

TYPICAL PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC AND SUPERSTITIOUS BELIEFS

At the borders of science—and sometimes as a carry-over from pre-scientific thinking—lurks a range of ideas that are appealing, or at least modestly mind-boggling, but that have not been conscientiously worked over with a baloney detection kit, at least by their advocates: the notion, say, that the Earth's surface is on the inside, not the outside, of a sphere; or claims that you can levitate yourself by meditating and that ballet dancers and basketball players routinely get up so high by levitating; or the proposition that I have something called a soul, made not of matter or energy, but of something else for which there is no other evidence, and which after my death might return to animate a cow or a worm.

Typical beliefs of Western pseudoscience and superstition

-this is not a comprehensive list-are:

- * astrology;
- * the Bermuda Triangle;
- * "Big Foot" and the Loch Ness monster;
- * ghosts;
- * the "evil eye";
- * multicolored halo-like "auras" said to surround the heads of everyone (with colors personalized);
- * extrasensory perception (ESP), such as telepathy, precognition, telekinesis, and "remote viewing" of distant places;
- * the belief that 13 is an "unlucky" number (because of which, which many no-nonsense office buildings and hotels in America pass directly from the 12th to the 14th floors, and in China, as 4 is an unlucky number, the same for the 4th floor—why take chances?);
- * bleeding statues;
- * the conviction that carrying the severed foot of a rabbit around with you brings good luck;
- * divining rods, dowsing, and water witching;
- * "facilitated communication" in autism;
- * the belief that razor blades stay sharper when kept inside small cardboard pyramids, and other tenets of "pyramidology";
- * phone calls from the dead;
- * the prophecies of Nostradamus;
- * the alleged discovery that untrained flatworms can learn a task by eating the ground-up remains of other, better educated flatworms;
- * the notion that more crimes are committed when the Moon is full;
- * palmistry; numerology; polygraphy; comets, tea leaves, and "monstrous" births as harbingers of future events (plus the divinations fashionable in earlier epochs, accomplished by viewing entrails, smoke, the shapes of

- flames, shadows, and excrement; listening to gurgling stomachs; and even, for a brief period, examining tables of logarithms);
- * "photography" of past events, such as the crucifixion of Jesus;
 - * a Russian elephant that speaks fluently;
 - * "sensitives" who, when carelessly blindfolded, read books with their fingertips;
 - * Edgar Cayce (who predicted that in the 1960s the "lost" continent of Atlantis would "rise") and other "prophets," sleeping and awake;
 - * diet quackery;
 - * out-of-body (e.g., near-death) experiences interpreted as real events in the external world;
 - * faith-healer fraud;
 - * Ouija boards;
 - * the emotional lives of geraniums (a plant) uncovered by intrepid use of a "lie detector";
 - * water remembering what molecules used to be dissolved in it;
 - * phrenology-telling a person's character from facial features or bumps on the head;
 - * the "hundredth monkey" confusion and other claims that whatever a small fraction of us wants to be true really is true;
 - * human beings spontaneously bursting into flame and being burned to a crisp;
 - * 3-cycle biorhythms;
 - * perpetual motion machines, promising unlimited supplies of energy (but all of which, for one reason or another, are withheld from close examination by skeptics);
 - * the systematically inept predictions of Jeanne Dixon (who "predicted" a 1953 Soviet invasion of Iran and in 1965 that the USSR would beat the U.S. to put the first human on the Moon) and other professional "psychics";
 - * the Jehovah's Witnesses' prediction that the world would end in 1917, and many similar prophecies;
 - * Dianetics and Scientology;
 - * Carlos Castaneda and "sorcery";
 - * claims of finding the remains of Noah's Ark;
 - * the "Amityville Horror" and other hauntings;
 - * accounts of a small brontosaurus crashing through the rain forests of the Congo Republic in the 19th century.

[An in-depth discussion of many such claims can be found in *Encyclopedia of the Paranormal*, Gordon Stein, ed., Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1996.]