

How to Know What's Really Happening

Preface

This book about is something we all want. Situations erupt around us and we wonder if the reports we receive can be trusted. The people being pursued are terrorists, the targets were innocent, it was a coincidence that one of the people who died had protested against corruption. Meanwhile government leaders declare new security measures and in other news a large trade deal is signed with a major superpower.

Downstairs, in apartment 3, there are often muffled moans and furniture seems to be moved constantly. The couple that live there are seldom seen together but both are quiet and invite no conversation.

So, how can you know what is really happening?

Well ... there is a classic solution: for the domestic situation, the private detective; and if you are a state, then an intelligence service. Spies are often very effective though they are expensive and, of course, difficult to trust. Technology can be more reliable—every keystroke of your intended target may be recorded and posted across the globe to a government database.

If you are a civilian who is worried by that scenario, and wondering what is happening, then there are still some humans such as Edward Snowden who are willing to explain what is going on.

The problem with government intelligence is that it only sets out to discover certain things. It's not helpful, however, to discover the location of a missile system if what you actually want to know is whether you will meet the partner of your dreams on a cruise. At such moments fortune-tellers become much more reliable, trained as they are to sense your fate from the way you place your bag on the floor and fold your arms.

If you are more concerned with the future of the planet or the trajectory of particles through space a scientist may offer some help too. The physicist John Bell pointed out that we are still trying to understand how a particle in Jakarta that is linked to another in Toronto can contain the same information, transmitted quicker than the speed of light.[1] Quantum entanglement is the name given to that particular problem, which suggests that there are ways of knowing that are still beyond our comprehension.

With so much information available and hurtling towards us from every direction, in fact, the burden of filtering and interpretation finally lies with each of us. In a sense we are all now historians and archivists, selecting and compiling various shards of information to form a reading of the world, knowing deep down that there are many counter-histories. In *The Writing of History* (1988, the Jesuit thinker, Michel de Certeau, highlights the subjective bias of our accounts, national and personal, concluding that “the past is the fiction of the present.”[2]

What de Certeau did not highlight, however were the conspiracy theories that now permeate our culture. The effort to answer the question of how do I know what is really happening accelerated after the assassination of John F. Kennedy and it may be a sign of the times we live in now that conspiracy theories circulate so widely.

Beyond the now almost-mundane theories of CIA activity, there are detailed arguments proving the death of Paul McCartney in 1966 (successfully hidden through Ringo’s links to MI5). There is proof of alien collaboration in the White House, Kim Kardashian’s involvement with the Illuminati, the false flag events of 9/11, the lost cosmonauts of the Russian space program, the disappearance of the Malaysian Airline MH370, the civilisation hidden within the Earth’s core ... What all of the conspiracy theories demonstrate is our disbelief in the world as it is being presented to us and a burning desire to know what is really happening. So let’s dive in ...

Chapter One

You get to your hotel room after a long journey. You drop your bag, turn out the lights and lie down. A few hours later you wake up in total darkness. For a good

minute you have no sense of who you are though once you turn on the television, or more likely, log onto internet, then information floods your mind.

You may ask: how do I know what is really happening? I will outline the things you need to know to answer the question: “what is really happening?” And the techniques revealed here could be adapted for many circumstances you will encounter in life.

First it is necessary to understand why it is so important to really know what is happening. So let me begin with a simple example from the life of Sidney Reilly: Reilly was the son of an Irish merchant seaman and he was born Georgi Rosenblum in Odessa in 1873. At the same moment, he was born in Clonmel in County Tipperary where his father was an Irish clergyman and an aristocratic landowner and courtier of Tsar Alexander III. Still in 1873, he was born Saloman (Shlomo) Rosenblum in the province of Kherson and only a year later he was born, again in Odessa, as Zigmund Markovich Rozenblum on 24 March 1874. He would become better known in later life as Sidney George Reilly, one of the most successful spies to work for Sir Mansfield Smith-Cumming who signed his letters simply as C, and always in green ink.

