

## Sign Here

Kris King – January 19<sup>th</sup> 2012

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2012/01/sign-here/>

Do you want to hear something really spooky? This post is my thirty-eighth on this site and it comes in the week when I celebrate my thirty-eighth birthday! Isn't that weird? What do you think it might mean? Hold on, don't answer, because it gets better! I share my birthday with Dave Grohl, Faye Dunaway, and Richard Briers, which is amazing because, get this, I *really* like the Foo Fighters, "The Towering Inferno" is one of my favourite films, and I thought Margot was the funniest character in "The Good Life"! Isn't that incredible? The connections are just so far beyond explanation, it's almost as if there was some kind of cosmic plan, a purpose to it all ... don't you think? No? Really? Well thank fuck for that because that means you're not a cloud-brained dipshit who infers a meaning behind every coincidence – I can't stand you people. If you were too busy drooling out of one side of your mouth when your parents explained the concept of probability to you by way of throwing dice, wake up, wipe your chin, and pay attention – it's time to learn something.

There are few things more irritating to me than the insistence of woo-peddlers that there must be some kind of greater meaning behind events which the rest of us rightly ascribe to coincidence. It demonstrates not only woeful ignorance of the alarmingly simple concept of probability, but also a total and utter failure of imagination because they pretty much always offer the same, tired and, frankly, boring explanation; someone, a being or "power" who exists beyond our meagre understanding of reality, is sending us a message – a *sign*. For some inadequately documented reason they're trying to communicate with us, pointing the way (although neither the direction nor destination are ever particularly clear), and it behoves us to take heed of their cosmic wisdom. Or, you know, maybe not ... call me Mister Traditional if you like, but I always felt it better to avoid following impenetrably cryptic and vague instructions given in a manner that is more convoluted than a game of charades with an entire dementia ward when it comes to making big, important life decisions.

Why does it always seem to be the case that the oh-so-powerful entities ostensibly responsible for these messages can rearrange matter in the universe, at least to a degree sufficient for them to easily contrive a complex sequence of events designed to alert **one** person to some important missive, yet they are *utterly* incapable of expressing themselves in a clear and unambiguous way? Why must they talk in the kind of riddles that are more open to misinterpretation than a religious text written entirely in a poetic, allegorical style, and in a dead language? Here they're playing hide and seek with the whole of reality, smuggling meaning into the banal and trivial, and then hoping that we not only see the "sign", but are also able to both recognise it as one **and** have the necessary mental furnishings in our brain-bungalows in order to be able to interpret it. Is it really too much to ask that they send us a text message?

Part of the problem is that people are prone to seeing "signs" everywhere because our cranial think-boxes incorporate some pretty sophisticated pattern-recognition software which, for the most part, serves us well. It helps us, for example, through the identification of faces to discern stranger from friend (a potentially life-saving skill for a young child to have), and research indicates that our fundamental psychology appears to be structured around the ability to find meaning in patterns ... as a result, most counselling and therapy involves a lot of habit breaking, or learning to avoid "destructive patterns". Despite how impressive all this might sound, the brain's pattern recognition system is just like any other piece of software in that it is not uncommon for it to misfire and get things spectacularly wrong occasionally (remember that infamous bug in Windows Vista that accelerated the moulding process of food and sold all your pets to a passing circus?). In the case of the brain this is known as apophenia, and it is simply the seeing of meaningful patterns where there are none.

There are numerous varieties of apophenia; the gambler who imagines they see patterns emerging in the sequence of numbers as they occur on roulette wheels; the believer in paranormal phenomena who hears ghosts in the sporadic tapping noises produced by a malfunctioning plumbing system in

an aging, decrepit house; the conspiracy theorist who sees a group of lights moving across the sky near a military base and believes them to be secret UFO tests, rather than car headlights momentarily bouncing off a flock of geese. The latter two of these are examples of probably the most well-publicised form of apophenia, pareidolia; this involves a glitch in the process of interpreting visual or audio stimuli, and is frequently exemplified by religious people who keep seeing images of Jesus in everything. Like, in the [lid of a jar of Marmite](#), in the [wood grain of a door](#), or, in one of the year's great gifts to comedy, in [a dog's arse](#).

These simple "hiccups" in people's skull-based grey matter (where clouds might be seen as portents of doom because they have apparently formed the shape of Piers Morgan) also include those who try to make profound connections between otherwise entirely coincidental events (an idea that is, in essence, what Carl Jung termed "synchronicity"). Things go a little beyond surreptitious cerebral farts, however, when folk try to ascribe some massive, cosmic, "it simply doesn't happen!" significance to rare occurrences; here they're very much living in the all-too-familiar, and somewhat popular, neighbourhood of being completely ignorant of the concept of probability and, although they can't say for certain what house they're in (numbers confuse them), they share a street with the people who *think* they understand things enough to believe that they can win the lottery by studying how frequently the individual numbers are drawn and then trying to predict when they're next likely to appear.

