

Lauren Lentini

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Written in the style of *Reader's Digest*

### **Psychics and skeptics**

On a 1980 episode of *That's My Line*, a youthful Bob Barker explained a simple experiment to a young man in an elaborate martial arts costume. James Hydrick had previously demonstrated his supposed psychokinetic ability to flip pages in a phone book without touching them. He would receive a reward of \$10,000 if he could do so again with three judges looking on and a control put in place by skeptic James Randi. Randi believed that Hydrick was simply blowing on the pages, so he spread small Styrofoam pellets around the book to detect any air currents. After some time, Hydrick complained that the Styrofoam and the lights created static electricity and caused the pages to become heavier. The judges conceded neither that such an effect was likely nor that it should affect any psychic forces. When asked to comment after Hydrick conceded the challenge, Randi said:

"I have gone through many hundreds of these tests with many hundreds of people who claim to have psychic powers and, quite frankly, it's more or less the same story every time. When a simple, direct, very uncomplicated protocol is used and the control is applied, the psychic forces don't seem to be present, if indeed they are ever present at all."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlfMsZwr8rc>

The Amazing Randi has devoted decades to debunking anyone who claims to have paranormal abilities. He still offers a reward through his foundation for confirmed psychic power, now up to \$1 million. Magicians and mentalists may be harmless entertainment, but “real” homeopaths, faith healers, and mediums can swindle the guileless and grieving out of their life’s savings.

Belief in the otherworldly preys on the frailties of the human condition: fear of death, uncertainty of the future, and desire to ascribe order and meaning to a chaotic world. It’s reassuring to believe that our day-to-day lives aren’t random and our loved ones don’t cease to exist when they die. It’s comforting to think we exert more control over the universe than we do, whether through positive thinking or tempting fate. Like following through when you throw a baseball, it’s not clear how the motion of your arm affects the ball’s trajectory after it’s already left your hand, and yet it does.

Those who have used a Ouija board will insist that they didn’t originate the movement of the planchette. Horoscopes and tarot cards are vague in order to allow the reader to fill in the blanks, but their results often seem uncanny. Everyone sees patterns in the world around them and confluences of events that might be mere coincidence or an omen of things to come. Confirmation bias, “a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one’s preconceptions, leading to statistical errors,”<sup>2</sup> can be a powerful indicator of the supernatural. For some, it may be easier to accept an outside force at work than to believe that our own brains act in ways we don’t realize. And those who seek to capitalize on it, according to The Amazing Randi, trade in cruelty.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/c/confirmation\\_bias.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/articles/c/confirmation_bias.htm)

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Written in the style of *The New Yorker*

### **Meditation on Meditation**

When our eyes are closed and everyone has stopped shifting noisily and the room grows quiet enough to hear the high-pitched whine of the audio equipment, Tara Brach asks us to consider our ultimate intention in coming here today. There's an inherent disconnect in why I'm here. I know from my research that Vipassana meditation is about "staying in the now to the most extreme degree possible,"<sup>1</sup> but my ultimate intention in being there is here, as I'm recalling the experience and writing it. I'm never there; I'm always here.

I tried to be a good Buddhist and focus on the there and then, because without being present how can I say my experience was authentic? But my mind is already here, cataloguing each moment so that I can re-create it for my audience. It is the naming of things that distinguished my mindscape from that of the regular practitioners around me. Instead of letting the thoughts pass away so that I might return to the present moment, I clung to them and labeled them in order to return to them in this space. The straight-backed rattan chairs squeak with the least bit of movement. The black razorback tank top clings to the perfectly tanned skin of the woman sitting in front of me. Tara's voice is deep and earthy as she asks us to visualize a wide-open sky with the curve of a smile. A valley in the heart of West Virginia was where I last saw an endless expanse of blue dotted with puffy cotton clouds. As I tried to superimpose a smile on that image, I realized it was already there.

It started out enough like religious services I'm familiar with: announcements and a guest speaker. The man at the microphone stammered as he asked us to get involved, and he seemed to wish he'd spent a bit more of his past thinking about the future so that he was more

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.vipassanadhura.com/whatis.htm>

prepared for what he was saying at present. As he talked, a woman to my left who was too old to be New Age fiddled noisily with something wrapped in cellophane, reminding me of my grandmother's butterscotch candies and Sunday mornings of my childhood. I recall the Raja-Yoga, which says that "All worship, consciously or unconsciously, leads to this end" of awakening the power and fulfillment that resides within each of us. I imagine my grandmother with her eyes closed, her head bowed and her hands clasped, and there may not be much difference between her experience and mine.