Smith-Cumming was the director of the British Secret Intelligence Service and, as it evolved, MI6. His task was to know what was really happening in global affairs, military, political, and industrial. The paradox, of course, was that C’s most effective tool for ascertaining a reliable picture of the world was the strange figure of Sidney Reilly, who often seemed nothing more than a psychic burst of fireworks and fog, a miasma of personalities.

Given his position it’s not a surprise that Smith-Cumming himself was a complex character. He is often defined by one moment in his life—a driving holiday across Europe with his son Alastair in 1914. Passing through a woodland area in Northern France at high speed, Alastair lost control of the wheel and the car smashed into a tree, flipping upside down and trapping Smith-Cumming’s leg under its weight. He could hear his son, who was thrown clear, complain of the cold but he couldn’t escape the weight of the car to reach him. In the end he used a penknife to hack off his

trapped leg and dragged himself over to cover his child with his coat. Hours later he was found unconscious beside his dead son.

Within six weeks he was back at work and the wooden leg he had fitted became a source of almost zen-like instruction for prospective agents during their interviews. One of his employees, Edward Knoblock, who worked for Smith-Cumming, described how “He would terrify potential recruits by reaching for his sharp letter knife and raising it high in the air. He would then slam it through his trousers and into his wooden leg.” If the applicant flinched, Smith-Cumming would murmur, “Well, I am afraid you won’t do.”[3]

If there is something to be learned from the convoluted personalities of these intelligence operatives, it is that a logical and reasoned approach to the search for knowledge is of limited use.

It may be worth recalling the famous incident when a supplicant called Notere Bisera journeyed to see the holy sage Ishu at his remote hut in the mountains. When he found Ishu, he said, “I seek enlightenment.” Ishu nodded and reached out his hand, saying “Pull my finger.” Notere hesitated, but went ahead and pulled his finger. Ishu farted, and Notere was suddenly enlightened.[4]

This is the territory of unknowing: the moment when knowledge is usurped by the realisation that there is something more nebulous and powerful beyond that goal. A mystical fourteenth century English text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

For, by transcendence of yourself and all other things, and by thus cleansing your feelings of all worldly, fleshly and natural pleasures, and your intellect of everything that can be known according to its own form, then, once everything has been negated in this way, you will be drawn up in your feelings above understanding to the radiance of divine darkness that transcends all being.

Take care that none of those unwise people still dwelling in their senses hear about these matters ... They expect to know him who has “made darkness his hiding place” by means of their own kind of knowledge[5]

This movement leads to transcendence in the case of *The Cloud of Unknowing* but at other times an unknowing can occur through possession and a sort of immanence. The American artist and filmmaker, Maya Deren, achieved a true sense of what was happening in a voodoo ceremony only when she reached a point of unknowing:

So it goes: the leg fixed and then wrenched loose, the long fall across space, the rooting of the leg again—for how long, how many times, I cannot know. My skull is a drum; each great beat drives that leg, like the point of a stake, into the ground. The singing is at my very ear, inside my head. This sound will drown me! “Why don’t they stop! Why don’t they stop!” I cannot wrench the leg free, I am caught in this cylinder, this well of sound. There is nothing anywhere except this. There is no way out. The white darkness moves up the veins of my leg like a swift tide rising; rising; [it] is a great force which I cannot sustain or contain, which, surely, will burst my skin. It is too much, too white, too bright for me, this is its darkness. “Mercy!” I scream within me. I hear it echoed by the voices, shrill and unearthly, “*Erzulie!*” The bright darkness floods up through my body, reaches my head, engulfs me. I am sucked down and exploded upward at once, That is all.[6]

Daniel Ellsberg, a Rand Corporation employee who in 1971 famously leaked Pentagon papers detailing the decision making process for the US government in relation to Vietnam, once met Henry Kissinger. He recalls the conversation they had regarding the levels of secrecy that could be accessed in the US government and the complexity of the impact this might have on one’s state of knowledge. Paradox heaps upon paradox as he outlines the subsequent journey from ignorance to knowing and back again that follows from special clearance to the highest levels of intelligence information.

