

Mind games that play havoc

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was a few days before I was due to go away and I was busy lining up all the bits and pieces that I'd need for traipsing around Bali. Very important was having the right shoes, a pair that would be absorbent in the humidity. There's nothing more annoying than having sweaty feet that slip on the base, making walking hugely difficult. The shoes needed to be orthopedically designed for support over distances. They needed to be airy and open.

I had just the pair -- bought a couple of years earlier for travelling around India. They'd served me well. They cost the earth, but had endured the test of time -- getting wet, getting dragged about. They had a corky sort of sole, nice adjustable straps, looked great. Don't get me started because for me a good pair of shoes is like a good life partner.

But where were they? I opened every cupboard. No luck. Every plastic bag. No brown sandals. I walked around the house, going into each room, peering under each chair and lounge suite, under the beds. Nowhere. I went outside, looked on the veranda. No luck. Went back outside twice and searched through the piles of shoes on the veranda, where they were most likely to be.

Not there.

I began to panic, tracing back my steps. Could I have left them at a friend's? I rang around, went visiting, searched in their cars, searched my own car. These were hard shoes to replace as I had bought them interstate.

I kept looking, accusing my daughter, the cleaner, my husband of shoe theft. Everyone was to blame for playing havoc with my delicate pre-travel nerves.

In the end, I made a pilgrimage to some distant shoeshop. No, they didn't have shoes like that, so I settled for another style that were a cheap imitation. And I traversed the streets of Bali slipping and sliding and wondering about my favourite, super-absorbent brown shoes.

When I got home from my holiday, I returned to daily routine, which included watering the pot plants on the veranda. Standing with the hose, looking at my shoe pile, I suddenly saw my brown sandals. I ran over and grabbed them, hugging them, as one does a familiar friend. But where had they been?

I immediately asked my husband. "Oh, those shoes. I didn't know they were the ones you meant. They've been sitting there all along." I went to my daughter. "Yeah mum, they were always there. I thought you meant another pair." It seems I had been looking right at them the whole time. How is it possible that they didn't register?

There is a card trick performed in new-age circles to prove an important life lesson. The dealer flashes a host of cards at viewers. There's always a card that no one records. It's the nine-of-hearts with the hearts painted black instead of red. The eye literally doesn't see the card because of the contradiction. As illusionists and con-artists know: we don't see what we are not expecting to see.

Otherwise put, we see only what we want to see, or we believe to be true, as a recent ABC program on the brain concluded. We become acclimatised to seeing something a certain way, and when a particular room in the house is recreated off centre, or something peculiar is done to alter perception in some way, our eye may pick up the difference but our brain literally doesn't register it as reality.

Projecting beliefs on to an object can have the same effect. If we believe we can't catch a ball, we don't see it clearly as it comes towards us and we drop it more often than not.

In personal growth workshops they throw the ball and distract participants with arbitrary questions, noting that there is a much higher catch rate when fears, needs and beliefs aren't called into play.

"My shoes are lost," I would have been fretting, as I looked right at them. I simply had reached a point where I believed they were not there and therefore my brain deceived my eye. In this spooky world of mind over matter many of us have stared at car keys and sunglasses as we've desperately searched the room for them. Many of us have missed red lights, or street names, as we've been trapped in belief.

Which makes me wonder what else our perception distorts. Sitting in a restaurant on the weekend I overheard a husband accusing his wife: "You always ..." and "You never ..." and I wondered if his belief actually led to her manifesting in a certain way. What happens when we see things as we expect them to be, rather than as they are? What if new, powerful behaviours aren't registered because we are blinded by habit and belief?

Since the shoe incident -- simple and shallow as it was -- my confidence has been rocked. If we can stare at something and not see the empirical truth, then what else in life, love and relationships are we missing? And, more importantly, at what cost?

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