Reading Signs: What the Moment Says When the Moment Speaks

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[This talk took inspiration from a Spring 2011 UUMA retreat workshop that posed the question, “Whose Are We,” and includes my ponderings about the question of belonging. CM]
Reading

There is almost nothing in the human or natural world that people have not tried to “read” for hidden meanings, “signs” and “omens.” Alomancy uses salt-interpreting patterns that form when it is dropped or thrown. Tasseomancy involves reading the patterns left by the dregs of tea leaves in the bottom of a cup. Alphitomancy was the use of barley bread to determine the guilt or innocence of those accused of crimes. Those being questioned were made to eat from a very coarse barley loaf. If you got indigestion, or if the bread got stuck in your throat, these signs were “read” as evidence of guilt.

Bibliomancy is a practice that involves actual “reading” as we usually understand that term. One method begins with allowing a book to fall open to a random page, then closing your eyes and letting a finger fall on a particular passage, then reading it for clues to understanding your current problem. Scriptures such as the Bible or Qur’an are favorite choices, but classical poetry and Shakespeare have also been used. You have probably heard of a Chinese book that was designed expressly for purposes of bibliomancy: the I Ching, or Book of Changes. First you throw coins to build up a hexagram—a pattern of six broken or solid lines—and then you consult the book about the meaning of this seemingly random pattern. Psychologist Carl Jung had a deep respect for the I Ching, and wrote:

...Whoever invented [it] was convinced that the hexagram worked out in a certain moment coincided with the latter in quality no less than in time. To him the hexagram was the exponent of the moment in which it was cast -- even more so than the hours of the clock or the divisions of the calendar could be -- inasmuch as the hexagram was understood to be an indicator of the essential situation prevailing in the moment of its origin. This assumption involves a certain curious principle that I have termed synchronicity, a concept that ...takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers. (C.G. Jung, Introduction to Richard Wilhelm translation, Bolingen Series XIX)

In other words, we can find in a seemingly chance arrangement of events a “snapshot” of a particular moment--the moment to which we belong and which also belongs to us right here, right now (though it won’t be long at all before another one comes.) It’s a snapshot that can reveal something not only about the objects or events themselves, but also about what’s going on inside of the person or persons who have stopped to take them in. It’s a moment that can be “read”--but how do you think we should try to read it? Let’s look at a few such moments together in just a few more moments, after we sing.
Sermon

People reading our highway sign this week might have gotten a weird feeling as they read the words READING SIGNS. “Hey, that’s what I’m doing right now!” We couldn’t fit the subtitle up there, too: “What the moment says when the moment speaks”. Who knows, maybe that would have only made things stranger. But when certain things happen, you know right away that you’re only going to experience something like this once. You’d better savor the moment and drink in the meaning because it’s likely that you’ll never get a second chance. Like when you’re walking along and a bird throws a fish at you. That actually happened to me once. Wait: it gets even better once you know some of the details in the snapshot of that particular moment.

My wife and I were walking along the bank of the Willamette River one summer day. Not just any summer day, but one in the summer when she was pregnant with our son. Very, very pregnant. She looked like a beautiful whale walking with her black summer dress stretched tightly over her abdomen, a sleeveless dress that showed her lovely white arms and neck and face. Black and white like an orca. She used that word herself, so I won’t get in trouble for using it here today.

We were walking slowly but steadily, moving easily through the heat and the dappled sunshine on the riverside trail. Bicyclists went carefully around us, giving the couple and the child who was almost there a nice wide berth before his birth in a month or two, excuse the silly play on words, but we felt like we were already out there playing with him, bouncing around by the river so aware of his presence and the pleasure of his company. We were getting ready, steady, steady, almost ready, just a little longer now. Everyone could read the signs of his coming.

Bald eagles nest along the river near where we live, and one flew by us maybe ten feet overhead, shading us long enough to actually feel a flicker of cooling. What’s their wingspan, six or seven feet at least? This was a big one, even as bald eagles go. It was carrying something, but we couldn’t see what it was, yet. The bird landed on a tree limb just ahead of us, not too high above our heads, not too far in front of us, and watched us coming closer. Bald eagles are not less impressive when they are perched than when they are flying.
If it had simply flown by then perched so close above us, that in itself would have been something to remember. But there was more. As we passed beneath the limb, the eagle dropped what it was holding, seeming to deliberately throw it at our feet. It. It was a fish, a large lamprey, fresh from the river, not quite dead in spite of the punctures it had suffered in the great bird’s talons. The native people of these Northwestern lands we occupy valued the lamprey as much as the salmon. Its flesh is rich and oily like that of many eels, and if it tastes like they do it must also be delicious. I don’t know for sure because we didn’t eat that lamprey. Shhhh...don’t tell the eagle. It might be offended.