Henry, there’s something I would like to tell you, for what it’s worth, something I wish I had been told years ago. You’ve been a consultant for a long time, and you’ve dealt a great deal with top secret information. But you’re about to receive a whole slew of special clearances, maybe fifteen or twenty of them, that are higher than top secret.

I've had a number of these myself, and I've known other people who have just acquired them, and I have a pretty good sense of what the effects of receiving these clearances are on a person who didn't previously know they even existed. And the effects of reading the information that they will make available to you.

... Over a longer period of time—not too long, but a matter of two or three years—you'll eventually become aware of the limitations of this information. There is a great deal that it doesn't tell you, it's often inaccurate, and it can lead you astray just as much as the *New York Times* can. But that takes a while to learn.

In the meantime it will have become very hard for you to learn from anybody who doesn't have these clearances. Because you'll be thinking as you listen to them: "What would this man be telling me if he knew what I know? Would he be giving me the same advice, or would it totally change his predictions and recommendations?" And that mental exercise is so torturous that after a while you give it up and just stop listening. I've seen this with my superiors, my colleagues ... and with myself.

You will deal with a person who doesn't have those clearances only from the point of view of what you want him to believe and what impression you want him to go away with, since you'll have to lie carefully to him about what you know. In effect, you will have to manipulate him. You'll give up trying to assess what he has to say. The danger is, you'll become something like a moron. You'll become incapable of learning from most people in the world, no matter how much experience they may have in their particular areas that may be much greater than yours.[7]

Chapter Two

Let's pause here for a moment.

Even as I've been writing these words there is an announcement on the radio. An English Baroness is making a statement in the wake of yesterday's terrorist attack:

I think being alert is very important. I am alarmed by the number of people I see wandering along the street entirely engaged in their mobile telephones and with their ears plugged into music and they are not aware of their surroundings.

You need to be aware of your surroundings, you do have to take some personal responsibility.

I do think we can be more alert than we are.[8]

The Baroness, a former counter terrorism minister, seems to be on the ball. We will know what is really happening if we remove our headphones and engage more directly with our surroundings.

I look out the window and the general population seems immune to this advice: headphones abound and people are skilfully weaving around each other, absorbed by their smart phones. Someone stops and looks up at me. I wave and they take a photo. The Baroness has missed the point. People are doggedly keeping faith with their headphones. They have made their choice.

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Sometime, early in the sixteenth century, three candidates were on their way to a vital civil service examination. They stopped to buy tea and pastries from a woman at the wayside. One of the men was calm and quiet, while the other two argued constantly. The woman asked where they were going. The latter two told her they were going to take the civil service examination. She said, "You two won't pass the exam." She pointed at the third candidate. "He will."

The two men swore at her and left, still arguing with each other. When the exam results turned out as the woman had predicted, the two failed candidates returned to discover how she had known they would not pass, while the third man would. They asked her if she knew physiognomy. “No,” she said, “all I know is that when a pastry is thoroughly cooked, it sits there quietly, but before it’s finished it keeps on making noise.”[9]

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What is happening is related to what really just happened and what really will happen.

The digital networks we are creating serve to demonstrate just how many networks already exist around us. The telephone itself is a near antique technology: the first call was in 1876 and, in the Bell Laboratories, the linking of Telephone 1 and Telephone 2 in 1877 marked the beginning of the first telephone network. That was the same year Queen Victoria became Empress of India, Thomas Edison made the first recording of a human voice (singing “Mary Had a Little Lamb”), the Lakota Indians performed the Last Sun Dance to honour Crazy Horse a year after the battle of Little Big Horn, and the first human cannonball act was performed in London.

