas about psychic powers center round the concept of *gift*—not only are such powers a gift in the sense of a talent, but they are a gift in the sense of an unsought handout that has been conferred on the woman though she has not asked for it and may not welcome it. This has several implications—most important, that the woman is not responsible for any power or advantage which the gift confers; she cannot be blamed for her success. Though the gift may empower her, that power is excused and she remains uncontaminated by it.

A folktale analogy may be in order here. We may compare the masculine ethos of force and action (as my informants see it) to the eldest sons in a typical "youngest-smartest" story, and the feminine ethos to the youngest son. When the elders fail, and force and action prove counterproductive, the task devolves to the youngest son, unfit and unwilling though he feels that he is. His virtue, deserving modesty, and kindness lead to his being presented with a magic gift, the power of which sees him through the task. The task can therefore be achieved without his being corrupted. He still remains the nice, appealing, helpless young man he was at the start of the story: the only difference is that he now has the princess. He can have the advantages of action without being affected by its corrupting influence. The same is true for women with psychic gifts.

The converse of this is, of course, that to claim the gift as yours and exploit it for personal advantage destroys this delicate balance. My informants called

the exploitation of psychic gifts "delving," and delving is the ultimate taboo for this group of women. Significantly perhaps, I collected only six stories about delving (i.e., less than 6 percent), but nevertheless they form a coherent and convincing pattern. These stories feature psychic women reading the cards or the cups for their family or friends. In every case the result is dreadful. Clara has her hand read by a friend and within a year her favorite nephew dies a painful death; Geraldine suffers a distressing domestic upheaval; Berenice foretells—and lives to see—an unsuitable marriage; Alma reads the cups for her mother's friend and the friend dies within three weeks; Rose plays with a Ouija board and has to have an operation; later Rose reads the cards for a relative and almost immediately afterwards their great-nephew visits them, contracts a fatal disease, and dies in their house.

The tenor of the "delving" experience and the moral force of the stories can best be seen by looking at two of the stories told by Rose and Alma. These two women are not just good narrators; they firmly believe that they do have special powers. Their personal experiences therefore deserve serious attention: their cautionary tales can tell us a good deal about the use and abuse of psychic gifts.

Alma

Now, I'll tell you one thing! When I was younger I used to look into teacups. Now, mother had a friend who was terribly superstitious, and whatever I said, she took for gospel. Things did happen that way, but a lot of it didn't. But I know, the last time she asked me, she said, "Oh, you must read my cup!"

And I looked at it and I said, "Oh!" I said, "There's nothing there!"

"Oh!" she said. "There must be!"

I said, "No, there isn't," I said. "Honestly," I said, "there's nothing there at all!" And I couldn't see a . . .

Well, she was very, very offended about this. And I said, "No, there isn't."

And when I came home, mother . . . "Oh!" she said. "Why didn't you tell her something?"

I said, "Look, mother! There was no future for her. None at all!"

She said, "There must have been!"

I said, "There wasn't," I said. "I couldn't see a thing in that cup," I said, "and I got a queer feeling when I picked it up," I said. There wasn't anything there!

Do you know! That next week, we were out, and we met a friend, and she said, "Ooh! Did you know about so-and-so. . ." She'd been taken ill. She'd had a stroke. And she only lasted three days. The next thing we knew, my mother was going to her funeral.

Well now, that was the last time that ever . . . ²⁷

Rose

[*Author*: Tell me how you think you're psychic.]

Because I know what's going to happen. I've got a pretty good idea, yeah. How do I know? Inside there (points to her head). And the fact also I've been able to tell fortunes by cards, and I was able to read cups, reading tea-leaves, and this was oh,

forty, fifty years ago. I was young. I was in my teens then, you see, and I frightened myself to death. So I said, "*No way!*" So I left the tea-leaf business alone.

When I was married, and we'd been married Lord knows how long—the war interrupted, so of course we never had any children till 1947. Now, in that summer of '47, I used to tell all fortunes by cards.

[*Author:* What's this? Tarot cards?]

No, no. Playing cards. Each card has a meaning and all the cards together spell out a message.

Anyway! I was about six or seven months pregnant and we go down to see my husband's aunt, and she was a great believer in the cards. And they have one son. Now, he was very good in business. He was quite a top notch in Rolls-Royce.

