

PSYCHOLOGY

Are You Still Superstitious?

Despite the Spread of Knowledge of the Sciences, Superstitious Beliefs Are Held Today, Even by Teachers

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER



SUPPOSE you were walking past a graveyard on the night of Friday the thirteenth in the dark of the moon and saw a falling star come down just as a black cat crossed your path. And you heard a dog howl, and an owl hoot

three times. And then a church bell tolled out the hour of midnight.

Would you be scared? And would you cross your fingers and wish for a rabbit's foot?

Probably you are not superstitious enough to think that all these things mean anything in determining your fate. But a great many persons in the United States do believe in superstitious omens of good or bad luck—either these or others like them. Even educated persons may cling to a faith in omens which they learned in their early childhood. And, though their good sense tells them that superstition is foolish, yet habit will make them persist in acting as though such trivial incidents could change the course of human events.

Just how common magical thinking is, is shown by the results of a questionnaire distributed by Dr. A. O. Bowden, president of the New Mexico State Teachers College, among the parents of elementary school pupils in cities in fourteen states scattered widely over the Union from New Hampshire to Georgia and west to California. These results will soon be published in book form.

By magical thinking, Dr. Bowden does not necessarily mean belief in such age-old sayings as those listed above, but fallacious reasoning based on false ideas of a cause-and-effect relationship where such a relation does not exist.

For example, one of his questions was as follows:

"Do you believe that fish is a better brain food than bacon?"

The belief that eating fish will improve school grades is an example of the fallacious thinking which Dr. Bowden calls magical thinking. For it is based on the fact that the tissues of the brains are rich in phosphorus, and that fish also contains phosphorus.

Scientists tell us that the brain is nourished, as is the rest of the body, by the blood and that fish has no more value as a brain food than any other equally nourishing food. The belief that it has such special properties is akin to that which holds that "every part strengthens its part," that is, that the person with a liver ailment should eat liver, the runner confine his diet to pig's feet, and perhaps that the lover should be served generous portions of roast heart.

Primitive peoples stretched this idea even farther and held that plants which looked like human organs were good foods or medicine for that part—liver-leaf or hepatica with a liver-shaped leaf for liver, trefoil for heart disease, thistle for a stitch in the side, yellow turmeric for jaundice, and even walnut shells for head injuries.

Dr. Bowden found that 59 per cent. of the general population and 32 per cent. of teachers believe that eating fish improves the brain.

He found that 85 per cent. of the population believe that beautiful pictures or fine music in the home or school will make people moral or virtuous. And 75 per cent. of teachers hold this view.

Electorate Infallible!

"Do you believe that the great majority of American people, by reason of their innate ability to tell right from wrong, will naturally take the right side of any big public question in the state or nation when allowed to vote on it?"

To this question, 84 per cent. of the non-teachers and 79 per cent. of the teachers answered yes. This despite the fact that many reforms have been urged for years before a favorable vote was secured.

Dr. Bowden believes that these figures indicate that notwithstanding the fact that public schools are available all over the land, America is not nearly so well educated as is generally believed.

But a psychologist reminds us that although the advance of science may be expected gradually to wipe out magic and belief in weird explanations of ordinary matters, still the very rapid development of science in our age may make it difficult or well nigh impossible for the mind of man to keep abreast.

The late Prof. Edgar James Swift, before his recent death head of the department of psychology of Washington University, St. Louis, in a new book on the *Jungle of the Mind* said that the recent stupendous discoveries of science have put us into an expectant, credulous mental attitude in which we are inclined to see nothing as impossible, nothing absurd.

Magic or Science

A few years ago it was necessary, in order to speak to a person, to approach within calling distance. Now we have only to direct our voices into a round object which the engineer calls a microphone, and the words may be heard at the ends of the earth without even wire to bridge the distance.

To the person who does not understand the scientific principles which make this possible, it may seem no more incredible that persons at a distance should be able to communicate without the aid of the radio merely by "projecting their thoughts."

Thus it becomes daily more difficult to distinguish between the true and the untrue, the real and the unreal, the scientific and the magical. And even educated persons are taken in by superstitions, new and old.

The ordinary general science course in high school tells the student nothing specific about the falsity of such unfounded sayings, and it is not easy for him to figure out why they are not true.

Your boy may search in vain through his text book in an effort to find out whether "lightning never strikes twice in the same place." He will probably find nothing to indicate whether the direction of the points of the new moon have anything to do with the dryness or wetness of the month following.

Probably the subjects of toads and warts, four-leaved clover and luck, cold hands and warm heart, and high foreheads and intelligence are all sadly neglected.