Other more ancient networks would include the postal service—a long, mostly anonymous history of horses and men stationed on dusty roads linking kings and merchants to the world around them. In forests and jungles there were drums; on the plains, smoke signals; and in the mountains, fire beacons.

All of these networks existed to help people to know what was really happening. It’s worth looking at the most recent attempt to do something similar. In science, the need to know what is really happening is always urgent but it’s tempered by a calibration of the subject under scrutiny. Often “what” is the most mysterious part of the sentence as in the search for gravitational waves. Initially it’s a question of “what are these waves?” and “do they actually exist?” and only later is it a question of “what is happening?”

Albert Einstein predicted the existence of the waves but their presence, as a ripple through space, is so faint that they could not be perceived. In an article documenting their eventual discovery in 2015, Nicola Twilley describes the meticulous preparations made by physicist Rainer Weiss in the construction of a wave detector:

It took years to make the most sensitive instrument in history insensitive to everything that is not a gravitational wave. Emptying the tubes of air demanded forty days of pumping. The result was one of the purest vacuums ever created on Earth, a trillionth as dense as the atmosphere at sea level. Still, the sources of interference were almost beyond reckoning—the motion of the wind in Hanford, or of the ocean in Livingston; imperfections in the laser light as a result of fluctuations in the power grid; the jittering of individual atoms within the mirrors; distant lightning storms. All can obscure or be mistaken for a gravitational wave, and each source had to be eliminated or controlled for. One of LIGO's systems responds to minuscule seismic tremors by activating a damping system that pushes on the mirrors with exactly the right counterforce to keep them steady; another monitors for disruptive sounds from passing cars, airplanes, or wolves.[10]

“There are ten thousand other tiny things, and I really mean ten thousand,” Weiss said. “And every single one needs to be working correctly so that nothing interferes with the signal.”[11] When his colleagues make adjustments to the observatory's interior components, they must set up a portable clean room, sterilize their tools, and don what they call bunny suits—full-body protective gear—lest a skin cell or a particle of dust accidentally settle on the sparkling optical hardware. The greatest surprise this operation produced was the documentation of the waves four days before the official tests were to begin. It caught everyone by surprise and risked being dismissed because it was so premature.

A meme currently haunts the web: John Travolta surfaces in an infinite variety of old movie clips looking around in confusion as if to say “what’s this?” By the time you are reading this, the meme may have faded but right now it has urgency and a rightness for the times. The curator, Bassam El Baroni, has addressed this saying:

The confused John Travolta GIF phenomenon indicates that it has become almost impossible to extract a sensible perception of what is really going on from the aggregation of information/data that constitutes the present. As Mr. Baudrillard once noted “One cannot at the same time grasp the real and its sign: we shall never again master the two simultaneously.” This particular GIF phenomenon with Travolta simply alienated is a clear hint that this idea has finally entered the popular imagination, and this is a positive sign, because it means that we perhaps can start loosening our expectations regarding the real and begin thinking what reality should be rather than what it is as a manifest entity.[12]

His analysis is positive, even slightly utopian. There is an opportunity here for the creation of a new reality, founded on the impossibility of grasping the present state of affairs. It’s paradoxical too, given the difficulty of forging reality in a world where it’s impossible to perceive reality or to know what is really going on. Perhaps this new conception of reality is produced in a more knowing context where we acknowledge the process of invention, where we willingly consent to living in a fictionalised state.