Anyway! We got down there on the Saturday afternoon and there was Auntie Edie, Uncle Bernard, who are my husband's aunt and uncle, myself (complete with lump, of course!), and my husband. And Cousin Charlie met us at Chesney station—with Rolls-Royce, of course, naturally!—and took us to his house.

So, and we had a terrible thunderstorm in the afternoon, so, to pass the time away, Charlie and his wife said, "Let's tell our fortunes, Rose!" So I said, "Oh, OK, then," never thinking anything about it.

And they got the cards out and we started, you know. And all I could tell her was that all I could see and all I could smell—all I could smell was flowers and all I could see was a coffin sitting there in the hall on a bier.

Now, it was a beautiful house, with a great big square hall, you see. There's a lounge at the front, and there's a dining room and there's a morning room, and there's this, that, and the other, you see.

Went to bed at night. Everybody laughed! They thought, "Oh, she's pregnant," you see. So we went to bed at night, like, and I kept crying and my husband said to me, "What the hell's the matter with you?" He says, "I can't understand you!"

I said, "I want to go home! All I can see . . . I can all smell flowers and all I can see is a coffin and it's on a bier in that hall!"

He said, "Oh, don't be silly, Rose! You'll be all right. Get off to sleep!"

No sleep for me!

We went home on the Sunday and Auntie Edie said to me going home on the train, "What was the matter with you yesterday?"

So I told her, so I said, "There's a coffin. There's a funeral in that house, you know."

She says, "Is there?"

I says, "Yes." I says, "I don't know who it is, but it's definitely in that house!"

So anyway, I think it would be July 19th. Now, in the August of '47, the great-nephew, he was fourteen years old, their only son—their only child, everything planned and a brilliant scholar—he came over to see his Auntie Edie and contracted polio, and in three weeks he was dead. Yes. *And his coffin stood on bier in the hall.*

It so affected me, I said, "Never again will I tell a fortune!" *Frightened me to death!*

I said, "No!"²⁸

As Alma and Rose—and their contemporaries—see it, the proper characteristic of the woman with psychic gifts should be that she reacts to events

already ordained, and that she does this by means of a God-given sensibility that is created and consolidated by love of other people. This being the mechanism of the precognitive process, it must be a sinful and graceless distortion to use it to achieve selfish or trivial ends. The women I studied therefore draw a sharp line between unsought precognitive experiences and delving, which is designed to harness these powerful abilities and claim them for one's own. The latter corrupts or backfires, the former does not. Supernatural experience that is not deliberately courted is considered both safe and good because it is an extension of ordinary loving intuition, but any attempt to deliberately seek knowledge of the future is dangerously audacious, and retribution will surely follow. These contrasts, I believe, are born out of the respect that elderly women have for the traditional female role. Their adherence to conventional female virtues leads them to make sharp moral distinctions between the two strands of precognitive traditions outlined earlier, eschewing the active-objective divinatory tradition of which delving is a part, and embracing the receptive-subjective visionary tradition of which psychic gifts are a part. Even consulting horoscopes or fortune-tellers is not without danger and should certainly not be taken seriously, for that could be construed as a willingness to "delve" into what should be kept hidden. Only by treating such activities unseriously can the sting be removed and the potential threat diverted. So the women are careful to stress that they do not "really" believe in these things, and are apt to hedge their stories and experiences with apologies and explanations—"I did it for a laugh," "I did it for a dare," "I've only ever done it once," "I only went with my sister to keep her company," and so on.

Whereas audacious "delving" into the unknown by reading teacups or playing with Ouija boards is morally dangerous, the modest and unselfish acceptance of psychic gifts is both safe and empowering. In terms of sociosexual roles, it allows women to "both have their cake and eat it."

On the one hand, the concept of psychic gifts directly enshrines the conventional feminine virtues of intuition, caring, and sensitivity, and thus glorifies the female character (I choose the word *glorifies* deliberately; psychic powers both glory in the traditional female virtues and make them glorious).