I'll give you a brilliant example of how people fail to understand probability and, as a special birthday treat from me to you, it's an example that comes right from my very own fabulously mediocre existence (that's okay, you're *more* than welcome). I am the eldest of my siblings, born when my mum was 18 years old; my first sibling was born a year later, when my mum was 19, and my second sibling arrived shortly after my mum turned 28. Similarly, my mum is also the eldest of her siblings, and she too was born when her mum was only 18. Likewise, her siblings followed when my nan was 19, and again when she was 28. Is my mother bizarrely mirroring her own female parent when it comes to the ages at which their children were ejected from the womb, like screaming cannon-balls made of flesh, bone, poo, and a willingness to trample sugar into the front-room carpet? Is it some kind of significant, other-worldly sign that we should be aware of? Or is it just a moderately interesting coincidence that can be explained with a basic lesson in probability? (see if you can guess)

The [average age of menarche \(first period\) in the UK](#) is 12 years 11 months, meaning the first year in which a woman could realistically give birth is their 13th. At the opposite end of the sprog-farming calendar is menopause which occurs, on average, [at around the age of 52](#). This gives a range of forty years, meaning the chances that a woman would have their first child in any one of those years are 1 in 40 (assuming, obviously, that they're *trying* for a baby and that there are no other negative factors involved). When working out the odds of subsequent children we have to discount past years (since time can't go backwards), meaning the odds of a second child at 19 are now 1 in 34, and a third child at 28 will be 1 in 33. This gives a total probability of one in (40 x 34 x 33), or 1 in 44,880 [thanks to my colleague Rich B for double-checking my reasoning!]

That might sound as if we're talking about a fairly rare event, but it really isn't. It's about as likely as being killed in a road accident in the UK in any twelve-month period (1 in 43,500), twice as likely as dating a super model (1 in 88,000), *thirteen* times more common than being struck by lightning in the USA (1 in 576,000), and **two-thousand, seven hundred and eighty-five** times more likely than a single passenger being killed as a result of an accident on a single airline journey (1 in 125,000,000). People talk all the time of "million to one" events happening to them, as if they're so rare as to invite alternative, "guiding hand" explanations, and yet when you consider that there are more than 60 million people living in the UK right now you realise that "million to one" events must be happening at least 60 times a day in this country. Suddenly these previously "miraculous" occurrences don't seem so miraculous now, do they?

With a world population of over 7 billion, even *billion to one* events happen around 7 times a day. The apparent total lack of understanding amongst the average idiot when it comes to the basic ideas behind probability is, without fail, the most common reason said idiots are always in a rush to assign some deeper meaning to events that they themselves cannot explain (although they're never short of a laughably flimsy hypothesis or two), and which they perceive to be far rarer than they actually are. Now, I know what you're thinking; "Come on", you're thinking, "it's not really fair to call people idiots just because they don't understand how probability works", and I would reply by telling you that, in fairness, you're an idiot. Most of us are introduced to the concept from a young age by way of flipping a coin, or throwing a dice in a board game; there really aren't many excuses for an adult

who sees a fairly uncommon event and starts verbally wanking on about "purpose" or "destiny".

The whole pseudo-romantic concept of "fate" and "destiny", the idea that our lives have some purpose assigned to it by an external entity (be it a god, or some other sentient being more nebulous in its definition that lives far beyond our day-to-day comprehension), is inherently flawed because it totally eliminates the possibility of free will. In such a scenario, *none* of our choices are ours to make; they have already been made for us by an unseen other who has determined how our lives are going to play out. Every aspect of our existence comes not from ourselves, but from outside – our lives are not our own, our actions dictated to us with neither an explanation nor the freedom to do anything but capitulate. We would be little more than dolls, play things for some higher power to manipulate to their will, with nary a thought for what we might want to do with our lives. Our sentience would be utterly wasted on us ... we would be *slaves*.

Worse still, it means that everything that happens to you is by design – it was *supposed* to happen to you because some invisible power wished it so. Good or bad, punishment or reward, no matter what fortune may come our way we would ultimately **deserve** it – cancer, rape, murder, all forms of suffering and pain would be on a par with health, happiness, personal safety and all the good stuff because these things are *meant* to happen to us; someone has decreed it, and that someone **owns** us in our entirety. Sure, we wouldn't have to take the blame for our failings, but neither would we get to take the credit for our achievements ... that would all go to whichever malevolent bastard it was who had decided what our fate, our destiny, our purpose, would ultimately be.

