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Impersonating Jed McKenna

By Jed McKenna

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"No man is a prophet in his own country."

That line keeps running through my mind as I sit over lunch with my sister who I haven't seen in several years. These days I'm the enlightened guy, but to her I'm just the bratty kid who couldn't make eye contact when she wore a bikini.

It's summer '01 and we're having lunch in lower Manhattan. She read a preview copy of *Damnedest* and has had a few months to digest it. It was very nice of her to read it because it's really not her kind of thing. She's a good citizen; a successful executive, wife, mother, Republican, tennis nut, Christian-ish, and all-round productive member of society. (She once told me she was raising her children to be productive members of society and I winced so hard I almost chipped a tooth.) She's a wonderful person, but not a member of the demographic the book speaks to.

There's a plate of chilled pasta in front of me and a salad in front of her. We're both drinking iced tea. She's runs the creative side of a medium-sized ad agency and, I have no doubt, she's very good at it. She's taking time out of a busy schedule to have lunch with me. After this, I'm going to the park to lay in the grass and watch people play with their dogs.

Visiting your sister and having lunch shouldn't be a confusing ordeal, but it is. Is she really my sister? What does that mean? We share some history and acquaintances, such as childhood and parents. Are my parents really my parents? Genetically they are related to my body, but the person who lived my childhood is no longer here. The past I share with this person is about as real and important to me as if I'd read it in a brochure.

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The problem is that these people, my family, are all related to my shell, and I'm not. They're looking at the outer Jed McKenna and assuming an inner Jed McKenna. I'm inside Jed McKenna looking out and I can't really remember what he's supposed to do or say. It's all fakery. I'm an actor playing a role with for which I feel no connection and have no motivation. There cannot be anything genuine in my dealings with people who are dealing with my outer garment. (The whole thing is further entangled by the fact that there's no "I" inhabiting my shell, just a fading echo, but let's not go down that road just now.)

Actually, it's not really confusing. I possess not the least shred of doubt about who and what I am. The tricky thing is that who and what I am is not related to this pretty, professional, salad-eating woman across from me. By coming to this lunch I have inserted myself into a situation where I do not belong. I am an imposter. I have some residual fondness for my sister and if she died I'd be saddened to think that she was no longer in the world, but the simple fact is that our former relationship no longer exists.

Okay, so why am I telling you this?

Because that's what I do. I try to hold this enlightenment thing up for display and this seems like an interesting aspect of the whole deal. How do you relate to the people who were most important to you before awakening from the dream of the segregated self?

She asks why I'm in town.

"My astrologers told me it was a good time to get away and not try to accomplish anything. They said that ketu and rahu wouldn't be letting me get anything done for awhile anyway..."

I look up and see that she has stopped chewing in mid-mouthful and is staring at me incredulously.

"What?"

"My astrologers..."

"You're not serious. You have astrologers?"

Oh yeah. I guess that sounds weird. I was vaguely aware that I was trying to be funny by starting a sentence with "My astrologers told me..." but what's a little amusing to me is other-worldly to her. Might as well have fun with it.

"I have dozens of astrologers. I can't swing a dead cat without hitting someone who's doing my chart or explaining how my future will unfold; advising me on pretty much everything."

Her expression doesn't change. "You have astrologers?"

"Lots. Gotta beat 'em off with a stick."

"And they tell you... They tell you what the future holds? What you should do? When you should do it?"

What you should avoid? Is that what we're talking about?"

"I suppose."

She resumes chewing but the wide-eyed gaze remains. There's a chasm in this conversation across which there's no point trying to communicate. She knows I'm into some serious weirdness, but not how much or what kind. I don't really have astrologers, of course, but in those days it did seem like I was surrounded by students of Eastern and Western astrology who were always very eager to share their readings.

"What do you do with all that information?"

"Me? Nothing. I mean, I don't ask for it. It's not like I wake up and summon the court astrologers to plan my day."

"Sounds like you do."

"I was speaking lightly."

