



Secrets Of Pronoia

HOW THE WORLD IS CONSPIRING TO SHOWER YOU WITH BLESSINGS

ROB BREZSNY

Back in the 1970s, before he created his widely syndicated column Free Will Astrology, Rob Brezsný was just another skinny young guy with shoulder-length hair living in the college town of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where The Sun is published. (He even wrote for The Sun back then.) But Brezsný had a desire to become more than just “a cross between a village idiot and a marginally entertaining monstrosity,” he says. Inspired by a girlfriend and some graffiti he saw in a Roy Rogers bathroom, he took off for California.

While down and out in Santa Cruz, Brezsný spotted a help-wanted ad for an astrology columnist in the weekly Good Times. A student of astrology, he had always considered newspaper horoscopes “an abomination,” dispensing dull predictions and inane advice. If he was going to write one — for the princely sum of fifteen dollars a week — it would have to be different. His horoscopes would be “poetry in disguise,” love letters to his readers, antennae picking up signals from “the other side of the veil.”

Wanting to dispel the notion that the stars alone determine our fates, Brezsný named his column Free Will Astrology. It is now the most widely syndicated feature in the nation’s free weeklies, read and enjoyed by believers and nonbelievers alike. (Free Will Astrology can be read free of charge at www.free-willastrology.com.)

In 2001 Brezsný founded the Beauty and Truth Laboratory, which he describes as “a think tank of sorts,” to balance what he sees as the unrelenting negativity in the news and entertainment media. The Beauty and Truth Laboratory, which may or may not have offices in Brezsný’s garage, is dedicated

to exploring the possibilities of “pronoia.” Coined by Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow, pronoia is the opposite of paranoia. A “pronoiac” is someone who believes that the world is conspiring to shower him or her with blessings.

Brezsný’s latest book, Pronoia Is the Antidote for Paranoia (Frog, Ltd.), is a combination of humor, philosophy, self-help, and alternative news, designed to help the reader “surrender to the conspiracy.” It is excerpted here with permission of the author. © 2005 by Rob Brezsný.

— Ed.

GLORY IN THE HIGHEST

Thousands of things go right for you every day, beginning the moment you wake up. Through some magic you don’t fully understand, you’re still breathing and your heart is beating, even though you’ve been unconscious for many hours. The air is a mix of gases that’s just right for your body’s needs, as it was before you fell asleep.

You can see! Light of many colors floods into your eyes, registered by nerves that took God or evolution or some other process millions of years to perfect. The gift of these vivid hues comes to you courtesy of an unimaginably immense globe of fire, the sun, which continually detonates nuclear reactions in order to convert its body into light and heat and energy for your personal use.

On this day, like almost every other, you have awoken

inside a temperature-controlled shelter. You have a home! Your bed and pillow are soft, and you're covered by comfortable blankets. The electricity is turned on, as usual. Somehow, in ways you're barely aware of, a massive power plant at an unknown distance from your home is transforming fuel into currents of electricity that reach you through mostly hidden conduits in the exact amounts you need, and all you have to do to control the flow is flick small switches with your fingers.

You can walk! Your legs work wonderfully well. Your heart circulates your blood all the way down to replenish the energy of the muscles in your feet and calves and thighs, and when the blood is depleted, it finds its way back to your heart to be refreshed. This blessing recurs over and over again without stopping, every minute of your life.

Your home is perhaps not a million-dollar showplace, but it's sturdy and gigantic compared to the typical domicile in every culture that has preceded you. The floors aren't crumbling, and the walls and ceilings are holding up well, too. Doors open and close without trouble, and so do the windows. What skillful geniuses built this sanctuary for you? How and where did they learn their craft?

In your bathroom, the toilet is functioning perfectly, as are several other convenient devices. You have at your disposal soaps, creams, razors, clippers, tooth-cleaning accessories — a host of products that enhance your hygiene and appearance. You trust that unidentified scientists somewhere have tested them to be sure they're safe for you to use.

Amazingly, the water you need so much of comes out of your faucets in an even flow, at the volume you want, and either cold or hot as you desire. It's pure and clean; you're confident no parasites are lurking in it. Someone somewhere is making sure these boons will continue to arrive for you without interruption for as long as you require them.

In your closet are many clothes you like to wear. Who gathered the materials to make the fabrics they're made of? Who imbued them with colors, and how did they do it? Who sewed them for you?

In your kitchen, appetizing food in secure packaging is waiting for you. Many people you've never met worked hard to grow it, process it, and get it to the store where you bought it. The bounty of tasty nourishment you have to choose from is unprecedented in the history of the world.

Your many appliances are working flawlessly. Despite the fact that they run on electricity, which could kill you instantly if you touched it directly, you feel no fear. Why? Your faith in the people who invented, designed, and produced these machines is impressive.

It's as if there were a benevolent conspiracy of unknown people who are tirelessly creating hundreds of useful things you like and need.

There's more. By some improbable series of coincidences

or long-term divine plan, language has come into existence. Millions of people have collaborated for many centuries to cultivate a system for communication that you understand well. Speaking and reading give you great pleasure and a tremendous sense of power.

Do you want to go someplace that's at a distance? You can choose from a number of ways to get there. Whatever mode of transportation you pick — car, plane, bus, train, subway, ship, helicopter, or bike — you have confidence that it will work efficiently. Multitudes of people who are now dead devoted themselves to perfecting these machines. Multitudes who are still alive devote themselves to ensuring that these benefits keep serving you.