Consequently high school graduates, and college graduates too, continue to hear these things and hearing them believe them or are influenced by them.

Dr. Otis W. Caldwell and Gerhard E. Lundeen, of the Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University, gathered together a list of two hundred unfounded beliefs—not all those that are regarded as important, but enough to serve as a basis for an interesting experiment.

The whole list of 200 was given in the form of a test to over a thousand high school seniors and college students. Each person was asked to indicate after each belief whether he had heard of it, whether he believed it, and also whether his actions were ever influenced by it.

The following beliefs selected from the list will give you an idea of what it was like:

Fat people are always good natured.
Dew falls from the sky.

If you tickle a baby you will cause it to stutter.

If the ground-hog sees his shadow on ground-hog day, there will be six weeks of bad weather.

Seven is a lucky number.
Dreams go by contraries.

Good people die young.

It was found that high school seniors on an average have heard of approximately half the 200 items in the list. They believe in about 20 per cent. or one-fifth of those with which they are familiar. They say, however, that they are influenced by even more of the ideas than they actually believe, 22 per cent.

Girls More Superstitious

College students have heard of more of the ideas than have the high school seniors, but they are influenced in and believe a smaller number. Girls are influenced by unfounded beliefs more than boys. And those in rural communities have heard of and are influenced by more unfounded beliefs than are the dwellers in cities. It is suggested by the scientists, however, that the city young people may have other superstitions which were not included in this list.

More than 80 per cent. of the high school seniors who had heard the saying, believe that when the plumage of birds is very heavy, that fact foretells a severe winter. But they are not so credulous regarding all the sayings. Although two-thirds had heard that a witch can

and sometimes does conceal her identity in the form of a black cat, only two per cent. were inclined to fear a dark-hued kitty for this reason.

This information on what public school graduates actually believe will aid teachers in revising the science course to hit directly at prevalent unfounded beliefs—showing the youngsters which ideas are false and why they cannot be true. After all it may be quite as harmful for the business man to grow up believing that he can discover a man's honesty from the look in his eye, or his intelligence from the shape of his forehead, as it would be for him to believe in witches and hobgoblins.

Students List Beliefs

Some indication of the great number of old superstitious sayings that are still current in the United States and influencing life and behavior to a greater or lesser extent is given by another list compiled by students of the Wisconsin State Teachers College under the direction of Profs. J. O. Frank and H. W. Talbot.

A total of 488 students made individual lists of superstitions they knew to exist in the community. Altogether 1,224 different superstitions were reported!

Some of these were very common. "A black cat brings bad luck," appeared on all but four of the lists. "Finding a horseshoe brings good luck," was re-

ported by 442. "Breaking a mirror brings bad luck," was reflected on 411 lists.

Thirteen of the more widely acknowledged of these superstitions are given on this page. With them you may test yourself and your neighbors to see how much influence superstition has in your community. In addition to asking, "Do you believe these things," question whether you ever act as though they might be important to you. For many a person will say "Oh, I know its all foolish, but I'll knock on wood anyhow just to be sure."

The following list is unusually interesting. It contains some of the more uncommon beliefs—those that appeared only on twenty lists.

1. Enter front door, leave back door—bad luck.
2. Put on left shoe first—good luck.
3. Northern lights bright—bad weather.
4. Job started on Friday—never finished.
5. Three lamps in a row—marriage.
6. Last rehearsal poor—play will be good.
7. Cow moos in night—someone dying.
8. Man dies in town—two more soon to follow.
9. Tell bad dreams before breakfast—dreams come true.
10. See bright object—kick it three times before picking it up—devil kicked out.
11. Stub your toe—will get a scolding.
12. Get up on wrong side of bed—cross all day.
13. Rain on wedding day—wedding unlucky.

This article was edited from manuscript prepared by Science Service for use in illustrated newspaper magazines. Copyright 1932 by EveryWeek Magazine and Science Service.
Science News Letter, October 29, 1932

COMMON SUPERSTITIONS

	TRUE	FALSE
1. Friday the 13th is a very unlucky day.
2. Thirteen people at a table—death or bad luck.
3. Walking under a ladder brings bad luck.
4. Sing before breakfast—cry before night.
5. Four-leaved clover brings good luck.
6. A rabbit's foot brings good luck.
7. Dog howls at night—a death follows.
8. Groundhog sees his shadow on groundhog day—six weeks of bad weather.
9. Two persons walk on opposite sides of an object—bad luck.
10. Drop silver at table—company coming.
11. Warts removed by various charms.
12. Clothing on wrong—bad luck to change.
13. Amber beads will prevent goiter.

● Even if you do not believe any of these superstitions, do you not allow your actions to be influenced by them? ●