I'm trying to skip playfully along the surface of this conversation. I don't want to sink down into the kind of answer I'd give a serious student. The truth is that I don't possess any mechanism that would allow me to be curious or concerned about the future, but saying that doesn't make for breezy conversation.

"Jesus," she says, shaking her head. "My little brother has his own astrologers."

"Well, they're not really mine. They're just in attendance, so to speak."

I'm used to conversing with people who aren't awake and aren't happy about it. Everything else is chit-chat; talking for the sake of talking, reinforcing the illusion of self. I'm not against it, I just don't care to participate in it. My fault.

"So, you obviously have a great deal of influence over your students," she says as she sips her iced tea. I mull her statement over and decide that I don't have a response. I take another bite of pasta, wishing I'd ordered something with meat.

"I mean," she says, "they obviously hold you in very high regard. That's quite a responsibility."

She thinks, quite understandably, that she's my big sister and we're having a reunion; a nice little catch-up lunch. She's been thrown a curve with this little-brother/spiritual-master thing and she's trying to handle it. Does she think I'm a fraud? Does she think I'm running a game? Does she think that underneath it all I'm still really her little brother? I don't know and I don't much care. The fact that she's read *Damnedest* doesn't mean that she and I can speak; it means she should know we can't. She doesn't seem to be clear on that. Maybe she thinks the enlightenment thing is just my day job and that I can step out of that role to be with someone who knows the real me.

"I don't know. I suppose it's a responsibility."

"You don't know? Obviously these people are strongly influenced by you. You don't think that's a big responsibility?"

I shrug. The first thing she said to me when we got together was that I wasn't dressed well enough for the restaurant. Such a statement is so alien to me that I could only shrug. Now it seems that every statement she makes is so alien to me that I can only shrug.

In accepting this lunch engagement, my hope was that I could slip back into my old persona enough to manage a civil meal. That was too hopeful. I can no longer impersonate myself and I am simply unable to formulate a reply to anything she has to say; I've forgotten my lines. We don't share a common tongue and there's no way I can make her see that. From her point of view she's saying perfectly normal, conversational things.

"Yes, I suppose it's a big responsibility," I say, trying to say something that sounds like I'm saying something.

She lowers her voice. "You hear a lot about people in your position taking advantage of that responsibility for... unsavory purposes. I hope you would never do something like that."

I could simply tell her what the preview copy of the book was meant to tell her, that we are no longer related because what I am now doesn't relate. But why say it? To satisfy myself? It wouldn't. To inform

her? It wouldn't.

"You mean sex stuff? That sort of thing?"

"Whatever. Power corrupts. I just hope you'll be careful."

Sweet. Big sister giving little brother some advice on how to shoulder the burden of power. Being in advertising, perhaps she thinks we have something in common; wielding the power to influence people's thoughts. Maybe she thinks we're in the same business, I don't know.

I set down my fork and sit back. "Well, when I walk through the house, I always have someone proceed me with a boom-box playing Darth Vader theme music to lend a weighty and ominous air to my approach. And I certainly don't dress like this. I have, you know, the robes, the beads, and I always carry fresh flowers. Just trappings, all very tiresome, really, but the minions expect it. There was a little resistance at first to having them call me Shri Shri Shri Shri Jed, but they got the hang of it. And remembering to speak in the first person plural there and singular here can take a little getting used to, but we are, I mean, uh, I am, happy to make the effort. Noblesse oblige and all."

She stares at me for a moment, then bursts into laughter. I guess some ice has broken because we are able to continue in a lighter and friendlier manner, and eventually say goodbye with genuine fondness.

I doubt I'll ever see her again, but I'm happy knowing she's still in the world.

–Jed McKenna

::: About the Author "Jed McKenna is an American original." –Lama Surya Das Jed McKenna is the author of "Spiritual Enlightenment: The Damnedest Thing" and "Spiritually Incorrect Enlightenment", published by Wisefool Press. Coming in 2005: "Spirituality X" and "Jed McKenna's Notebook". Visit WisefoolPress.com to learn more.

The Bottom Line

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Whadda ya know?

Seriously. With absolute certainty, what do you know?

