



## Knock on Wood

At age nine, I learned to read palms, the “scientific way.” What *did* I mean by that? Telling little girls how many babies they would have by counting the number of lines on the sides of their palms could not be less scientific. Yet, 50 years later when I taught a pre-conference class at TED called *How to Read Palms*, it was filled to overflowing. Heads of large corporations, revered pundits and billionaires stared intently at their outstretched palms as they learned how to read the intricate map of lines that spelled out their unique lives.

Humans are fascinated by occult practices: astrology (who doesn’t know their sign?), not to mention the more exotic Tarot, Ayurveda, Feng Shui and Palmistry. While we may laugh about them, many of us believe that these practices hold insights that may enhance our lives and provide guidance for an uncertain future.

Most cultures believe in the mystical (one exception is communism whose people are involuntarily atheist). But while Catholics perform exorcisms, fundamentalists speak in tongues and healers lay-on hands, neuroscience questions the very existence of the soul. Voluntary atheism (while miniscule in numbers) is on the rise in the cities of first world countries; the philosophy is based on the negative absolute, “There is no God.” They add that they are smart because they only believe that which can be rationally explained or scientifically verified. Fundamentalists say, “Have faith. Believe.” But many people exist somewhere in the middle with an agnostic point of view “Maybe. Maybe not.” A world full of chaos and tragedy—where innocent children die senselessly, entire species are wiped-out and mankind seems perpetually at war—certainly begs the question, how could all this be happening if there is a God? Blind-faith philosophies that “everything happens for a reason” and “God provides” are ridiculed in times like these and help raise the tide of disbelief. Yet many of the world’s most devout

believers (including many of the saints) experienced great pain in their lifetimes—and their faith did not waver.

God or no God, good times or bad, the human brain is hard-wired to seek meaning. We want to understand, to be happy. We persist in that goal, with a healthy dose of skepticism, with every question, big or small, consciously or unconsciously. We conjure up fictions all day long whether we acknowledge it or not. A person walks toward us: By the time they reach our side, we’ve developed a scenario. The person is

sexy or dull, welcoming or threatening. Their life is bliss; their life sucks. Always, we are comparing ourselves to others, providing context in our day-to-day world. It’s very natural. Sometimes it’s useful; sometimes it’s disastrous.

A woman was imprisoned in a remote Ugandan village after she hit a chicken with her car. Since the chief of the village had gone missing, the local people believed that he had been turned into that chicken, and now killed by that woman! A few days later the chief resurfaced, having been off on a drunk. The woman was released. And so it goes.



Two superstitions—that cats have nine lives and that black cats are lucky—are put to work in this classic identity to suggest that these batteries will last a long time. Redesign by Mark Fox for Landor Associates, San Francisco.

The implications of chimerical thinking can therefore be alarming, especially to atheists who say the human craving for the supernatural is the biggest tragedy of human cognition.<sup>1</sup> But doesn’t the alternative—calculatingly “realistic” thinking—promote a joyless, pessimistic life? At the beach, toddlers run, laughing, once again towards the breakwater, eager to see what they imagine is beyond the rocks, stimulated by a sense of joy and wonder. Innocence = inner sense.

When do we lose that inner connection? At what age? Isn’t inner sense the path to innovation? Innovation certainly requires imagination, the ability to consider that which seems impossible. A leap of faith. Back in the eighties, Milton Glaser’s design studio on 32nd Street in New York City experienced a series of robberies. He contacted an expert in Feng Shui, the Chinese art and science of manipulating the elements to achieve harmony in the universe. The man wrote from Hong

## design issues

Kong, “Send me a diagram showing me all the waterways and religious institutions near your building.” Glaser complied. The man responded, “Paint a wall red in the front of the entrance. Put a clock at the top of your entry hall. It doesn’t matter whether it works or not. Install a fish tank with black fish. The fish will die, but don’t be concerned, just keep replacing them.” The fish were replaced as they died and Glaser experienced no more break-ins. If we believe, can we make it so?

