



## Psychic Failure and the Boston Marathon Bombing

Q:

You wrote a short Facebook post after the Boston marathon bombing noting that psychics failed to predict the attack. Fair enough, but one question: Say a psychic *did* foresee the event. Would telling anyone have changed anything?

—C. Morrison

**A:** I indeed pointed out in a two-sentence post that psychic powers had once again failed to warn the world about life-and-death tragedies and acts of terrorism whose consequences could have been prevented or mitigated. Since no psychics came forward in the days, weeks, or months before the April 15, 2013, Boston attacks to warn authorities, we will never know how the situation might have been different.

It's a valid question, and one echoed by several others, including British skeptic Hayley Stevens, who wrote: "Psychics are damned if they do and damned if they don't. If they'd predicted bombs would explode in Boston during the Marathon we'd berate them for scaremongering. If they don't predict it we berate them for not warning people."

My answer is that if one or more psychics did foresee the event, *and* it could be demonstrated that they had a proven track record of accuracy in previous cases (that is, it's not a random, one-time guess that anyone could do), then I would be the first person to try to help the psychics alert the police,

try to identify suspects, and put them under surveillance to thwart the attack. If it's a one-time, vague prediction, I don't think anyone should take it seriously because random events and coincidences happen all the time (simply by random chance, thousands of people every day have seemingly prophetic dreams about events that happen the following day or week). But if there's some reason to think someone has a real predictive ability (whether explained or unexplained), then it absolutely should be taken seriously.

### Psychics and Police

This is not merely an academic exercise or abstract thought experiment; we have enough information from real-world cases to have a pretty good idea of what would have happened to a psychic's legitimate information about the Boston bombing.

The claim that police ignore psychics not only plays into the hands of these psychics ("the problem is not that we give bad or vague information, but instead that we're ignored by the police"), but it is also factually wrong. Those who aren't familiar with the history of psychic detectives may assume that po-

lice routinely dismiss information coming from psychics as unreliable, but in fact police must follow up on all credible tips about crimes, including those from dubious sources. They routinely deal with liars, hoaxers, jailhouse informants with dubious motives, people with drug habits and mental illnesses, and so on. Police cannot simply ignore a lead or tip even when it comes from a psychic—after all, just because a person claims to be psychic doesn't mean that he or she may not have some real knowledge of a crime (Radford 2010).

Of course it depends on what, exactly, our hypothetically accurate psychic told police: Did she or he say, "There will be a bombing in Boston in 2013," or "There will be a bomb at the Boston marathon finish line, and the name Tsarnaev is somehow connected," or something else? Psychics and psychic detectives often claim to give the names, detailed physical descriptions, ethnicities, and countless other "specific" descriptors of wanted murderers, terrorists, and abductors to police. It is not unreasonable to assume that, out of the tens of thousands of self-proclaimed psychics in North America and

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around the world, one or more of them with genuine precognitive psychic abilities would provide useful information about the bombers.

In fact, I've encountered dozens of cases where police have followed up on even vague information from psychics. For example, in March 2004 a psychic told the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) that a bomb was aboard an American Airlines flight leaving Florida and bound for Dal-

Tsarnaev, the two accused Boston bombers? Quite a bit: In October 2011, America's main counterterrorism agency, the National Counterterrorism Center, added Tamerlan Tsarnaev's name to two different government watch lists, also alerting other agencies including the FBI and its Terrorist Screening Database, the State Department, the TSA, and the Homeland Security Department. We know that Tsarnaev's name was still on a watch list as of

been flagged. This is especially true given that the information would have been passed along to the FBI counterterrorism unit in Boston—the same agency that had previously investigated Tsarnaev only a year earlier, and whose agents were familiar with his profile. Any actionable information would almost certainly have been at least briefly checked. And the information need not have been made public, avoiding the issue of scaremongering.

So it's unlikely that a psychic who (correctly or incorrectly) predicted a terrorist attack would be ignored or dismissed—especially if he or she could point to a history of verified, accurate predictions. If the information is vague (such as “a bomb might go off in Boston around mid-April”), then of course it's likely that the information will be ignored. But if the information is specific enough to follow up on (what's called “actionable intelligence,” such as names, dates, locations, and profiles), then it's very likely that the information would indeed be taken seriously and investigated.

My answer is yes: I think that in this case, and many others, if police had been given useful information about the Boston attacks by psychics, it likely could have been prevented. I respectfully disagree that psychics are damned if they do make accurate predictions and damned if they don't. The problem is that they don't—and if they did I'd be the first person encouraging law enforcement to use them to solve crimes and prevent terrorism. Anything else is simply making excuses for failure. ■

## References

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las, Texas. The psychic's bomb report resulted in a pre-boarding search by the TSA and Port Authority police; despite a thorough examination with both equipment and bomb-sniffing dogs, nothing suspicious was found. The delay forced cancellation of the flight. Doug Perkins, local administrator for the TSA, said that the psychic's information was taken seriously because “...we can't ignore anything. We want to take the appropriate measures.”

In 2011, the Texas police, FBI, and Texas Rangers mobilized the massive search of a remote farm based on a tip from a psychic that mass graves would be found there. There have even been cases where the FBI has actually enlisted psychics in their investigations, such as in the 1996 crash of TWA Flight 800 near Long Island (see Radford 1999).

### Boston Bombing Suspects

With that background, what do we know about law enforcement's knowledge about Tamerlan and Dzhokhar

January 12, 2012, when his flight reservation to Russia flagged a security alert (Schmitt and Schmidt 2013a).

In fact, the FBI dispatched two counterterrorism agents to interview Tsarnaev and his family in 2011 but found no evidence of terrorist activity, leaving the case dormant. “At that point, [an FBI] official said, ‘you would need additional information, like a follow-up request’” (Schmitt and Schmidt 2013b) for information or some other reason to look again at Tsarnaev as a possible threat.

Which brings us back to the question of whether or not information from a psychic would have been taken seriously by authorities and investigated—possibly preventing the attack in the first place. It seems almost certain that if police had been given reasonably specific, accurate information about one or both of the Tsarnaev brothers (by a self-proclaimed psychic or anyone else) that someone would have taken a few seconds to enter that information in a computer system where the information had already