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In the mid-1950s the Japanese professor of Buddhist philosophies, D. T. Suzuki came to lecture at Columbia University. Recalling the event a few years later John Cage highlighted Suzuki’s restless search for the ideal lecture room:

During recent years Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki has done a great deal of lecturing at Columbia University. First he was in the Department of Religion, then somewhere else. Finally he settled down on the seventh floor of Philosophy Hall. The room had windows on two sides, a large table in the middle with ash trays. There were chairs around the table and next to the

walls. These were always filled with people listening, and there were generally a few people standing near the door. The two or three people who took the class for credit sat in chairs around the table. The time was four to seven. During this period most people now and then took a little nap. Suzuki never spoke loudly. When the weather was good the windows were open, and the airplanes leaving La Guardia flew directly overhead from time to time, drowning out whatever he had to say. He never repeated what had been said during the passage of the airplane. Three lectures I remember in particular. While he was giving them I couldn't for the life of me figure out what he was saying. It was a week or so later, while I was walking in the woods looking for mushrooms, that it all dawned on me.[13]

It's clear immediately what an influence Suzuki's ambient lecture space had on Cage's work. Just as important, perhaps, is the fact that Cage comes to his moment of understanding while mushrooming in the woods. It is his fieldwork, literally, that leads him to a new form of music. Praxis generates a concept generating praxis.

Chapter Four

There is a woman in Lofoten who is worried that the cod will move north.

A man in Kirkenes is watching Syrian refugees crossing the border from Murmansk. They all have the same kind of bicycles, the most basic models: black, no brakes, no lights.

The woman in Lofoten is wondering what will happen when people in Tokyo can 3D print seafood.

“Cod, haddock, and other Atlantic fish, which used to be confined to the southwest part of the Barents Sea, are now moving rapidly northward. Meanwhile, Arctic fish like sculpin and snailfish are retreating to the northernmost parts of the sea.”[14]

The man in Kirkenes is wondering why the authorities collect all the bicycles and then dump them. Couldn't they be reused?

We know that fish eat plankton and plankton eat algae. Think again, says a researcher, who has spotted a form of algae so ferocious that can overpower animals 10,000 times their own size.

Massive exploding space rock crashes to earth with the same force as an ATOMIC BOMB—but nobody noticed.[15]

Scientists say your enemies smell much worse than friends or family.[16]

Has a parallel universe opened? Mysterious floating city reappears in the sky.[17]

A scientist in Princeton is excited by the number of bacterial signatures to be found on the human body: it may be up to a thousand. She understands now that many of the bacteria are potentially disease causing but they live in peace within the larger community that comprises 90% of our body.[18]

Mystery of lion with TEETH growing out of its head: Scientists baffled by mountain cat.[19]

Singapore just launched a plan to fill the city with 3D-printed homes.[20]

A French writer is struggling to reach the shore against a strong tide:

Somewhat rashly, for I was out alone and the water was rather choppy, I swam until the shore was almost out of sight. When a wave lifted me up, like an incalculable number of backbones, and in the distance, between the surf, the rocks, the pebbled slope of the beach, stretched the yellow strip of sand, narrow, out of reach

A message of death has been issued ... The ocean is thinking; and in this madhouse where millions of floodtides interconnect, I am what it is thinking, I am a foreign body. I am the target. The ocean wants to void itself of this minute little islet, this defiant skull with its throbbing temples, with its rival organ pulsing within. It is sucking me in to be rid of me. It is unrelenting. It is striking out at me Panic. For a brief instant, delirium.[21]

This tiny glass disc can store 360TB of data for 13.8 billion years.[22]

Yemen is fighting its severe water shortage by harvesting its fog.[23]

This mushroom suit digests your body after you die.[24]

Our brains prioritise playback of high-reward memories.[25]

This new 3D printer *makes* life-sized ear, muscle, and bone tissues from living cells.[26]

Women's code rates better than men's, but is rejected when their gender is revealed.[27]

Why don't we wipe mosquitoes off the face of the Earth?[28]

There is a scientist in Glasgow wondering why the robins sing all night.[29]

Members of a North Devon Women's Institute were left embarrassed after a number of them dressed up as pirates for a talk by a former sea captain—without realising he had been held hostage by Somali pirates for several weeks.[30]

Bacterial cells are actually the world's smallest "eyeballs."[31]

Scientists are making better batteries derived from bee pollen.[32]

First fully autonomous "robot run" farm to open in Japan. [33]