Let's say it's now 9:30 A.M. You've been awake for two hours, and a hundred things have already gone right for you. If three of those hundred things had not gone right — your toaster was broken, the hot water wasn't hot enough, there was a stain on the pants you wanted to wear — you might feel that the universe was against you, that your luck was bad, that nothing was going right. And yet the vast majority of things still would be working with breathtaking efficiency and consistency. You would clearly be deluded to imagine that life is primarily an ordeal.

THE EXPERIMENT

DEFINITION: Pronoia is the antidote for paranoia. It's the understanding that the universe is fundamentally friendly. It's a means of training your senses and intellect so that you're able to perceive the fact that life always gives you exactly what you need, exactly when you need it.

HYPOTHESES: Evil is boring. Cynicism is idiotic. Fear is a bad habit. Despair is lazy. Joy is fascinating. Love is an act of heroic genius. Pleasure is our birthright.

PROCEDURE: Act as if the universe is a prodigious miracle created for your amusement and illumination. Assume that secret helpers are working behind the scenes to assist you in turning into the gorgeous masterpiece you were born to be. Join the conspiracy to shower all of creation with blessings.

DISCLAIMER: This material may be too intense and controversial for some readers. It contains graphic scenes of peace, love, joy, passion, reverence, splendor, and understanding. You should therefore proceed with caution if you are a jaded hipster who is suspicious of feeling healthy and happy. Ask yourself: "Am I ready to stop equating cynicism with insight? Do I dare take the risk that exposing myself to uplifting entertainment might dull my intelligence?" If you doubt your ability to handle relaxing breakthroughs, you should stop reading now.

EVIL IS BORING

When an old tree in the rain forest dies and topples over, it takes a long time to decompose. As it does, it becomes host to new saplings that use the decaying log for nourishment.

Picture yourself sitting in the forest gazing upon this scene. How would you describe it? Would you dwell on the putrefaction of the fallen tree while ignoring the fresh life sprouting out of it? If you did, you'd be imitating the perspective of many modern storytellers, especially the journalists and novelists and filmmakers and producers of TV dramas. They devoutly believe that tales of affliction and mayhem and corruption and tragedy are inherently more interesting than tales of triumph and liberation and pleasure and ingenuity. Using the machinery of the media and entertainment industries, they relentlessly propagate this dogma. It's not sufficiently profound or well-thought-out to be called "nihilism." "Pop nihilism" is a more accurate term. The mass audience is the victim of this inane ugliness, brainwashed by a multi-billion-dollar propaganda machine that makes the Nazis' Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda look like a child's backyard puppet show.

At the Beauty and Truth Laboratory, we believe that stories about the rot are not inherently more captivating than stories about the splendor. On the contrary, given how predictable and omnipresent the former have become, they are actually quite dull. Obsessing on evil is boring. Rousing fear is a hackneyed shtick. Wallowing in despair is a bad habit. Indulging in cynicism is akin to committing a copycat crime.

How did it come to be that the news is reported solely by journalists? There are so many other kinds of events besides the narrow band favored by that highly specialized brand of storytellers. Indeed, there are many phenomena that literally cannot be perceived by journalists. Their training, their temperament, and their ambitions make vast areas of human experience invisible to them.

"Ninety-six percent of the cosmos puzzles astronomers," read a headline on CNN's website: proof that at least some of our culture's equivalent of high priests — the scientists — are humble enough to acknowledge that the universe is made up mostly of stuff they can't even detect, let alone study.

If only the journalists were equally modest. Since they're not, we'll say it: The majority of everything that happens on this planet escapes their notice.

FEAR OF BEAUTY

The Italian city of Florence harbors the richest trove of art treasures in the world. Its many museums are hot spots for outbreaks of a rare psychological disorder. Foreign tourists sometimes experience breakdowns while standing in the presence of the tremendous beauty, and are rushed to the psychiatric ward of Florence's Santa Maria Nuova Hospital.

"Many visitors panic before a Raphael painting," reports

Reuters. "Others collapse at the feet of Michelangelo's statue of David."

Psychiatrists have named this pathology the Stendahl Syndrome, after the French novelist who wrote about his emotional breakdown during a visit to the city's art collection in 1817.

As you embark on your explorations of pronoia, you should protect yourself against this risk. Proceed cautiously as you expose yourself to the splendor that has been invisible or unavailable to you all these years.

BURN, BABY, BURN

Try this meditation: Imagine that you are both the wood and the fire that consumes the wood. When you focus your awareness on the part of you that is the wood, you hurt; it's painful to feel your sense of solidity disintegrating. But as you shift your attention to the part of you that is the fire, you exult in the wild joy of liberation and power.

It may be tempting to visualize yourself more as the fire than as the wood. But if you'd like to understand pronoia in its fullness, you've got to be both wood and fire simultaneously.

YOUR AWAKENING TREE

Many people alive today think that our civilization is in a dark age and on the verge of collapse. In her book *For the Time Being*, Annie Dillard points out that such beliefs have been common throughout history. Around 300 B.C. Hindus were convinced they lived in a "degenerate and unfortunate time" known as the Kali Yuga — the lowest point in the great cosmic cycle. In 426 A.D. the Christian writer Augustine mourned that the world was in its last days. In the early 1800s the renowned Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman grieved for the world's "widespread atheism and immorality."

Dillard concludes, "It is a weakening and discoloring idea that rustic people knew God personally once upon a time but that it is too late for us. There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less. There is no whit less enlightenment under the tree on your street than there was under the Buddha's bo tree."

Go sit under that tree. The time for your awakening is at hand.

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