

The Naked Eye

Painting Devils

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*Why do people so easily accept
the word of psychics, astrologers, and other oracles?*

My sister-in-law was telling me the Mother day about how her Turkish grandmother used to read coffee grounds to predict the future.

"This old lady would be sitting there at the kitchen table, pushing her finger around the bottom of a cup, trying to get me to sit down for a reading," Cali said, rolling her eyes. "For years I used to say to her, 'Nona, please leave me alone. I don't want to know the future. What's the point? It'll be bad enough when it happens.'"

I understand what Cali means. I'm not as pessimistic as she is, thank God, but I am a great believer in focusing on the present moment and not getting lost in occult speculation. It worries me that people nowadays may be flocking to oracles (an umbrella term I'm using, for the sake of argument, to include anyone who claims to predict the future) out of rank terror or idle curiosity. It worries me that they may be using oracles to counter anxiety, to stuff the void of being here now, to whitewash their perfectly human frustration at having only five (usable) senses in a multisensory dimension. These strategies worry me not because there's anything inherently harmful in psychic guidance, but because these seers may be profiting from our terror, diverting us from the challenge of living in beginner's mind. What exactly is the wisdom of trying to know the future, I ask myself. Isn't it hard enough to deal with what is? Isn't the overweening urge to know more than you're meant to a sort of hubris?

I speak from some experience. A couple of years ago, I accepted an offer to have my astrological chart done. Until then, I'd always resisted psychic aid, had been almost fanatically op-

posed to all forms of what I considered magical dabbling. But sometimes I need to challenge my own prejudices, so I agreed to the reading. The astrologer was an editor I liked (I like any editor who returns my phone calls and doesn't screw up my copy); he was also, by reputation, an expert in the ways of the stars, having completed a 10-year



study of the subject. Finally, he was someone I'd never met and probably never would, thus assuring my skeptical mind that the information he'd give me would be based solely on my horoscope.

When the morning of our phone date came, I called him in Illinois. For the next hour, he talked to me about the tilting constellations—transits, cusps, and retrogrades—describing what he believed these astral bodies light-years away seemed to be saying about my little life. Mostly, his predictions were sunny, though I noticed that he steered away from details and specifics. His only darker warning was this: to beware of the following spring,

when my health would be in danger.

I tried to shrug his words off with the cliché that astrology deals in probabilities, not absolutes. However, with the seed of apprehension planted, I couldn't forget the prophecy. As March approached, I started to worry. Through April, May, and most of June, calamity hovered in the back of my brain. Not until July had come and gone and spring was safely behind me was I able to relax completely and forget the astrologer's onus.

Afterward, I asked myself what I had accomplished by pushing my instincts aside and venturing into the Oracle Zone. The answer was: nothing at all, except to add stress to my already combustible life. I thought of the Finnish saying that warns us not to "paint devils on the wall," not to conjure more problems than we already have. It could be argued that the astrologer's warning prompted me to take better care of myself that spring than I might have otherwise, but that's speculation. The truth (according to me) is that this proliferating oracle business is truly questionable, as most spiritual teachers will attest. Not one enlightened person I know of recommends the magical arts as a hobby, or a crutch, not only because personal power of the kind oracles offer is dangerous if misused, but because the individuals peddling this service are frequently wrong.

The question of legitimacy among oracles is too complex to tackle here, though it seems likely that for every bona fide psychic there are at least three amateurs profiting from the public's gullibility. These seers read everything from tarot cards to horoscopes, runes, palms, and auras. They work on

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the Internet, in bus stations, at New Age centers, and in chic storefronts in Greenwich Village. Some are trained in long traditions of occult arts; others make it up as they go along. Yet for all their diversity, there seems to be one characteristic common to all oracles: They take little responsibility for the accuracy of their advice. Hiding behind a sort of mystical disclaimer that says, "Hey, I'm only guessing," they leave themselves free to make predictions for profit without personal liability. Imagine an M.D. who could treat you this way—"Well, Mrs. Smith, it might be cancer or it might be gas. We'll wait and see if the groundhog sees its shadow."