Put aside all opinions, beliefs and theories for a moment and address this one straight question: What do you know for sure? Or, as Thoreau put it:

"Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe... through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say, This is, and no mistake; and then begin..."

In other words, let's cut the crap and figure out what's real. The cogito does exactly that, and it's very simple. The question is: What do you know?

The answer is: I Am.

All other so-called facts are really non-facts and belong in the category of consensual reality and relative truth, i.e., unreal reality and untrue truth.

::: Cogito Ergo Sum

Cogito ergo sum is the equation that proves the fact. But first, before we go on, let's ask what else we know. What else can be said for certain?

Nothing. We don't know anything else. And that's the real point of the cogito. The importance of I Am

isn't that it's a fact, but that it's the only fact.

I Am is the only thing anyone has ever known or will ever know. Everything else, all religion and philosophy, is nothing more than dream interpretation. There is no other fact than I Am. The cogito is the seed of the thought that destroys the universe. Beyond the cogito, nothing is known. Beyond the cogito, nothing can be known. Except I Am, no one knows anything. No man or god can claim to know more. No God or array of gods can exist or be imagined that know more than this one thing: I Am.

We can't avoid letting this topic drift briefly into the Christian realm. When Moses asked God His name, God answered, "I am that I am." The name God gives for Himself is I Am.

Note that I Am is unconjugatable. It allows of no variation. God doesn't say, "My name is I Am, but you can call me You Are, or He Is." The cogito, the I Am equation, does not extend beyond one's own subjective knowing. I can say I Am and know it as truth, but I can't say you are, he is, she is, we are, they are, it is, etc. I know I exist and nothing else. Understood thusly, I Am, aka God, truly is the Alpha and the Omega; the entirety of being, of knowledge, of you.

::: The Line Is Drawn

The cogito is the line between fantasy and reality. On one side of the cogito is a universe of beliefs and ideas and theories. To cross the line is to leave all that behind. No theory, concept, belief, opinion or debate can have any possible basis in reality once the ramifications of the cogito have fully saturated the mind. No dialogue can take place across that line because nothing that makes sense on either side makes sense on the other.

We all think we know what the cogito means; this is an invitation to challenge that assumption. If professors of philosophy truly understood it, they wouldn't be professors of philosophy. Alfred North Whitehead said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, but all philosophy, Plato included, is rendered obsolete and irrelevant by Descartes. Nothing but the subjective I Am is true, so what's the point of prattling on?

The cogito isn't a mere thought or an idea, it is an ego-eating virus that, properly incubated and nurtured, will eventually devour all illusion. Once we know the cogito, we can begin systematically unknowing everything we thought we knew, and unraveling the self we aren't.

::: Life is but a Dream

There is no such thing as objective reality. Two cannot be proven. Nothing can be shown to exist. Time and space, love and hate, good and evil, cause and effect, are all just ideas. Anyone who says they know anything is really saying they don't know the only thing. The greatest religious and philosophical thoughts and ideas in the history of man contain no more truth than the bleating of sheep. The greatest books are no more authoritative than the greatest luncheon meats.

No one knows anything.

::: Disprove it for Yourself

Anyone wishing to deny these statements about the meaning of the cogito need merely prove that something, anything, is true. By all means, give it a try, dash your head upon it, but it can't be done. Cogito ergo sum, however, isn't the endpoint of inquiry, it's the starting point; it's a tool that helps us see, without intermediaries, exactly what is true and what isn't.

How great is that?

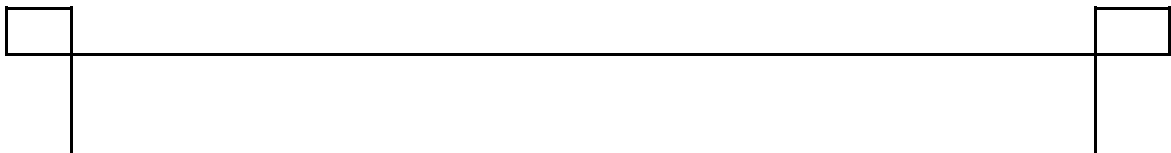
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