Pam and I pondered this unique moment of time, caught in an arrangement of place and weather and trees and three distinct animal species. Why did the eagle drop its fish precisely at that moment? Was it responding to something about us? It was as if the eagle looked at Pam, recognized her pregnancy, then sized me up and thought: “Pathetic! Where are his wings, his beak, his claws? Better take this lamprey, or else you’ll starve.” Whatever the bird might have “seen” in us, there was no way that we could see this event as simply random and nothing more. We had to take “the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance,” to use Jung’s words again.

We could not imagine our encounter with the bird and the fish except in connection to ourselves and our impending state of parenthood. But, of course, birds eat fish, and birds drop things. We’ve probably all been hit by something that a bird has dropped. Why make more of dropping the fish than we do of those other droppings? Fair question. But we can just as well ask why we should make less of this unique arrangement of events. They happened together as if they belonged together, just as Pam and I belonged together and now we were preparing to also belong to our son.

He was born just a little over a year after we’d left Illinois and our many good friends there--families, couples, and single people, too. I had fishing buddies from all three categories. We made a trip back to see these folks when our boy was turning three, and I took an afternoon to go fishing with my friend Phil. Phil has what’s called a “borrow-pond” downstate. The Department of Transportation “borrows” a heap of soil and rock from your property so they can build an overpass, and the hole it leaves sets you up with a nice little pond just off the highway that the state will stock for free. My friend calls his pond “Lake Phil,” and keeps a rowboat there in the willows.
He’s one of the few people I know who keeps the little fish and throws the big ones back. He can fillet the tiniest bluegills you ever saw and make a meal of “potato chip” slices fried up crisp and delicious without a single bone. Some of the bass he’s thrown back over and over again have now grown bigger than anything you’d expect to catch in a borrow pond, so come prepared to break some line and lose some lures while you have yourself a time. When I’m retired I’d rather have a borrow pond than a house but we’ll see what Pam has to say about it when that time comes, since it’s clear that we’re together for the long haul now.

It wasn’t clear that day if Phil and his wife Martha were together for the long haul. He was ready to retire and she was many years his junior, just getting started in her career. They also loved to fish together but had recently hit a snag. Phil’s sons from his first marriage were already grown and living on their own. Martha wanted a baby, and she wanted one now. Phil thought that this had been settled before they’d gotten married, and that Martha had understood how he felt about having any more children. Martha wasn’t sure quite what she was supposed to understand, seeing as she had never had one of her own. He was hoping that she and he could belong wholly to each other in a stable way. She was hoping that both would soon belong to a third person, and later maybe more.

They’d been going round and round on this for months, in tangled loops that got them nowhere. The more focussed and concentrated on the question of two or three their relationship became, the more unstable it was getting. You’d think that concentration and stability would go hand in hand, but let’s take another look at the I Ching, that Chinese book of bibliomancy which Carl Jung liked so much. I mentioned before how you draw lots or throw coins in order to build up a hexagram of six solid or broken lines. You throw three coins at once. If they come up two or three heads at once, you get a solid line. If it’s two or three tails, it’s a broken line, with a gap in the middle. Solid lines are yang and broken ones are yin. Yang is associated with notions like firm and masculine, with the sun and summer; yin is associated with the feminine, the yielding, the moon and winter.

A balance of the two is thought to be desirable. What complicates the process and makes it more interesting is the difference between two and three alike in the coin toss. A line determined by two out of three is considered stable--it’s either solidly broken or solidly solid if you get my meaning. It’s not about to change into something else. However, if you get three heads or three tails, the situation is different. Three of a kind gives you a changing line. A changing line is still drawn solid or broken, but according to the I Ching is about to change into...
its opposite. You’ll therefore need to consult two chapters of the oracle book, not one. Both the first hexagram you get by chance and the one it’s changing into are thought to have bearing on your present situation, and the immediate future. What now? What next? Read both to get the fullest picture.

[There’s an example on the cover of your order of service. The X and O mark changing lines in the upper hexagram--the lower one shows the changes completed. Of course it’s also possible to cast the coins and get a figure with all changing lines, or one, or none.]

The idea is that once something has become one hundred percent what it is, fully concentrated into itself, it becomes unstable. What belongs only to yin will soon belong to yang, and vice versa. This may seem a bit counterintuitive to a Western mind, but think about it: the more pure the concentration of many materials, the more likely they are to be volatile or highly reactive. Think of pure sodium, for example. Pure stuff seems inclined to combine, form compounds, mix and join and form new bonds. The mind behind the I Ching would hold this true for emotions and human situations as well. The principle can also apply to societies, large or small. A nation in the grip of a craze or a crisis does not seem firm or stable. A small organization entirely focussed on just one thing can easily fall apart. The same thing can happen to a family or even to an individual.

