

The Home Doctor

Physiological Basis for Superstition

Written for The Western Home Monthly
By Dr. Leonard Keene Hirschberg, A.B.
M.A., M.D. (Johns Hopkins University)

Epictetus, that wise old earthling of days gone by, held that apparitions are of four kinds. Things are either what they appear to be as a mist or a transparent cloud; or they neither are, nor appear to be; or they are, and do not appear to be; or they are not, and yet appear to be. If your sense organs are all in health enough to take in their proper objects, you will not judge a horse by its harness, or a thing by its mere appearance.

Look how you can, or sad or merrily, interpretation will err more often than be correct. There is no vice so simple, but assumes some mark of virtue on its outward parts. In morality and ethics, there is no damned error, but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text.

Just as many men are better than they seem, supposed superstitions and apparent manifestations of the supernatural or super-normal actually have a form and basis of the unsensed, unperceived world of reality in them. Man is imperfect and in need of more senses as well as greater perfection in the hundred senses God decided to give him, in order to discover many realities under the apparitions. He considers spirits, ghosts and other uncanny figments.

Dr. Tom A. Williams, of Washington D.C., however, maintains that there is an instinct or craving for the super-normal in human nature. He has just announced that this craving is a sign of a physiological need.

In accord with these studies, any craving is a sense phenomenon of which you may or may not be aware. Usually you are innocently and blissfully unconscious of it, yet in disturbance of the thyroid and other glands, there may occur a crude, intangible recognition of the condition.

Something seems to be the matter. You are restless or fixed in a store. Emotional excitement may appear. Your craving may induce shortness of breath, whether it be an instinct or an acquired memory, the fact remains that craving comes from some need or some missing satisfaction of the living creature.

Physiological discomfort is, therefore, present, and physiological discomfort is the evidence that some experience in the past of the race or of the individual is absent and a need of it felt.

Now an influence, according to Dr. Williams, which has been of vast importance to human beings since the time the memory of man runs not to the contrary, has been the testimony of a universe so gargantuan that man recognizes the limitations of his senses and judgments to reckon with it.

The ever present insistence of this large fact as an ultimate end of human endeavor, is over and above religion, authority or blind obedience to an inspired word. All of the inconvenient questionings and scepticisms and dogmatisms on this earth cannot submerge the plain evidence of our own fallible senses, to wit, that there are more realities, more solid truths inaccessible to the common senses than there are at hand ready for them. Dr. Williams does not take this view but misjudges his own discoveries and leap into a tirade against "arbitrary interpretations of supernature," whatever that may mean.

The facts, however, are these. Man and many animals, notably the opossum and the rat—is a curious creature. His nose may have only a few senses, such as smell and touch, but it goes on probing inquisitively into the universe with an understanding that there are more things in heaven and earth than was ever dreamt of in anyone's philosophy, a philosophy necessarily shy of facts, because human limitations mean a lack of senses necessary to take in myriads of certain though unperceived facts.

All of which is philosophical and not "psychical research." Obviously then, an appetite to sense more things in the world than we have senses with which to catch or perceive them, is to be expected. It is no more a blind struggle than is your wish to eat, to see, to play athletic games.

All the thumb stretching and word juggling possible cannot dispute the

physiological basis of a craving for the unknown and the hidden. The chance or accidental principle that it takes the form of a belief in spirits, ghosts, spectres and other super-normal and unreal immaterialities, is unimportant.

Indeed, this is confirmation of human ignorance and deficiency, and merely indicates that the credulity which is associated with unsophistication, is a human state of curiosity necessary to convert a want of experience, ignorance, into new truths or knowledge.

The appetite for the comfort of knowledge to replace the discomfort of its "felt-want," is given testimony in such universal observation as the expanse of "the heavens proclaim the glory of God." This is a religious ecstasy, which makes you crave a realization of something which you cannot directly sense, but which you intuitively conceive.

Evidently this is the physiological origin of religious feeling. The unsatisfied craving or appetite generates by incomplete, faulty and too few senses explains the conviction intuitively obtained that there will always be more to know, more facts to garner than facts known.

If there is added to this fundamental craving the emotions of veneration, glorification, fear, horror and super-hero worship of the unknown, the first principles and elements of religious experience is obtainable. This germ of true religion seems to have its abiding place as much in savage and as in civilized man, as far back as history and tradition reach as well as universally at this moment.

When reason is applied, logic learned, ethics developed and philosophy unraveled, the doctrine and proofs of religion become firmly planted upon its physiological stronghold. Their misapplication into realms of the mystical, the superstitious, the bizarre, science, religious, and what not, are mere rambles and pilgrimages into byways and blind alleys. These do not alter the essence of the condition, to wit, a definite, physiological reaching out and craving for infinity, a Supreme Being.

To love, to taste the sail's divine delight, Of loving some most lovely soul or sight To worship still, though never an answering sign Should come from the Great Beyond within the shrine.

Hints for the Sick Room

When a woman thinks of making deliberate choice of the profession of a sick-nurse, she can, of course, take into careful consideration if her character and temperament are or are not suited for so arduous and trying an avocation. No peculiarities of character or temperament can exempt a woman from being called upon by the plain voice of duty, at one time or another of her life, to take her stand by the bedside of one dear to her, and soothe as best she may many a weary hour of restlessness and pain. And all women should train themselves to possess self-control, calmness, and courage. As they strive to acquire a certain amount of knowledge of the cares and duties of the sickroom, let them not shrink from hearing the details of this or that form of suffering and disease, but gladly and readily offer help, when they rightly and safely can, outside the bounds of their own immediate home circle. Let them rejoice in any fitting opportunity that may come in their way of perfecting themselves in this, the highest and holiest of woman's duties, so that when their own time of trial comes they may not fail! Taking it for granted that there are many who will gladly take a few plain and practical hints on this subject, I shall condense the result of a somewhat long and wide experience into a short space.

It is in things which of themselves appear trifling, and even insignificant, that the comfort of a sick-room is made or marred. For instance, an energetic and amiably-intentioned person places a cold pillow beneath the shoulders of a patient suffering from pneumonia, that is, inflammation of the lungs; a fit of coughing, perhaps a restless night, is the result.

"I am delighted to meet you," said the father of the college student, shaking hands warmly with the professor. "My son took algebra from you last year, you know."

"Pardon me," said the professor; "he was exposed to it, but he did not take it."

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