To be without self-determination like that would put us very much at the whims of a being who has no problem standing by whilst the most appalling atrocities are committed, simply because it is that being's *will* that those atrocities take place. Nothing could contravene the will of such a being, no-one could defy the "plan" that had been laid out for them, so every murder, every rape, every genocide, and every torture is at the overseer's command. Now, some people would say that such a plan would not be so rigid, that it would, in fact, be possible to figuratively wipe one's arse with it and fling it back in the face (eww!) of its architect. But, if that were true, what's the point of the plan at all, or even its architect? Who would bother paving life's road for us (making sure to install all the signs, crossings, diversions, junctions, bridges, speed bumps, toll-booths, and overpriced services) if we're able to throw the GPS out the window and dirt-track rally the entire journey?

When we delegate away the responsibility for making decisions in our lives, or even for defining its purpose, we become passive bystanders to our own existence. I'm sure you, like me, have heard someone utter the phrase "everything happens for a reason" in that mysterious and faintly patronising way, and found it hard to suppress the desire to lecture them for four hours on exactly *why* such soft, hippy-ish bollock waffle makes them less credible than a Sun editor's appearance at an inquiry into journalistic ethics. If they mean that everything happens because there is a complex sequence of causal events that lead up to it, then yes, they're right – they've wasted precious moments of your time by stating something so paralytically obvious, but they are right. Where they are *wrong*, however, is when they postulate that there must be some profound, and greater cosmic purpose to it all ... there isn't. Shit just happens, I'm afraid – learn to deal with it, and stop acting like a child.

Seriously, this need for people to see meaning in everything, to see signs and greater purpose wherever they look, is massively fucking irritating. What's the matter? Is the fact that you're alive *at all* not enough for you? How miserable and squalid must your outlook on the world be if you have to constantly search for something bigger, grander, and more impressive? Is your imagination so stunted that you can't find meaning and purpose in life on your own without having to defer to some invisible being you hope will give you hints on how to be a human? Instead of looking to the skies for cheat codes, why not try to explore the game and solve its riddles yourself? You'll find it an experience that is richer, fuller, more eye-opening, and infinitely more rewarding than simply sitting around looking for clues that'll unlock the secrets to drifting through existence.

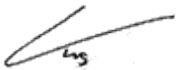
Every ounce of progress that we as a species have made has been because we sought to figure things out for ourselves. We didn't sit around waiting for the gods, or the stars, or the cards to tell us – we got up, cracked our knuckles, and decided that *we* make our own destiny; we will evolve and progress because *we* define our purpose. All of the good and all of the bad that we do, or that happens to us, is ours, and we should own it ... *all of it*: every success, every failure, every moment of shame, every rush of pride, every triumph, every disaster, all of these things belong to us because they are what **define** us. We should embrace them wholly because they are important parts of our lives. We need to stop looking to the skies for a purpose to our lives because *living* is our purpose. If

you're looking beyond the physical for signs, or help with your problems, you're looking in the wrong place. As a planet, for now, we *are* alone; as a species, we have neighbours; as individuals, we have *each other*.

While riding home from work, the day before my birthday, my bike's front tire got punctured by something in the road only a few hundred yards from home. On my birthday itself, the recirculation pump in our dishwasher fried itself and filled the kitchen with pale smoke and a burning electrical smell. The day after, we had to put our oldest rat, Leeloo, to sleep after she had become very ill very quickly, to the point where she was beyond anyone being able to do anything for her. Was this trifecta of tragedy a sign that someone is trying to tell me something? Should I concern myself with the fact that while making birthday muffins for my co-workers I cracked open one egg to find not a single yolk, not even a double, but a *triple*? Three mini-yolks, together taking the place of a regular-sized one! Was this some kind of omen, a warning of dark times to come? No. It was simply nothing more than the last in a series of coincidences that had occurred over the span of several days ...

The bike tires weren't new, and no-one round here gives enough of a fuck about cyclists not to leave broken bottles in the street; a puncture was inevitable at some point. The dishwasher was over five years old, and frequent-use home appliances with moving parts don't last forever – it was simply a matter of time before it broke down. As for our beloved Leeloo, well, she was the longest-lived rat we'd had so far – two and a half years old – whether we liked to admit it or not, the odds of her reaching her third birthday were not good. Short of any meaningful connection between a crippled bike, a broken home appliance, and a deceased rodent, each of these events was nothing more than a coincidence ... just as it was that my 38th post occurred in the week that I turned 38 ...

And the triple-yolked egg? Apparently the odds are one in 25 million, or about half as likely as winning the lottery ... that's pretty rare, but it's still way more likely than that *actually* being Jesus in your pancake ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Ang', written in a cursive style.