

"Sense Number 6"

At some time in our early schooling, or perhaps as we thumbed through one of those big children's books with the thick cardboard pages, most of us learned that we have five senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. These senses are the windows of perception through which we engage the world around us. They are certainly wondrous portals. And although we know the physical mechanisms by which our senses function, we do not really know how or why our consciousness responds with specific feelings or attitudes. We breathe in beauty with the scent of lilacs. The comfort of stroking an animal's head which rests trustingly against us brings profound peace. The sight of a poor person pushing a grocery cart filled with all their worldly goods down the street can open our hearts and change the focus of our lives. I do not discount the profound blessings, challenges and transformations brought about by the five senses.

And yet, for me, this list of senses widely held to be real in our contemporary culture is incomplete. In my experience, there is another sense through which reality is communicated to us, and affects our consciousness. In fact, when I was very young, I thought everyone received impressions through this additional sense. I grew up thinking it was normal to leave my body at night and fly around - I even had a favorite perch in the pine tree next to our house. I took it for granted that my grandmother conversed regularly with her mother, who was long gone from this earthly life. I thought that causing the dice in a game to roll the numbers you were thinking of was a skill that could be learned, and we practiced this skill at home. I experienced the feeling I was never alone; even if I couldn't see the beings attending me, I knew they were there. There was physical violence in my home, and like many children for whom this is the case, I was pressed to discover safe places and protections that weren't necessarily physical. Perhaps I would have discovered them in any case.

This was my family's culture, and my reality. I discovered that not everyone sensed these things. Not everyone paid attention to their dreams, or saw a picture falling off the wall when someone died. Not everyone tried discretely to move the salt shaker a fraction of an inch through the power of her mind when she was bored with the conversation at the dinner table. But I didn't know why my friends didn't seem to have this extra sense of things. It surprised and perplexed me.

I am not so special - there are many folks who have a similar background and experience. Many people, perhaps you, are genuinely surprised and even even disoriented to learn, as they make their way into the world, that these experiences are considered "paranormal." I surmise that how and what we perceive, and what we think of as the norm, has much to do with the environments in we have been raised. Whatever one's family or mentors consider to be working "givens" often lay the groundwork for what we claim for ourselves as natural. "Miracles," said St. Augustine, "do not happen in contradiction to nature, but only in contradiction to that which is known to us of nature." In this respect, the word "supernatural" has little meaning. Paranormal experiences may be as rare and wondrous as a trillium in the woods, but they are known, and they are not unnatural.

Not everyone in my family had such experiences. My father was firmly circumscribed and grounded in five senses. Darwin's Origin of Species was on his bedside table. For his own pleasure, he studied medical texts, and physics books, and frequently read to me from our old collection of The Book of Knowledge. He liked to take things apart and put them back together again; we looked at pond water through his microscope, and in the evenings, I'd often go outside with him - he'd smoke his cigar and point out the constellations. He was as loyal to the five-sense scientific method as a man can be.

I hope you will indulge me by listening to a simple story from my own life which I believe illustrates the interplay between the 6th sense psychic and the Newtonian, classically scientific mindset:

Before I was born, my Dad's father - my grandfather - said to my mother, "Margaret, you're going to need a rocking chair for that baby." He gave her one of the old mission style rockers from their screened-in porch. I have it still. My grandfather died when I was four, or so. A few weeks after his passing, my mother and I were in the back bedroom of our house. That rocker was across the room from us, over by the window. My mother was sewing, and I was sitting on the floor next to her, working on pulling yarn through the holes in a set of those sewing cards for little kids. I looked over, and I saw my Grandfather's rocker begin to rock. It didn't start out slowly, it started rocking like it would if someone had just sat down. And I said to my mother "Look Mama, the rocker is rocking and no one is in it!"

She turned from her sewing, and the two of us watched the rocker for several minutes. It rocked solidly, then slowly subsided, as if the person had just gotten up. My mother and I agreed, without talking about it too much, that my Grandfather had been in the rocker, and he was letting us know he was OK, and he loved us. It wasn't scary at all - it wasn't weird - he simply left us with a good feeling.

When my father got home, we told him of the event and he tried every which way to make that rocker rock. He had my mother run the sewing machine, and he asked me to sit there as I had been sitting, and then he asked me to jump up and down - then he jumped up and down. He set up a fan in the window and positioned it in various directions to shoot air on the rocker from different angles. He tied string onto pieces of furniture in the room and twanged them so they snapped the floor. But no matter what he did, he could not get that old rocker going. At most, there was a slight movement, but nothing like the continuous, true rocking motion my mother and I had witnessed. I thought these efforts were funny, and fun to watch. And it seemed to me then, just as it seems to me now, that the simplest explanation was the best and most elegant: Grandfather had dropped by to convey his abiding love.