On the other hand, and best of all, while doing this the concept also allows women to act outside the constraints of those characteristic virtues. By concentrating on the notion of psychic powers as "gift"—something unsought and perhaps temporary—women permit themselves, at least for a while, to achieve a personal glory, to play an active role as guide and interpreter of human affairs, to claim status and authority within their group—all without giving up their claim to feminine modesty. In brief, the concept of psychic gifts allows women to act out-of-role while still in-role.

Conclusion

Finally, how far are the beliefs I have described as part of the folklore of a neighborhood group of elderly women common to other social groups?

My work permits only an impressionistic discussion of this question, but some trends are nevertheless discernible and would be worth following up in a subsequent study. During the months I worked in my father's clinic, I also spoke to twenty-one younger women (one sixteen-year-old and twenty women between the ages of forty and sixty) and to thirteen men, nine of whom were husbands of women in the main study group. If the beliefs of these (admittedly small) alternative samples are analyzed, some interesting and suggestive patterns emerge.

Among younger women, belief in fortune-telling, astrology, and other forms of divination is significantly higher than among the older women. Thirty-two percent of them believe in horoscopes, 46 percent think that one's character can be read in one's birth sign, and 53 percent have some measure of faith in fortune-tellers (comparable figures for the older women are 27 percent, 33 percent, and 24 percent, respectively). Elderly men return lower percentages on all topics except omens (where—and I have no explanation for this—they score higher than both groups of women). Among men, scores are particularly low for telepathy (32 percent for men, compared with 67 percent for the older women) and somewhat lower for premonitions (the men score 60 percent, the older women 77 percent).

Though partial and impressionistic, these figures do suggest that the patterns which I have discussed are indeed elderly women's responses to traditional beliefs. On the whole, the younger women are more believing than the older ones. If, for example, one were to average out their level of belief over all six topics that were discussed, one would find that their mean percentage of belief in traditions of foreknowledge is 50.6 percent compared with 47.1 percent among older women. The significant difference, however, is that they are much more accepting of the "active" divinatory traditions. Averaging out the percentage scores over the different aspects of these traditions gives a figure of 29.6 percent for the older women, but 47 percent for the younger women. Conversely, averaging out the percentage scores on the three "subjective" traditions (omens, premonitions, and telepathy) gives a figure of 57.6 percent for the younger women, but 65.3 percent for the older ones. This does suggest that seeking to know one's personal fate for personal advantage is less taboo for the younger women and that, conversely, they lay less stress on the value of involuntary foreknowledge.

Comparisons between the levels of belief among elderly men and elderly women are also suggestive. Averaged out, men's percentage of belief overall is

lower than that for either group of women (42 percent). This is despite an inexplicably high level of belief in omens (66 percent). It is virtually impossible, however, to get any figures for belief in the divinatory tradition. Two of the thirteen men said that they read—and believed—their horoscopes: all the rest state or imply that horoscopes are "more for the ladies"—as are interest in birth signs and fortune-telling. One cannot help but guess that this is because men of this age and class feel sufficiently in control of their lives to have no use for these practices.

Not too much should be made of such an impressionistic analysis, of course, but nevertheless it is suggestive. The younger women and the men are directly comparable with the women of the study group, in that they differ only by virtue of age or sex, but not both. This is specially true of the men, the majority of whom were married to women in the study group. It would follow that differences in their patterns of belief are a function of age and sex taken together. In turn this suggests that the operational factor must be age- and sex-related cultural contacts.

More would need to be done to confirm whether these are universal patterns among elderly women, or whether they are perhaps most typical of middle-class churchgoers. I would be most interested to learn of any studies which would serve to confirm or challenge the patterns of belief that I have described here. Meanwhile, I hope that my own work may at least show what a wealth of folklore there is to be explored in even the most prosaic of everyday surroundings.