A woman in Kvalnes explains to the professor that the oceans are a viral soup. She estimates that there are tens of thousands of virus particles in the worlds oceans. They might even outnumber all cellular life forms by roughly a factor of 10.[34]

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What I mean to say is:

Crows are more curious than most birds: they always keep an eye on what is happening. It has been said that if you offend a crow, it will remember you and so will its companions. A scientific experiment in Seattle has provided dramatic evidence of this. In an area well populated by crows, one woman threw down peanuts while another researcher approached the feeding birds with the taxidermied corpse of a crow. The birds mobbed the researcher and dive-bombed her. Other crows seemed to have been relayed the message that she may be a danger and they joined the attack. Both women had to wear masks to protect their identity as the crows remember the faces of those that threaten them and pass on this memory to the next generation.[35]

As for the taxidermied bird, the crows gathered around it and seemed to both mourn it and to examine it to learn what caused its death. It is no wonder the crow is associated with grief throughout history. The corvid family is always alert to danger and appears to archive all transgressions against its family members.

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When Tom Harrisson went to Harrow school for boys, he found he couldn't blend in. He did though observe the other boys scrupulously, keeping a card index listing each pupil and their activities. He also took up bird watching and eventually produced a ground breaking book on the subject, assembling along the way, an army of over 1300 volunteers to make a census on one bird—the great crested grebe.

Eventually he went to Cambridge where he painted his toenails and wore open sandals to encourage local outrage. He was impatient to explore the world as an

anthropologist, however, and he never completed his degree. Instead he organised various expeditions via Oxford University, and by 1932 he was in Borneo, ostensibly to study birds but quickly seduced by the headhunting Dayak population of Sarawak.

The following year he set out on another expedition to the New Hebrides where he “went native” among the cannibal tribes of Malekule Island to study their culture without distance. In 1937 he published *Savage Civilisation*, promoting his corrective view of anthropology, arguing that the discipline should be dialectical, arguing that white Europe is the “Savage Civilisation.”

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The Tao of Tom Harrisson

Abandon our belief that we are the only civilised ones ...

Are you so superior to these savages? ... if you were put in their environment you would be stupid, ludicrous, not worth hitting on the head. You couldn't make a fire, a house, a comb ... or clean your teeth with sand. What good are you?

Dancing and war are the Malekulan approaches to understanding. So it is necessary to dance and to fight before you may fully understand.

Most of the time I wrote down nothing, being too busy eating, sleeping, drinking kava, living hard and good until I became almost part of the landscape.

What oceans of error we should have been spared if those who wrote about the “savage,” primitive mentality, had done more primitive living.

Much of what I have seen and heard I would not have seen and heard (1) if I had not been there a long time; (2) if I had not also won and rewon the confidence of most of the people (3) if I had not shown a positive

sympathy with their culture and an active participation in a large part of it; (4) If I had been visibly interested in all I saw and heard; (5) If I had displayed any prejudices antipathetic to their culture and race.[36]

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Having published *Savage Civilisation*, Harrison realised what the next step would have to be in his research: he would turn his anthropological skills on Britain itself. Linking up with like-minded researchers—the filmmaker Humphrey Jennings and the poet Charles Madge—Harrison suggested Bolton as the locus for future exploration. A letter in the *New Statesman* on January 30, 1937 declared the founding of an organisation called Mass Observation that would dedicate itself to the investigation of daily life in contemporary Britain.[37] Areas of interest included:

Behaviour of people at war memorials.

Shouts and gestures of motorists.

The aspidistra cult.

Anthropology of football pools.

Bathroom behaviour.

Beards, armpits, eyebrows.

Anti-semitism.

Distribution, diffusion and significance of the dirty joke.

Funerals and undertakers.

Female taboos about eating.

The private lives of midwives.