### Can we become more like computers, please?

The mystical is deeply embedded in our DNA (right there with the craving for connection) manifested in the meaning of numbers, colors, symbols and the fables created by our ancestors (and ourselves), all intended to mollify our perennial insecurities. Isn’t this what makes us human?

The mind has powers often not acknowledged in our daily lives. For instance, it’s been scientifically proven that we (believers and nonbelievers alike) respond to suggestion. A healer pronounces a patient cured and, in fact, the patient’s brain might make it so. This is called the Placebo Effect. A surgeon named Dr. Henry Knowles Beecher, one of the



The nautilus shell and fern frond are just two examples of the millions of spirals that appear throughout the universe, inspiring design in innumerable ways. The proportions of the nautilus are reflected in the Golden Mean.

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early promoters of the Placebo Effect, found that soldiers treated for extreme pain in battle do not necessarily need morphine. Civilians with the same pain, on the other hand, are more apt to need the drug. Beecher speculated that this was about context. The soldier knows he will soon be sent on R&R and praised for his valor, whereas the civilian may face job loss and perhaps not be able to pay his rent. Each patient

There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.

—Albert Einstein

spins a story that affects his emotional state and his pain tolerance.<sup>2</sup> Consider the implications for yourself. You create a narrative for your life. Your glass, half empty or half full, spills over into your work. How does this affect what you do? Your career’s trajectory? Statistics show that the vast majority of stories in the workplace are negative. It’s very tempting to join the crowd.

There’s a receptor in your brain for every drug in the pharmacy. For instance, if you suggest to your brain that it’s

time to sleep or perk up or get angry, you are often able to create the exact chemical to do just that. But other subliminal suggestions come into play as well. If a sleeping pill is blue, you may sleep better because the suggestion of calm is there. This is generally true all over the world, except in Italy.<sup>3</sup>

### Design = plan

When designers choose colors, do they concern themselves with the emotional response of the end user? When designers incorporate the elements of the mystical in their designs, are they aware of their significance? There is a mathematical relationship in form that results in harmony. Designers often create a sense of order by using some very specific proportions in the form they use, based on the Golden Mean, a proportion which appears in nature in innumerable ways as well as in the designs of the Pantheon, Stonehenge and, contemporaneously (and quite ironically), the Pentagon.

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Competition in business has ratcheted up the need to differentiate, to impress, to be sexy. So trends in design started to change. Designers have begun to mix-up a garbled stew of meaning, creating chaos to entertain and shock to elicit awe.

Perhaps this was due to an influx of a number of young designers into the field, their new-found tools in tow: the Internet, the computer, the programs and easy access to billions of typefaces, swipe art, stock photography and illustration. Perhaps it was a youthful rebellion against design's old guard. At any rate, new design became about throwing out the recipe. Blowing up the museum.



Universal symbols, heart and hand, join together to create the New Mexico Heart Institute identity. Maggie Macnab, designer; Macnab Design (Albuquerque, NM), design firm.

It's hard to find meaning in this age, yet meaning is everywhere. Concepts that cross over cultural barriers are indestructible: The balance of yin and yang, the harmony of the trinity, the union of two will always be part of our universal language.

Designer and iconographer Maggie Macnab explores numerology, and iconography. She says, "The number five is symbolic of



This postcard from Peoria, Illinois (c. 1900) shows how most of the world (Native Americans, Hindus, Buddhists, Chinese, Ancient Romans and Greeks) once looked at this popular amulet. Postcard artist unknown.

man, health, love and of the energy of movement acting upon matter—what we also call magic. The ancient Greeks originally recognized four elements (air, fire, water and earth) until Aristotle added a fifth. The Pythagoreans also added a fifth and called it nether—the fifth essence, which they said flew upward to creation and out of it the stars were born. Ayurveda, the 5,000-year-old healing art of India, has always recognized that five elements (ether, air, fire, water and earth) play a role in creation, regeneration and healing. This fifth element called nether, or ether, is the quintessence—the magical stuff of living, breathing form. It defines that element so rare that it can't be seen or felt, but is pervasive in everything that is created and everything we do. It creates our sensibility and yet we can't sense it. Quintessence (literally from the Greek: quinta essentia, "fifth element") is behind the principle of regeneration and, as its name implies, it is symbolized by the qualities of the number five."<sup>4</sup> There is hidden meaning in almost everything.