So Phil and Martha, while entering a state of such total concentration on the question of whether or not to have a child had also reached a state of instability. Staying focussed “100%” was not helping, but pushing things toward a breakdown. A day of fishing without Martha was probably the best thing for Phil right now, so there we were in his boat, floating on the surface of Lake Phil. Redwing blackbirds were singing in the willows as always. The fish were biting and we were catching and releasing them, after admiring each one for a moment. My first few were all fairly small.

For each kind of fish there’s a certain way to grab it that’s best for preventing injury to both the fish and the fisherman. With bass you pass your thumb over the teeth in the lower jaw and hook your forefinger under what would be a chin if fish had one. They go quite still and then you can unhook them easily. My first big bass that day was hooked quite cleanly, just one barb through the lip, easy to get out. Before tossing it back I held it up for Phil to see—a fisherman’s ritual. That’s when we noticed something in the fish’s mouth.

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Sometimes fish pick up water plants as you reel them in but this looked different, really black and jointed. A stick, maybe? No--it was jointed and pointed and it wasn’t a plant. You heard me mention the redwing blackbirds that thronged the willows around Lake Phil? Sometimes they get too close to the the water, where danger lurks below the surface. This one had, and now its legs were sticking out of the very large mouth of a largemouth bass, stuck in its throat like it wouldn’t go down.

So if we were to take this “coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance,” what could we take it to mean? Is it just that *birds eat fish and sometimes fish eat birds*. That’s certainly one meaning, and you could certainly add that *sometimes fishermen catch fish that have just eaten birds* and that’s all there is to it. You wouldn’t be wrong, but you’d certainly be missing something; and if there’s any reason for us to be here--wherever we may find ourselves--I don’t think it’s to say, *That’s that. So what? Who care?*. Some moments seem to want to tell us something, and who are we to say “Shut up”? It’s better to listen to what the moment says when the moment speaks.

It may not be speaking answers, or telling you anything that you didn’t know before. It might be posing questions that you’re tired of already. But sometimes, to realize that you’re stuck on a question is the best answer you can get. There it was: Phil and Martha’s question, stuck in the fish’s throat, yes or no, it won’t go down and won’t come out. You might recall *Alphitomancy*--the form of divination that determines guilt or innocence when a piece of bread goes down successfully or else gets stuck in the throat. Guilt or innocence was not the issue here--the question was much more difficult. Phil and Martha divorced soon after, and that was probably much better for them than this thing in the throat that wouldn’t move, either up or down. Always almost choking is no stable way to be.

Heads, tails, heads. Man, woman, child. Tails, tails, tails. Take what look like the same few elements, and they can combine in so many different ways. Phil and Martha had focussed so much in their question about a child, 100%, all heads or tails. Maybe this destabilized their relationship or revealed an instability that was already there, or both. For Pam and me, joy in her pregnancy did not involve concentrating on the question of yes or no but rather a diffusion of the many things one must attend to as the reality of a child sets in--a nice mixture that has held stable for 15 out of our 30 years together so far. We read strong confirmation in the eagle’s gift of the choice we had made and would go on

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making. A child and a choice, mixed very nicely. (Handsome, too.)

We could just as easily have read a threat in the kind of fish it dropped before us: You might remember that it was a lamprey. That’s not a pretty fish at all. It has a sucker mouth and a circle of teeth around it with no jaw at all. Lampreys attach themselves to other fish, and suck their life’s blood parasitically. You don’t catch and release such fish, and once it’s on it won’t let go. So the creature at our feet could have made us fearful about the one in Pam’s belly. Maybe the eagle is warning us! Maybe the child is going to suck us dry, maybe his hunger will be too much, maybe we’ll never swim free of him again! But the way we were at that moment, such thoughts never crossed our minds.

Nothing can completely prepare you for a child--for that kind of love, that kind of care, that kind of give and take--but we were as ready as we could be. We speak of “having” a child, but who belongs to whom, really? (Belonging is a very different kind of commitment than ownership.) To us, the lamprey meant richness and nourishment and even a certain freedom to be found in giving ourselves to our son. We were beginning to belong to that child just as we belonged to that moment in our world--the warm day, the river, the fish and the bird. The eel’s toothy mouth was just a detail, nowhere near the center of our snapshot of that day. Jung cautioned us about any method of reading such snapshots when he wrote that we need

..self-knowledge throughout. The method...is open to every kind of misuse, and is therefore not for the frivolous-minded and immature; nor is it for intellectualists and rationalists. It is appropriate only for thoughtful and reflective people who like to think about what they do and what happens to them...

And so it must be appropriate for folks like you, gathered by chance and gathered by purpose in this single place today. May we all learn to pause and listen when the moment speaks. Pause, don’t stop. Belong to it, and let it belong to you, and trust that you won’t get stuck. Stay with the page you’re on until it’s time for another. Let’s take time to read our world so we can share its tidings. Let us never close the book until it’s time to rest. And dream. And move once more in the river of meaning.

So may it be.