Recruiting a small army of volunteers, Mass Observation set about their task. Researchers were sent to pubs and football matches where they were to infiltrate groups, discreetly recording behaviour and conversations in their notebooks. Photographic surveys of Bolton were undertaken, interviews were solicited, diaries were harvested periodically, and questionnaires were sent out across England. In one of Mass Observation's most spectacular surveys, volunteers were asked to record their dreams, resulting in an archive of that is being added to even in the present day.

The outbreak of the Second World War brought a new focus to Mass Observations concern with the trivia of Britain. Their sense of the importance of the small daily rituals of life boosted morale as they celebrated the persistence of English culture under bombardment. By 1944, their grasp of what was really happening among the general population was acute enough that they could predict Winston Churchill would not win a post-war election. They were proved correct.[38]

Chapter Five

In a forest the trees work together, helping each other to survive. They are communicating across large distances, linked by fungi in a vast underground system. This network is fuelled by a constant exchange of carbon and nitrogen, moved around like a form of currency in a benign community, the materials being delivered to whichever plant needs them most.

The network that links the trees is known as mycelium, a white thread-like fungus that wraps itself around tree roots, spreads itself across the local area and links the trees to other plants. Besides the trade in carbon, nitrogen and sugars, the mycelium also conveys messages of a sort between the various organisms. Recent experiments with broad beans have demonstrated just how that can work. David Johnson in the University of Aberdeen studied the response of broad beans to the threat of hungry aphids. Bean seedlings linked to other beans under insect attack were able to activate

anti-aphid chemical defences. Beans with no linked mycelia did not raise their defences and were subsequently eaten by the aphids. “Some form of signalling was going on between these plants about herbivory by aphids, and those signals were being transported through mycorrhizal mycelial networks,” says Johnson.[39]

It’s complicated, isn’t it? The trees have been practicing that kind of communication for millennia. The crows are in a constant chatter too. Internet is buzzing and gravitational waves are passing through us right now while the cod swim north towards the Barents Sea. Perhaps we need to ask what is really happening at a certain level of life. Think of a tarot reading or the throw of i-ching stalks. You have to formulate your question before that process begins, focusing the tools of divination on a particular area of your life, nature or the universe. Another nice tip on how to know.

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The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States. That’s the proper title. We tend to call it the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* or *Bardo Thodol* but its real title is actually the more useful one. It’s a guide for those about to die: a compilation of instructions and advice to help navigate through the 49 days between death and rebirth.

Listen carefully, you are now on the path to rebirth. Choose carefully where you are to be reborn. In all the possibilities that are present for you, choose a good human birth in a good place so you can continue on the path to recognise your own mind, even though you are desperate for a home, a dark cave in a forest may well lead to a birth in the animal realm. Even if you are consumed by yearning, the realm of hungry ghosts is a never-ending wilderness where life is ruled by hunger and thirst. Rage, bitterness and anger open all the images of hell: the gods may command all the pleasures of the senses, but their death comes as suddenly as an unpleasant smell borne on a summer breeze. Put your mind at ease, avoid the extremes of pleasure and pain and take birth where you may still recognise the luminous essence of your own mind.[40]

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We have reached a point here where the search for what is really happening no longer concerns the outer world. It's now the inner realm, the weather in our head, that we must learn to navigate.

But, one may ask, when will these interminable stories end? Buddhist monks and zen professors, intelligence agents, quantum particles and knives in legs, crows, lichen, telephones, and Norwegian cod ... Can this really help us to know what is really happening? Is it all actually a question of patience?

In the meantime, though, having moved beyond death itself and the assistance of Tibetan monks, we are in a liminal zone where waiting can be a very productive activity. To demonstrate just how useful it can be to mark time I have supplemented this manual with a bonus exercise!

The assignment is a simple one but Fortune 500 companies and NASA regularly utilise it as they quest to identify the highest calibre recruits in their screening programmes.[41]

It is, literally, a series of questions designed to highlight what is really happening in your mind, a snapshot of your mental state. We all have our ups and downs, depending on whether we had breakfast, or three cups of coffee we may be calm and ordered, or strung out, wired and moody. The following questions will take all of those considerations into account and should provide a more balanced measurement of your emotional state over a sustained period of time.