### Easier said than done

It's not simple to convey meaning accurately, especially using language. For instance, there are a number of words in the English language called Janus words, because they have contradictory definitions. "Clip" means to attach and to separate, "fix" means a solution and also a problem, "screen" means to display and to hide. The mindful creator, in the telling of any story or the making of any visual, takes all this into account and, when able to harness these contradictions, we are the richer for it.

I visited northern India in 2002 and was overwhelmed by the power and prevalence of primal symbols and overlapping mythologies in the many cultures of that ancient region. Belief in the miraculous is palpable in India, reflected in the joy on the faces of the people, and in the sense of wonder in the children. I felt I had come home. By contrast, New York City seemed a jaded, colorless world.

The Western principle of reductionism (where science often trumps spirituality) distills the world to zeros and ones and, in the process, destroys the indefinable—the God—of nature. Of the ether. On the other hand, Eastern holism accepts that there



# Shelter



The peak roof in the Shelter identity (housing for the poor) is universal and all that's needed to say "home." It's so strong, we still know it's Shelter—even when the word is changed. Michael Johnson/Luke Gifford/Katherina Tudball, designers; Johnson Banks, London, design firm.

is something more than just the components and, as Aristotle points out, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We can't possibly understand everything, explain everything.

### Our stories connect us

Science is truth. It's the facts of the world. But while science explains, it doesn't try to connect the dots. Our stories do this for us. And stories open doors in a way that science cannot. The very Catholic people of Ireland, famous for their faith and fairies, say you must kiss the Blarney Stone to gain

the gift of gab. This bluestone slab, which used to be down a well (requiring the kisser to be lowered by rope) has since been moved to a less precarious location, but still requires the person to be held in order to get close enough to make contact with the enchanted stone. Faith is essential. And, of course, even if you manage to plant your lips on the rock, the gift will not be yours unless you truly believe.

### Why I don't read palms anymore

When I was around eleven, I decided I was not smart enough. Using my fingernail, I repeatedly impressed an extension of my head line into my left (passive) palm. One day I looked at my right (active) palm and the line had increased significantly. I was shocked. When I was a student at Parsons School of Design while reading the palms of my fellow students for fun, a man in the bursar's office asked me to read his palm. In doing so, I told him he had a Simian line (a fusion of the head and heart lines which shows a tendency to combine thoughts and feelings). Later that day the bursar begged me to talk to this man again as he had become quite despondent after the reading. I did not know he had recently been released from a mental hospital. I clearly did not know I could cause harm. Reading palms was supposed to be amusing.

So I adopted the "teach them to fish and they will eat for a lifetime" philosophy, choosing to leave the interpretation of their palms in their own hands.

There is so much we don't understand. However, as scientists further dissect our human brains, they aim to explain it all: why we love, why we hate, why we believe in something greater than ourselves. At the same time, technology distances us from ourselves. Designers, on the other hand, are charged with feeling our collective emotional pulse, chronicling our relationship to the world in our time—telling our stories. Like a flower growing through a crack in concrete, our humanity will persist. Knock on wood. **CA**

1. Henig, Robin Marantz, "Darwin's God," the *New York Times*, March 4, 2007.
2. "Placebo," Radio Lab, WNYC, May 18, 2007.
3. In Italy, it's speculated that since the color of the national soccer team is blue, blue may conjure aggressive feelings that may interfere with the sleep of Italian men who take blue pills. Since blue is the color of the Madonna, Italian women probably sleep just fine with blue sleeping pills. "Placebo," Radio Lab, WNYC, May 18, 2007.
4. Macnab, Maggie, *Decoding Design*, F+W Publications, January 2008.