The chanting of "Ohm" may bear some resemblance to the monotone muttering of "Our Father," but it has much more resonance. I joined in, but I was careful not to be the first to start or the last to finish. I wasn't the only one there who wished to blend in, and the staggered choruses at the beginning and end of each syllable made me feel more at one with the hundreds of other people in the sanctuary than if we'd sung a perfectly timed chorus. The first was tentative, the second had much more confidence, and the third sounded as though most of us wished for a fourth. We chanted with our palms together and level with our heart, and everyone else knew to relax them at the end without making a sound. It took me a while to realize we wouldn't be prompted to do so.

My inner copy-editor cringed during the metta practice, knowing I would need to write "lovingkindness" without a space. I thought of my pets when she asked us to visualize a love that was simple and uncomplicated, not quite sure they qualified. However, her discussion of unconditional love afterwards contained multiple references to dogs. I looked for allusions to religion, to anything that resembled a sermon, and I failed to find them. The man who spoke at the beginning mentioned the "dharma," but the Buddha sitting behind Tara on the altar was the only indication of the worshipful nature of the service. She didn't quote the Buddha; she quoted Woody Allen, among others. She talked about space suits, not sacraments. She asked us to reflect, not pray.

Everyone filed out silently; the only voice I heard was the dharma man's, and he sounded much more comfortable without a microphone. I felt the ground under my feet and the wind on my face, and halfway through the parking lot I finally heard people beginning to converse as normal.

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Written in the style of *U.S. News and World Report*

### **Buffalo and Blowhards**

Ted Turner is the root of all evil. The eccentric media mogul was a household name when I was growing up in Atlanta, long before the Braves baseball stadium bore his moniker and long before the Braves were a team worth mentioning. But Turner saw their worth, and he purchased the team so he could broadcast all their games on his TBS television station. He turned TBS into the first super-station, broadcasting content nationwide via satellite, and his next media venture would change the world as we know it: 24-hour news.

The monster he created has two heads, the first of which is “infotainment.” Coined in the 80’s as CNN was cutting its teeth, the portmanteau describes “a television program that presents information (as news) in a manner intended to be entertaining.”<sup>1</sup> Cable news is driven by advertising revenue, which encourages networks to keep viewers from changing the channel. CNN and the cable news networks that followed tore down the historical walls between the news division and the entertainment division, the public services and the money-makers. Soft news and human interest stories now drown out more important but less marketable issues in the continual ratings battle.

Fierce competition and sensational headlines are far from new. The term “yellow journalism” originated in the 1890s, referring to the contest between the *New York Journal* and the *New York World* newspapers.<sup>2</sup> William Randolph Hearst’s supposed

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/infotainment>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pbs.org/crucible/frames/\\_journalism.html](http://www.pbs.org/crucible/frames/_journalism.html)

quote about the Spanish American War—“You furnish the pictures. I’ll furnish the war.”—sounds like something you might hear in a cable newsroom today. But the damage newspapers caused to the American discourse pales in comparison to the influence of television media on a nonstop loop.

The second head of Ted Turner’s beast is the 24-hour news cycle. According to reporter John Kiesewetter in 2000:

“CNN has changed news. Before CNN, events were reported in two cycles, for morning and evening newspapers and newscasts. Now news knows no cycle. When a plane has crashed, or shots are fired in school, we expect to see it immediately on all-news channels. We don’t depend on the Big Three broadcast networks.”<sup>3</sup>

A news cycle so relentless allows precious little time for reflection and reasoned discourse. Accuracy and journalistic standards take a back seat to breaking news and keeping stories fresh. Embedded investigative reporting doesn’t have nearly the profit margin of a handful of pundits around a table.

The media’s dual role in politics is to allow politicians to communicate with the public while allowing the public to hold politicians accountable. In the toxic environment of 24-hour news and infotainment, these purposes become perverted. Fox News structures its narrative so that it fulfills the first objective for Republicans and the second for Democrats, and to a certain extent MSNBC does the opposite. Scandals receive higher ratings than policy debates, and pundits who yell loudest receive the last word. When Turner predicted CNN would be “the greatest achievement in the history of journalism,”<sup>4</sup> did he also foresee its impact on democracy?

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2000/05/28/loc\\_kiesewetter.html](http://www.enquirer.com/editions/2000/05/28/loc_kiesewetter.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/cnn>