To demonstrate how to respond to the questions I have provided some brief trial answers, using myself as an example:

Question 1: Describe one of your most maniacally viewed YouTube clips and talk about what in it appeals to you.

This would have to be the opening sequence in *Eat the Document*, an unreleased film charting the course of Bob Dylan's 1966 tour of Britain. Dylan is bent double over a

small island of powder on the lid of a piano, laughing uncontrollably while trying to steady himself to ingest the powder. He looks up and spots a waiter patiently observing the scene. “Have you ever heard of me?” he asks, while a friend opens a small box, removes a tiny rock and slips it up his nostril.[42]

Alternatively, I would choose that well-known clip from *Planet Earth* where Richard Attenborough talks us through the the last moments of a bullet ant which has ingested spores of the parasitic fungi, Cordyceps. The ant, hallucinating under the influence of the spores, climbs to the highest point of a plant, grips the stem tightly with its mandibles and stops moving as the fungus takes control. Attenborough juicily narrates the next moments as “the fruiting body of the Cordyceps erupts from the ant’s head” in high-definition slow motion.[43]

Question 2: Who is your favourite historical figure and why?

Dolly the Sheep remains a key figure for me. Unlike most historical figures (excepting Jeremy Bentham and Vladimir Lenin), Dolly can still be seen in public, displayed in the National Museum in Edinburgh. The first mammal to be cloned from an adult cell, the sheep is a landmark in the development of living organisms. Despite that fact, for many years, Dolly was shown on a revolving platform in an obscure corner overshadowed by a massive steam engine.

I sometimes wondered if there was a deliberate irony in the positioning of the sheep in this way, a quiet curatorial statement. The looming engine reminded me of Timothy Morton’s comments at the beginning of *Hyperobjects* when he explains that his intention is:

... to awaken us from the dream that the world is about to end, because action on Earth (the real Earth) depends on it. The end of the world has already occurred. We can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended. Convenience is not readily associated with historiography, nor indeed with geological time. But in this case, it is uncannily clear. It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the

depositing of carbon in Earth's crust—namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.[44]

If that engine ushered in the end of our world, Dolly attempted to usher in the genesis of another one. There is a neat symmetry in one world ending in the University of Glasgow and another beginning one hour's drive directly east, across southern Scotland, at the University of Edinburgh.

Question 3: Now tell us who is your favourite fictional character and again, what draws you to this character.

Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, without a doubt. The protagonist of James Joyce's novel, *Finnegans Wake*, Earwicker is asleep throughout the entire book and dreams the whole jumbled narrative, oftwhile balbulous, though nearly waking when the smog is lofting, sensing the eversower of the seeds of light in the yonderworld of Ntamplin[45]

No-one quite knows what is really happening.

That appears to be a theme in my choice of fictional characters. A strong alternative choice would be Genly Ai, protagonist of *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. An envoy from Earth to the planet of Gethen, Genly Ai struggles to understand a culture where the population is ambisexual and have no fixed gender identities. Eventually, of course, the novel becomes a powerful love story of sorts.

Question 4: What would you do if you were a magpie?

Pica Pica, the Eurasian magpie, is the only bird able to recognise itself in a mirror. It's a corvid of course. I would work on self-portraits, using simple materials—leaves, pebbles, mixed rubbish scavenged from bins.

Question 5: Outline a scenario for your ideal trip.

I am actually writing this in the airport, running out of time and thin on patience. My foot hurts. I stand waiting in my socks, arms outstretched like a scarecrow, watching my laptop roll by in a grey plastic tray. An officer rubs a security wand over the tarot deck she has discovered in my bag. The hanged man falls from the pack and lands on the floor reversed. There is no standard reading for this eventuality.

I have decided to leave my baggage unattended.

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