This sounds absurd, but I've known my share of psychic casualties. I've watched intelligent people turn gaga in the presence of supposed oracles. A few years ago, an otherwise brilliant, politically active liberal I know actually followed his psychic teacher's brainstorm that everyone should buy Krugerrands while apartheid was still being practiced in South Africa. When I asked him how he could possibly be so naive, he shrugged and said that he figured his teacher knew something he didn't. Another was advised, during his father's final illness, to cut off all contact with his family and not to attend his father's funeral. Someone else was told by a psychic that he was about to embark on the most important love affair of his life, then had his bones jumped by that same wacko, who admitted afterward that his prediction had been a setup. Aside from this sort of flagrant misdirection, there is the more common but equally insidious practice of offering generic advice on specific problems—elliptical messages open to multiple interpretations, which often confuse people in need of genuine guidance.

Many of my best friends disagree with me. They think that I'm afraid of expanding my mind and relinquishing autonomy. (They're partially right on that score.) They call me a spiritual reactionary and return with glowing reports of their encounters with oracles around the globe, full of adjectives like "uncanny." When my eyebrow sneaks up, they tell me that I'm an awful pessimist, that most psychics mean well, work with compassion, and

struggle to be as accurate as possible. Though immune to the rigors of malpractice, oracles, I'm assured, do aspire to a central tenet of the Hippocratic oath: to do no harm if they can help it. Other than the sort of vague warning I received from the astrologer in Illinois, my friend Robert maintains, oracles are honor-bound not to tell you anything really scary. "Even if they see bad things, they only tell you what can be useful," he says.

What I want to know is: Who is the oracle to decide for me what's useful and what isn't? Even though I'm not

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looking for bad news, how could I trust somebody who withheld it? Beyond that, what role might self-interest play in this censorship? How popular would a psychic be if he told his clients the whole truth? Not extremely, I suspect, but I'd still prefer the plain facts to a prophecy that has been parsed to please me.

I feel like such a Scrooge when I grouse this way. What's wrong with being supported, affirmed, encouraged through life's uncertainties by confirmation from the great beyond? What's wrong with gathering information, taking what's useful, and leaving the rest? We're adults who can discriminate, right? I'm really not so sure. A true believer I know who swears by his astrologer (though the predicted movie deal with Steven Spielberg hasn't quite materialized) was recently told that he shouldn't even bother pursuing romance this year. Rather than being discouraged by the disturbing news that love was not in the stars for '96, my unhappy-to-be-a-bachelor friend appeared relieved.

"Why are you so happy?" I asked him.

"'Cause now I know it's not my fault."

"It's not?"

"No. It's just not in the stars."

I find this so distressing. Of course, I'm glad that my friend's self-blame is momentarily softened, glad that his loneliness has been appeased by explanation. But what does his reaction to the astrologer's prognosis say about free will? What does it say about the desire, shared by nearly everyone, to give ourselves over to magical authority, to shake free the burden of self-determination? Isn't it dangerous to accept a stranger's word on something as important as one's love life, to shut down the aspiration that magnetizes our hearts' desires and to risk fulfilling the oracle's prophecy?

We're highly impressionable beings, after all, confused by tumbling circumstance, often more needy for guidance than we'd ever admit. When that guidance comes from psychic authority, it tends to assume a greater legitimacy, which is why the potential for spiritual abuse is always so great. What I want to say to my bachelor friend is that although I'm glad he's feeling better, I'm troubled by his eagerness to shrug off the complexity of his life on the basis of a hundred-dollar phone call. "Forget the constellations!" I want to shout. "Get off Uranus and figure out once and for all why you keep chasing your lovers away!"

I never would, though. It's none of my business. Life's tough for everyone, the mystery too much to live with sometimes. The suspense of waiting for Godot is frequently unbearable, I know, but to me that's the thrill of it. I'm a sucker for surprise. The day-to-day expectation of never knowing what's ahead is exhilarating to me; it keeps me on my toes, keeps me in the present tense. I have no desire to play leapfrog with time. It's all I can do, on a good day, to make sense of what's right in front of me.

Like my sister-in-law waving away her coffee-slinging grandma, I say to the oracles who come my way, "Thanks, but no thanks. The future will be here soon enough."

Mark Matousek's memoir, *Sex Death Enlightenment*, is being published in April by Riverhead Books.