

Superstitions

I am a superstitious person. I am also a rational person. I'm a teacher. I believe science. I know about faulty causality. I teach about it. I know that when one thing happens, it doesn't automatically mean this other, unrelated event will happen (or not) as a result.

But that doesn't stop me from waving when I drive by the high school where I teach in hopes that something good will happen as a result of my waving.

I've been thinking a lot about these superstitions, mainly because the year 2020 was so dreadful and my brain keeps trying to make sense of all the awful things that have happened in the past 12 months: the pandemic, political strife and riots, racial injustice, economic downturn, remote teaching. Oh, the remote teaching!

I had a conversation recently with my sister – not in-person, due to Covid-19 – about superstitions. I mentioned my weird superstition about waving at my school road when I drive by, “but that's it. I don't think I have any others,” I said. “Well, I do knock on wood, but that's it.”

“Sofia and I talk to our house!” She exclaimed, describing her ritual with her daughter whenever they leave their house. “We say, ‘bye, house!’ whenever we leave.”

“I talk to my house, too,” I said. “I tell it all the time that I love it.” I thought about this more, and realized, as a new homeowner, it's probably in hopes that it will prevent something bad from happening to my house.

“The number 85 is important to me, too,” I said.

“Why?” She asked.

“It's my house number,” I said. “No one can ever find my house, so I've littered the place with 85's. I have them pasted at both doors, stickers all over my mailbox, and a metal post at the

end of the driveway with the number 85,” I explained. I bought a giant green sign with the number on it and I can’t get it to stay attached to its post. It ends up dangling there for a while and then eventually falls to the ground. The number seems significant, as though if I can get it to stay and get people to find the house that way, then I officially own the house and it becomes real, even though I *do* officially own the house and it *is* real.

To this day, my mail still gets lost, and the pizza delivery person sometimes drives by slowly, somehow mystified that there is a number 85 on this road.

Ever since that conversation, my sister and I text each other whenever another superstition comes to mind. One that she said was especially important was not to say something aloud if you didn’t want it to happen. We’ve developed these habits that we often don’t even notice, thinking that we can somehow control the outcome of a situation with a bizarre ritual.

The waving at the school began shortly after I started teaching there, over two and a half years ago. I remember waving and exclaiming excitedly, “hi, school!” as I drove by on a weekend to run errands. And then I started doing it every time. I rationalized it, telling myself that I associate the school road with good things – a stable job, a grown-up lifestyle. I didn’t give it the name “superstition” because I felt crazy when I thought about it. But I knew it was. And it is. I’ve since admitted to the ritual, especially after doing it with my mom in the car. She’s now started to do it, too, hopefully just out of solidarity and not out of her own superstitious reasoning.

And what’s worse – I’ve started waving at my old apartment in the neighboring town as I drive by. It started as a pretense of “honoring my past” and the place where I lived when I decided to change careers and go to graduate school to earn a teaching degree. But I quickly

realized that it was just one more superstition to add to my collection. And it's stuck. Another exhibit to showcase in my museum of rituals.

I talked with my dad on the phone a while ago. He came over earlier that day (masked up) to fix a few house problems – a dead outlet and light switch, a leaky faucet, etc. – but he was unable to solve any of the problems. He called when he got home to console me and keep me from thinking that my house was doomed to burn down due to the faulty outlet. He told me how fortunate I was to have such minor house problems, and I found myself bending down to knock on the hardwood floor as he said it, sure that if I didn't, I would find a flood in my basement the next morning.

My family is relatively superstitious – my gram and uncle do the salt over the shoulder thing. I blame it on the Red Sox (baseball in general) in which batters need to go through a ritual of gestures and motions before committing to swinging the bat. We Red Sox fans are some of the most superstitious sports fans out there, believing strongly that the “Curse of the Bambino” was the cause of our 86-year losing streak at the World Series. For many years, my gram couldn't watch the games, thinking that her participation somehow caused the team to lose. I remember watching the end of the curse in 2004, watching the game (with my gram) late into the night at my grandparents' house and then listening to the finale on AM radio on the ride home. It was a glorious night. And I think superstitions have been glued into my psyche ever since.

That was the week of Friday the 13th – literally the last weekday before life shut down and our students were sent to remote learning (cringe), and I found myself doing all sorts of rituals to prevent bad luck (so much for that). I was teaching in our high school's STEAM program, and one of my co-teachers and I were leading a morning icebreaker.

“Today is Friday the 13th,” I started. “What superstitions do you have, if any?” I asked. We circled up, and students spoke up about their various superstitions. Many of them said they didn’t have any superstitions at all, which made me wonder if it has something to do with age. My co-teacher (a scientist, mind you) described his superstition, and I talked about my superstition that the more we say “snow day” before a big storm, the less likely it is that school will be canceled. Just a point of interest – our district no longer has “snow days” because due to Covid-19, we just go “remote” for inclement weather. So, guess I was right; all the times we whispered “snow day” are coming back to bite us in the ass.

I guess it all comes down to our coping mechanisms and how we handle crisis. I’ve discovered through all the tribulations of the previous year that I handle crisis through rituals. I know they don’t mean anything, but somehow they make me feel in control when I know I’m absolutely not.

And when I drive by my high school and wave, I think about that wave and how nothing will happen as a result of it. I also think about the good things that I secretly hope will happen because of it. And I can point to all the good things that have happened since I started waving at that school road – paying off some debt, buying a house, staying healthy, feeling (mostly) secure in my career, the birth of an amazing second niece. I know, rationally, that none of those things came as the result of my waving, but my brain tells me that they did, demanding some sort of control over this chaotic world, in the face of a pandemic and “hybrid teaching.” In the face of a terrifying political divide and a fragile democracy. And so I continue to wave, telling myself it is for any reason other than my superstitious, magical thinking, but knowing all along that I have no control over what happens in mine or anyone’s life.