A DOWSING STORY - Peter Harper

It occurred many years ago when I was living in a small village outside a university town where I was a student. In the village there was a well-known legend of "buried treasure" associated with a particular field, and over the years various people had taken it seriously enough to try and find it, using such methods as aerial photography, but without success. At that time metal detectors were not widely available. While I was living there, however, a local dowser became interested and offered his services.

As a graduate student in experimental psychology this naturally piqued my interest. I started thinking about how to measure the process, and if possible devise clear statistical tests of the nature and limits of the dowser's powers.

The first surprising thing that happened was that, having quartered the supposed "correct" field, the dowser drew a blank. He was not, evidently, running on suggestion and cues from local lore. However, acting on a hunch, he proceeded to dowse in another field nearby and identified a positive find: objects under the ground which included precious metals.

The next surprising thing was that he gave an extremely detailed description of the find, its size, and its exact position and depth. He used L-shaped rods of various metals to detect those same metals in the ground, and took measurements by traversing the target area and marking the ground with surveying poles. He was professionally a surveyor, and expressed himself in a matter-of-fact fashion, with a lot of numbers.

To me, observing, it was surprising because I had never witnessed this kind of numerical dowsing. It seemed as exact, repeatable and quantitative as if he had been using a metal detector. More significantly it seemed to rule out any charlatanry because he had committed himself so exactly, leaving no possibility of a face-saving escape should the "find" prove illusory. It is far more common for hoaxers or those unsure of their powers to prepare the ground for failure with a smokescreen of generalities. Still, as a would-be psychologist I had the prospect of a fascinating outcome whichever way it went: either the "treasure" would be found, vindicating an extraordinary power; or it would not and I would witness a classic spectacle of cognitive dissonance!

After the identification of the site, it was decided to dig. A day was fixed and turned into a great village event, twenty or thirty people, children, dogs - carnival atmosphere. The predicted depth was 15 feet, so the necessary hole was quite a large one and it took most of the day. During this period I was able to talk at length to the dowser, who from time to time would pace about checking his readings to make sure we were on target.

He was very forthcoming about his methods, particularly the technique of estimating depth, which involved his own theory of refraction of linear "rays". Evidently he used dowsing routinely in his work, but also for finding lost objects and to entertain friends at social gatherings. I asked if he would be willing to come into the lab at the university and submit himself to testing under controlled conditions, half expecting him to demur on the grounds that his methods only worked in the field. But no, he was very willing, eager even, to cooperate. He was obviously completely confident in his abilities.

During the digging of the hole, there was not a breath of "preparing the ground for failure" or talk of any other hypothesis. He was utterly certain that the "treasure" was at the predicted location.

As we got to 14 feet I was watching him like a hawk! At 15 feet still nothing. 16 feet, nothing, and I could see furrows of genuine puzzlement crossing his brow. He paced about, measuring and re-measuring, obviously completely baffled. Mutterings started to pass around the gathered villagers. Had they spent all day digging a great hole for nothing? Had they been shown up as gullible fools? Were they victims of a hoax?

The dowser was now in a bit of a spot. I was impressed by his apologetic sincerity. He started asking if anybody had any reason to suspect a geological or other anomaly in this particular place. Right on cue, an old villager who had formerly been the sexton at the nearby church, mentioned that there had been, in former times, a tunnel leading in this direction from the churchyard. "Why, I used to lose coffins down it!" . Laughter, tension broken, a saving hypothesis. The dowser was adamant that "objects of gold, silver and brass occupying a volume of several cubic feet" was underneath this spot, but admitted that if the objects were in some sort of cavern it would confuse his depth readings - and this would account for the failure to find anything at the predicted depth.

This could have been the end of the story, but having dug so far, there were enough villagers willing to press on that it was agreed to continue the following weekend. One of the local grandees, who lived nearby, offered his extremely large house for the treasure-hunters to foregather. This prompted me to prepare a preliminary test of the dowser's powers under laboratory-like conditions. As it happened, it was raining on the day and nobody was over-keen to get down a 16 foot hole, so my proposed experiment was accepted as a kind of parlour-game while we waited for the weather to improve.

Our host provided a solid silver bowl about 10cm in diameter weighing several hundred grams. I asked the dowser if he would be able to detect this object at very close range. He gave a "don't be ridiculous!" snort and held the silver rods over the bowl. Yes, they swung decisively. I had prepared some cardboard cones each large enough to cover the bowl completely, and asked the dowser to verify that he could still detect the bowl when hidden underneath a cone. Again, no problem.

The experiment now needed three rooms to ensure the absence of any visual clues and complete "double blind" conditions. In room 1 was a table with five cones in a row, otherwise empty. Experimenter A would place the target bowl under one of the cones according to random-number tables and would then withdraw to room 2. The subject and experimenter B would then emerge from room 3 and the subject would identify which of the cones concealed the target. Experimenter B would note the choice and would withdraw into room 3 with the subject, to await the next trial. There were 25 trials, with no knowledge of results.

In this case I had role of experimenter B, and it was noteworthy that the dowser behaved without hesitation. He would sweep the rods along the line of cones until they "crossed" in the classic manner. And they did cross, very decisively, over different cones on each trial in what looked like a random pattern.

It remained to collate the actual random sequence with the subject's choices. I must say that by this point in the proceedings I was convinced that I was about to "bag" something very remarkable, and I half expected a perfect score of 25 matches. The ‘chance’ level was 5.

The dowser actually got 4. His ‘powers’, on this occasion at least, had proved completely illusory.

I had not really prepared myself mentally for this outcome, which was naturally very embarrassing - for the assembled company, the host, for me, and most of all for the dowser himself, and the whole "treasure" affair dissolved in some acrimony. Of course I acted in good faith, but another time I will take care not to undertake these things in public!

More seriously, what does it mean? One thing seems odd. If dowsers, and perhaps others with supposed paranormal powers, are in fact operating on subtle physical cues, then the removal of these cues should leave them hesitant and uncertain. But in the present case this did not happen; the dowser always acted decisively; he always got a definite reaction, or lack of it, even though there was nothing "actually" there to stimulate it. What was he reacting to?