Some would say, no doubt, that this explanation is not so simple. It depends upon the sweeping assertion that there is life after death. Although there are countless stories of experiences which leave people with varying degrees of conviction that there is life after death, there is no proof. There is only the 50/50 chance which obtains with any conjecture which is beyond our ability to prove or disprove. We do know that what we perceive is greatly influenced by what we expect to perceive, or, as Albert Einstein put

it, "It is the theory which decides what we can observe." My outlook, at 4 years old, and my mother's theory, was that Grandfathers beyond the beyond can come back for visits. My father's was that death is dissolution, though I think he would have loved to have been proven wrong. And each of us perceived - or didn't perceive - in accordance with our natural orientations.

I believe most folks have experiences they may choose to perceive, or not to perceive, in terms of a sixth-sense reality. How many times have you thought of calling someone and then the phone rings because they are calling you? How many times have you thought to yourself "It's time for me to get up from this desk and go outside" - and before you even make a move, your dog gets up and looks at you expectantly? How about the dream or the passing thought you have of someone you haven't seen in a long time, and you round the corner of the street or the grocery aisle, and there they are? What of the inexplicable feeling that you have been somewhere before, or known someone before, and the deep familiarity attending that place or person you encounter for what is, for all practical purposes, the first time? And what do you make of the times you have begun to say something - something very mundane, perhaps, such as "I think we ought to plant purple potatoes in the garden this year," only to be pre-empted by your spouse who says, out of the blue, "I think we ought to plant purple potatoes."

The experiences of Ernst Cassirer, a brilliant 19th century German Jewish philosopher of history, crystallize these everyday happenings:

"During the years that his daughter Anna [was] in boarding school, there [were] three or four occasions when he [woke] up in the middle of the night and insisted on telephoning to the school. On each of these occasions she had been taken sick and was in the infirmary. As she was basically a healthy child, these were rare occasions for her. He never called this way when she was well.

Many years later, when she was an adult, the two of them were at a party in Berlin where she was studying. The next morning, he took the express back to his home in Hamburg. There was one stop between the two cities, the town of Wittenberg. As the expressed pulled into this station, Cassirer took his suitcase, got off the train, went to the nearest phone booth, called Berlin and asked, 'What happened? What is the matter with Anna?' The housekeeper referred him to the hospital. An hour after he left on the train, she had suddenly begun to hemorrhage and was in emergency surgery." [The Science of the Paranormal, Lawrence LeShan, pp 140-141]

The surprising thing about this anecdote, is that it is not particularly surprising. Occurrences such as these, while not frequent, are not extraordinary. Countless people have had similar experiences - knowledge that a loved one is in distress, intuitions that we need to get in touch with a child or parent, a sense that we need to connect, or unexpected verifications that we are connected.

We may sweep these experiences under the rug because they are inexplicable. We may put them high up on a shelf marked "to be figured out later." Or we may choose to attribute them to chance. But these experiences are a natural part of being human, and

people have had such experiences through the ages. Sixth sense events are not out of the ordinary, they are simply not subject to our ordinary ways of understanding.

Many choose to reject the veracity of paranormal experiences because they seem to defy the laws of space and time. If we accepted them as real, the world of substantial reality as we know it would become quicksand, and that prospect can be frightening. In his book *The Science of the Paranormal*, Lawrence LeShan points out that our five-sense realm of experience works according to the principles of Newtonian physics. But in the macrocosm, "in which things are too large or moving too rapidly in respect to the observer to be...seen or touched...the term 'space' takes on an completely different meaning....It merges with the concept of time, and only the new term 'space-time' is valid for this realm," in accordance with Planck and Einstein. Similarly, he writes, "The concept of space [and time] in the microcosm, the realm of experience in which things are too small to be - even theoretically - seen or touched, is still unclear. We know only that it is different from space in the realm of experience accessible to the [five] senses." [pp 94-95]

I understand this to mean that while Newtonian physics work fine for purposes of negotiating here in the middle ground between the macro- and the microcosms, space and time get bent, or combined, or genuinely confusing when we try to imagine what happens at the speed of light or down at the level of quarks and charms. It is as if reality is similar to one of those Russian nested dolls. Scientific laws that work for the inmost doll are not thrown out when the next doll encloses it - they are simply superseded by the next set of laws, appropriate for the larger doll.

Applying this analogy to the senses, we may say that the five senses work according to one set of laws. The sixth sense supersedes that realm, and works in accordance with another set of laws, within another dynamic of space and time. This is why attempts to prove or disprove the existence of the 6th sense in experiments set up according to the laws of Newtonian physics are rather like trying to measure the effects of a symphony by analyzing the mathematical relations between the notes - but never listening to the music. It is natural for us to hear the music; even as it sweeps us away or takes us out of ourselves and our customary ways of thinking, we are enriched.

It is my experience that the 6th sense - the awareness of meaning at the edge of our understanding - serves to connect us with one another and the world around us. Like the five senses which orient us as we go through our days, the sixth sense deepens the connections between us. We share a special connection with loved ones through this sense; we work together in sympathetic communion with others who share our visions; we receive affirmations of deep meaning running through our lives, and are visited by abiding love which surpasses all limitations.

I suggest to you that giving the 6th sense room to play and to grow in your consciousness is a wholly natural and appropriate activity - and if you have a mind to look for fairies in the bottom of your garden this Spring, feel free.

AMEN