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SUPERSTITION

Getting up on the wrong side of the bed can ruin your day. All of us have been told at one time or another that we were so grouchy or irritable that we must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed. But what is the right side? Some people say that the right side is the right side, while others say that we must get out on the same side that we got in. If you realize that you have gotten up on the wrong side, whichever it is, then you must immediately go back to bed and get up on the right side. Never climb over the footboard to get into or out of bed. This is the unluckiest thing you can do.

Having successfully gotten out of bed, it may occur to new parents to worry about their baby's future. To learn what is in store for baby, just put a Bible, a deck of cards, and a silver dollar where he can reach them. If he reaches first for the Bible, he will be a preacher; if he touches the cards, he will be a gambler; and if he touches the silver dollar, he will be good at getting money. If he touches all three, perhaps he will grow up to be a TV evangelist.

Even if baby picks up the silver dollar, financial security can still elude him if his mother washes his hands before he is a year old.

You know, of course, that all this is just superstition.

We find such quaint ideas amusing because we are rational people, but all of us cherish at least one or two irrational ideas. How many of us have a lucky piece of clothing or jewelry which we wore when some particularly fortunate experience happened? Whenever we want to be lucky we wear the same thing. Conversely, we refuse to use some item associated with an unlucky or unfortunate experience lest we be unlucky again.

Superstition is an attempt to control, avoid, and predict unpleasant occurrences by irrational or supernatural means. Superstitions may be religious, cultural, or personal.

An example of religious superstition is the belief that a Christian will be guided by the Bible if he opens it at random and reads the first text that strikes his eye. One wonders what such a person would do if he were to read the verse which says that Judas went and hanged himself. There is a scene in Treasure Island when the pirates send Long John Silver the black spot. Long John is unafraid because he notices that the paper they used was a page torn from a Bible.

Cultural superstitions include the belief in the evil eye, particularly in the Mediterranean world. The evil eye is possessed by all persons with eyes of different colors, bad squints, or eyes set too close together. How can you tell if someone has given you the evil eye? One source I consulted states: "If your mayonnaise won't thicken, your garden won't grow, you lose games you usually win, and you feel anxious without being able to say why, then you have been given the evil eye."

Fortunately you can counteract the evil eye if you can find the person who has given it to you and make a fig at him. The fig is a good all-purpose gesture for most any situation, and I advise you to learn it now if you do not already know it. To make a fig, clench the right hand into a fist with the thumb placed between the index and second fingers. Then raise the left arm and bend it so that the left hand can touch the right arm above the elbow. Place the right fist in the crook of the left elbow, pointed toward the person with the evil eye.

While the fig is a sovereign remedy for the evil eye, care must be taken in its use. In some places it is considered an obscene gesture and, if made at the wrong person, may subject the maker to physical abuse.

A personal superstition can be most anything. For example, I consider it lucky to find a coin on the sidewalk, a superstition I share with many people, including Hack Wilson, a former Chicago Cub baseball player who was quite a home run hitter in the '20s and '30s. Hack considered it crucial to his hitting to find a coin before each game, and his manager would drop coins around the ball park until he found one.

Warding off ill-fortune requires some inkling that bad luck is on the way. This is the purpose of omens. The most serious of omens is to spill salt, a substance with great superstitious power. Salt's preservative and curative properties have been known for ages. Even today salt is used in the Catholic Church in the making of Holy Water. The spilled salt must not be swept up until a pinch of it is thrown over the left shoulder where the devil always

stands. If you hit him with the salt, you may avert the evil which is heading for you.

The number 13 is an especially bad omen, signifying death or another unfortunate event. We know what happens when hostesses seat thirteen at dinner. The reason for the fear of the number 13 is often said to be that thirteen were present at the Last Supper, but this superstition is much older. Norse mythology says that the twelve gods of Valhalla were having a feast when Loki, the god of mischief, arrived uninvited. He caused the death of Baldur, a favorite of the gods. Other sources say that the last plague of Egypt when the first-born sons were killed occurred on the thirteenth day of the month. So serious are people about the number 13 that hotels rarely have a 13th floor and many public buildings have no office numbered 13.

It is generally accepted that breaking a mirror brings seven years of bad luck. There seem to be two reasons for such a severe penalty. The first reason is that mirrors have always been expensive and to break one caused financial loss. The superstitious reason seems to be that primitive man thought that his reflection was his spirit or alter ego. To break the mirror was to destroy the reflection, which might destroy the soul.