Endnotes

1. John Beaumont, *An Historical Physiological and Theological Treatise of Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcrafts, and Other Magical Practices* (London: D. Browne, 1705), 220.
2. John Aubrey, *Miscellanies* (London: Edward Castle, 1696), 33–34.
3. *Ibid.*, 39.
4. *Ibid.*, 40.
5. *Ibid.*, 45.
6. Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary with a Collection of Local Proverbs and Popular Superstitions* (London: S. Hooper, [1787] 1790), 34–37.
7. See Gillian Bennett, *Traditions of Belief: Women and the Supernatural* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1987), 175–188.
8. William Henderson, *Notes on the Folk Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (1866; reprint, Wakefield: E.P. Publishing, 1973), 30; Catherine Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature: Or Ghosts and Ghost-seers* (1848; reprint, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire: Aquarian Press, 1986), 48–65, 98–129.
9. Bennett, 110–142.
10. H. K. Nixon, "Popular Answers to Some Psychological Questions," *American Journal of Psychology* 36 (1925): 418–423; Lynn L. Ralya, "Some Surprising

- Beliefs Concerning Human Nature among Pre-Medical Psychology Students," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 15 (1945): 70–75; Geoffrey Gorer, *Exploring English Character* (London: Cresset, 1955); Robert Towler et al., "Conventional Religion and Common Religion in Great Britain," Religious Research Papers, no. 11 (University of Leeds, Department of Sociology, 1981–84); Eugene Levitt, "Superstitions Twenty-Five Years Ago and Today," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 65 (1952): 443–449; F. W. Warburton, "Beliefs Concerning Human Nature among Students in a University Department of Education," *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 26 (1956): 156–162.
11. Leea Virtanen, *"That Must Have Been ESP!": An Examination of Psychic Experiences* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 24.
 12. David J. Hufford, "Traditions of Disbelief," *New York Folklore* 8 (1982): 49.
 13. Virtanen, 161.
 14. Gillian Bennett, "Narrative as Expository Discourse," *Journal of American Folklore* 99 (1986): 415–484.
 15. Informant 100b, interviewed February 4, 1981.
 16. Informant 76b, interviewed May 4, 1981.
 17. Informant 72b, interviewed March 31, 1981.
 18. Informant 34b, interviewed April 6, 1981.
 19. Informant 56b, interviewed February 24, 1981.
 20. Informant 34b, interviewed April 6, 1981.
 21. Compare the "narrative velocity" of legends "told for laughs," in Gillian Bennett, "Legend: Performance and Truth," in *Monsters with Iron Teeth: Perspectives on Contemporary Legends*, vol. 2, ed. Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 13–36.
 22. Informant 3b (pseudonym Barbara), interviewed March 2, 1981.
 23. Premium Bonds are a form of government raffle.
 24. Informant 12b (pseudonym Norah), interviewed January 27, 1981.
 25. See Bennett, *Traditions of Belief*, 63–81.
 26. See Erich Lindemann, "Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 101 (1944): 141–148; Peter Marris, *Widows and Their Families* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (New York: International Universities Press, 1972); Richard Schulz, *The Psychology of Death, Dying, and Bereavement* (Reading, PA: Addison-Wesley, 1978).
 27. Informant 48b (pseudonym Alma), interviewed February 25, 1981.
 28. Informant 85b (pseudonym Rose), interviewed March 18, 1981.

III

Demons and Gods: Cultural Adaptations and Incorporations

Within a society, elements of the supernatural might be included within a broad spectrum of belief, but how that assimilation takes place or in what form varies from culture to culture. This final section provides three rather diverse accounts of how the supernatural functions among groups in the United States.

In Chapter 8, Erika Brady provides an intriguing look into the world of evil spirits, exorcisms, and Roman Catholic priests. Through her students, Brady collected several accounts in which an individual either was possessed by or somehow encountered a malevolent force, and, accordingly, sought the help of a Catholic priest. Curious about following up on these accounts, Brady undertook field research with Catholic priests in her region, collecting their remarks on these legends. Her findings and insightful comments provide a unique perspective on interpretation of events, the influence of media, and the experiences of those whose profession links them directly to the arena of supernatural belief.

Focusing on the Hawaiian goddess Pele, anthropologist Joyce Hammond explores the concept of Other, something both sought and feared as it applies to the tourist experience, desirable precisely because it is distinct from self and one's typical experiences; Hammond examines the function and value of this distinction. Initially often skeptical, some tourists later place credence in the Pele legends encountered during their visit to Hawaii. Whether they are human fabrications or actual, independently existing figures, substances, or essences, gods like Pele—although conceived of differently by Hawaiian natives and by non-native tourists—become symbolic of the exotic physical environment and culture, and of individual interaction with both.

In Chapter 10, Shelley Adler discusses the vital concept of how belief in the supernatural can affect health and one's sense of well-being.