The best way to ward off evil is never to break a taboo. One universal taboo is never speaking ill of the dead. The reason is not respect for the departed but rather care not to offend his spirit lest it return to haunt you. A similar taboo relates to using the name of spirits. Primi-

tive man thought that to use the name of a spirit might cause the spirit to appear with unknowable results. This is the origin of the Biblical commandment not to use the Lord's name in vain. The Old Testament has few references to Yahweh, preferring to use the euphemism, the Lord.

Yawning and sneezing are to be avoided, but if one must yawn or sneeze the mouth must be covered by the hand. In the case of a sneezer, a blessing must be pronounced over him. This is not just politeness as your mother may have told you but a necessity to keep the soul from flying out of the body. Sneezing is much more serious than yawning because it is more forceful. The blessing is intended to assure the soul that it is really appreciated.

Primitive man associated breathing with life though he did not know why it was necessary. Therefore anything associated with breathing was of the highest superstitious importance. Yawning is a physical response to a need for more oxygen. It is a way of taking in large gulps of air, but the facial contortions involved made primitive people think that the spirit was trying to get out of the body. Sneezing, an involuntary act, was very frightening because the sneezer thought that his soul was trying to get out of his body.

The best known of all taboos is the admonition never to walk under a ladder. This superstition is so widespread that I will say with assurance that the vast majority of people in this room will walk around a ladder. We justify this fear of ladders by saying that the ladder or something

on it might fall on our heads. This^{is} sensible but it doesn't begin to explain the matter.

Ladders are plentiful in folklore. The ancient Egyptians thought that the sun god, Osiris, used a ladder to escape from the powers of darkness, a symbolic way of explaining the sun's ascent through the sky each day. They put ladders in their tombs to help the spirit of the deceased to climb up to heaven. Hebrew myth tells of Jacob seeing angels going up and down a ladder reaching from earth to heaven.

The fear of ladders seems to be related to a reverence for the triangle, a sacred symbol, and to the number 3, a sacred number. Since the area marked off by the ladder was triangular, it was sacred and to venture into it was dangerous. What can be done if someone inadvertently walks under a ladder? Fortunately, several things. One can make a fig; as I said it is an ever-useful sign. Or one can turn around three times and walk back out. One may make a wish while turning around and this may so preoccupy the spirits that they will forget to punish and may even grant the wish. Finally one may make the sign of the cross, an all-purpose sign which gives infallible protection.

The cross is a Christian symbol now, but its use appears to be much older. Like so many pagan rituals it was preempted by the Church for its own purposes. It seems to be related to the number 4, a lucky number. While the sign may be made by crossing the upper body, it is equally

effective when made by crossing the fingers. All children learn that a lie may be told with impunity when the fingers are crossed.

Knocking on wood is an important ritual which will protect one who makes boastful statements. The Greeks thought that boastful, ambitious remarks and actions were the sins most often punished by the gods. Why should knocking on wood avert their wrath? In prehistoric times trees, particularly evergreens, were revered as gods. Among the Greeks Zeus was identified with the Oak, Athena with the Olive, and Apollo with the Laurel. To ask a favor of the god, one touched the bark of the tree; to thank the god for a favor granted, one touched it again. When children play tag there is always a place, usually a tree, where they are "safe" as long as they touch it. Sacred trees appear in the Bible as the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. In Anglo-Saxon culture the sacred trees were oak, ash, and thorn; to touch their wood was especially efficacious.

An ancient ritual but one out of favor today is spitting. A merchant would spit on the first coin received each day in order to get more. A workman would spit on his hands and a fisherman on his net in order to be successful. Saliva was thought to have curative power. We speak of licking our wounds; a mother will kiss a child's injury, an idealized way of licking the wound. Ancient people believed that saliva represented the soul and that to spit was to make an offering to the gods. Jesus is described as spitting into the dust to make clay to put on the blind man's eyes. This action would

not have been strange to his observers, but it was certainly distasteful to a Sunday School teacher I recall who tried to explain to a group of small boys why it was all right for Jesus to spit but not all right for them to do so.

An amulet is an object worn or carried or placed in a house as protection against evil. A talisman is a good luck charm. People who would indignantly deny being superstitious hang a St. Christopher medal around their ^{necks,} put a religious statue in the house, or prominently display a Bible. The rings that most of us wear are not just jewelry but amulets, the circle being one of the most powerful superstitious symbols. ^{Remember} ~~recall~~ the famous Tolkien trilogy of a few years ago, The Lord of the Rings.

The two most famous amulets are the horseshoe and the rabbit's foot. There are many reasons why a horseshoe is lucky. It is made of iron, which repels witches and evil spirits; its shape is curved with two points, reminiscent of the crescent moon. By the way, any object with two points is a powerful superstitious symbol for some reason. Winston Churchill made good use of this power with his V for Victory sign. The two fingers used by a priest in giving a blessing are superstitiously powerful for the same reason.

A horseshoe has seven holes, a lucky number; if nailed over a door with seven nails it has almost unlimited protective power.

Along with the horseshoe, the foot of the lowly rabbit has brought comfort and reassurance to millions of people for many years. My research indicates that over ten

million are sold each year. It may be difficult at first to understand why an animal which relies on speed and flight for survival and which is a metaphor for cowardice should be a token of good luck.

Our Northern European ancestors associated the rabbit with spring and renewal, hence its presence today in secular Easter celebrations. Involved in this idea is the rabbit's undeniable fecundity, which has made it an obvious fertility symbol. It was an easy jump in the minds of uncivilized people to the belief that a rabbit could confer fertility. By another easy step this idea of renewal and increase could include anything from sexual potency to financial prosperity to general good luck. Feet, as any good Freudian knows, have symbolic association with sex, so eventually this part of the rabbit came to be viewed in folk belief as containing the essence of the rabbit's powers. It made it unnecessary to carry around the whole rabbit.

The luck-bringing potential is increased if it is the left hind foot. When buying a rabbit's foot, check carefully for a left hind foot. A dealer will charge more for a left hind foot than any other foot. This point alone proves the ability of the rabbit's foot to bring financial gain.

The man in the street is convinced that there are ways to foretell the future and that some people possess that ability. If modern man believes this, why should we doubt that prehistoric man did also? In ancient times these people were called prophets or sybils or soothsayers. Today

these persons are generally evangelists, political pundits, stock market letter writers, and economists. All of them are paid handsome incomes to forecast the spiritual, social, and financial condition of both individuals and the nation.

What is most remarkable, however, is the fact that we do not require these modern soothsayers to be right in their predictions. In ancient days a false prophet was stoned to death; today there is no penalty for being wrong. Evangelists can bilk the credulous believer of millions; stock market advisors can cause people to lose fortunes; and economists at the Federal Reserve can cause the loss of billions of dollars of Gross National Product. All of these failures are totally forgotten while their few successes are cited as infallible proof of their ability to foresee the future. I think it is safe to say that if any of us were able to forecast with absolute certainty the ups and downs of the stock market, we ^{would} keep that knowledge to ourselves while we cornered all the wealth. We certainly ~~wouldn't be trying to sell it.~~

If a superstitious person does not believe in soothsayers or economists, he is left with very little to guide him. He is forced to pay careful attention to omens and to which parts of his body happen to itch. For instance, we know that if our nose itches someone is coming. All parts of the body which can itch have similar associations.

A related subject is making wishes come true. Careful research indicates that the best way is to possess a

genie, as Aladdin did, who will grant all your wishes. The next best way is to summon a spirit, who will grant three wishes. This is risky because spirits are unpredictable, as we have already learned. The safest way, although the least reliable, is to make a wish when engaged in some activity the spirit might approve of, for example, while blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. ~~Recall that~~ (Expelling the breath is a form of sacrifice.) It would seem logical that spitting or sneezing on the cake would be even more effective, but the literature is silent on this subject and there are social niceties to be considered.

Obviously this paper was written with tongue firmly in cheek. It is easy to poke fun at superstitions, and the origins of many of them are quite interesting. Yet it is disturbing to realize that we are only a little removed from the time when these superstitions were reality for most people. Man does not like to deal with chance. Chance presents us with alternatives and, as Sartre said, condemns us to choose. Man prefers to believe that luck can affect his choice. Even as great a scientist as Einstein refused to accept the Uncertainty Principle in Physics, which says that the act of measuring sub-atomic particle alters it; in other words we can either observe it or measure it but not both at the same time. Einstein was wont to mutter that "God does not play dice with the Universe", leading one of his colleagues to tell him that he was tired of hearing about the gambling habits of the Deity.

We continue to flirt with superstition because we want to play it safe. There may be something in it after all. We are not as superstitious as our ancestors, but neither are we totally rational. From our irrational side have sprung many magnificent things: our art, much of our philosophy, all of our religion. Perhaps the fact that superstition thrives in the same soil is a small price to pay.

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