

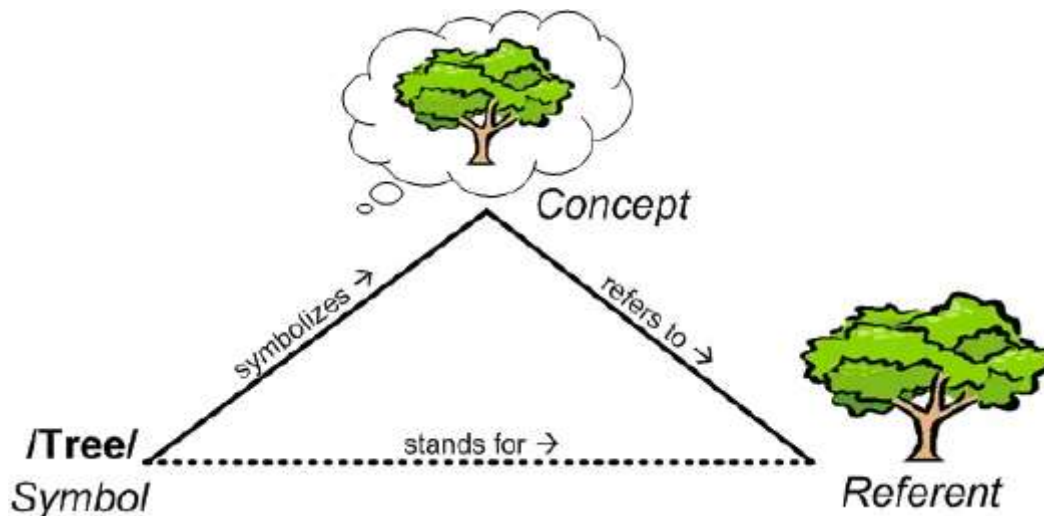


# Saint Augustine and the Semiotic Trinity



Timothy Brown

10 min read · Aug 30, 2023



In this article we shall explore Saint Augustine's semiotics. I will show how Augustine's early, bipartite semiotics matured into a tripartite model that maps on to the Holy Trinity, and how this shift allows the Holy Spirit to take on a more distinct role in Augustine's understanding of meaning. Further, this shift in Augustine's thinking may help inform contemporary debates in the Augustine literature over how closely Augustine hews to Plotinus' cosmology. Additionally, will see how, despite seeming quite foreign at first

glance, Augustine's theory of meaning actually has many similarities with "classical" theories of meaning advanced by the logical positivists, C.S. Peirce's influential semiotics, and even ontological theories popular in contemporary physics.<sup>1</sup>

## **Saint Augustine's Early Semiotics**

Augustine's early exploration of signs and meaning are most fully laid out in *De Dialectica* (388) and *De Magistro* (388–391).<sup>2</sup> In *De Dialectica*, Augustine begins from the Stoic definition of dialectics, i.e., the science of discussion and "statements true, false, and neither true nor false."<sup>3</sup> Augustine's innovation is to point out that words are also signs, and that *meaning* occurs solely in the mind.<sup>4</sup> A "word is a sign of any sort of thing," "a thing is whatever is sensed or is understood or hidden," and "a sign is [sensed, but] indicates to the mind something beyond the sign itself."<sup>5 6</sup>

All signs ultimately point to the *intelligible world* of the Neoplatonists. "By speaking, we simply call to mind... the realities of which [words] are signs."<sup>7</sup> To maintain his Neoplatonist ontology and its notion of downwards causation — where the corporeal (a lower hypostasis) lacks causal power over the internal, spiritual world (a higher hypostasis)— Augustine must maintain that sensible things cannot cause us to understand the intelligible.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is Christ, who "dwells in the inner person"<sup>9</sup> that is our teacher.<sup>10</sup> Sensible signs only help us to grasp meaning by directing our attention to that which already lies within the self.

Augustine's early semiotics is a Christ-focused "expressionist semiotic,"<sup>11</sup> where Christ, the Logos, is the mediating bridge between the soul and God.<sup>12</sup> Christ fills the traditional role of *Nous* (Greek: Mind) in Neoplatonic thought, allowing the individual to access the intelligible world of Platonic Forms (*eidos*), Forms which exist "in the mind/Nous of God."<sup>13</sup> **Thus, God is the only**

teacher who can truly teach man (a view adopted by several earlier Patristics, although in varying, nuanced ways).<sup>14</sup>

## **Tensions in Augustine's Early Semiotic Model**

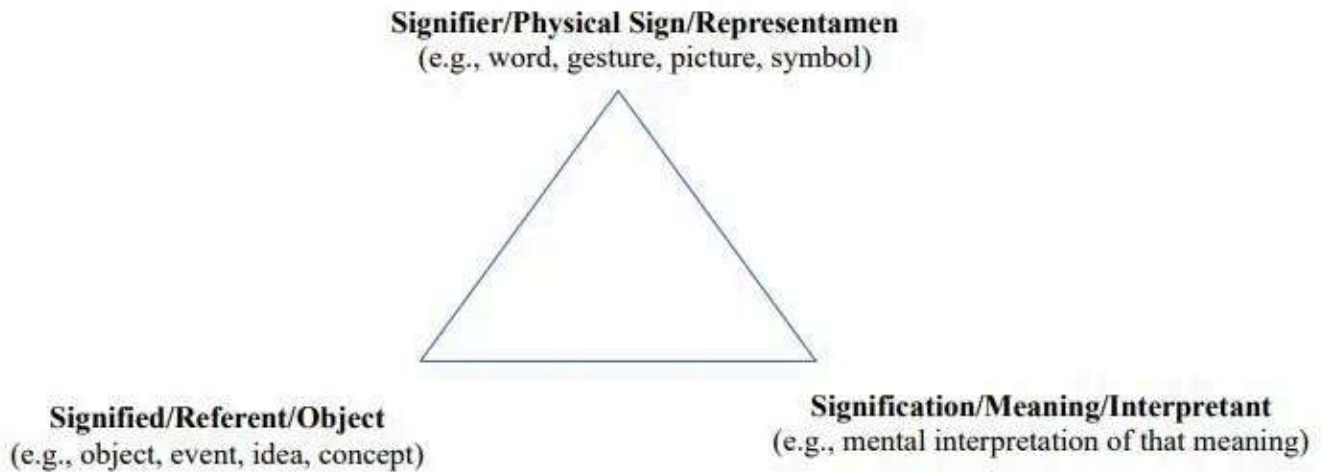
Importantly, this early model creates a tension for Augustine. The Plotinian hypostases form an explicit hierarchy. The corporeal world is at the bottom, followed by Psyche/Soul and Nous/Mind, with the One, the greatest and most perfect of all, on top. **To the extent that Christ is identified with Plotinian Nous, which is not coequal with the One, this model appears in danger of conflicting with Nicæan Trinitarianism.**<sup>15</sup>

The argument that Augustine maps the Trinity to the Plotinian hypostases is a strong theme in the works of Olivier Du Roy and R.J. O'Connell. This view has recently come under criticism, but it is not without its merits.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in light of later innovations in Augustine's theory, it seems plausible that Augustine recognized these tensions and strove to resolve them.

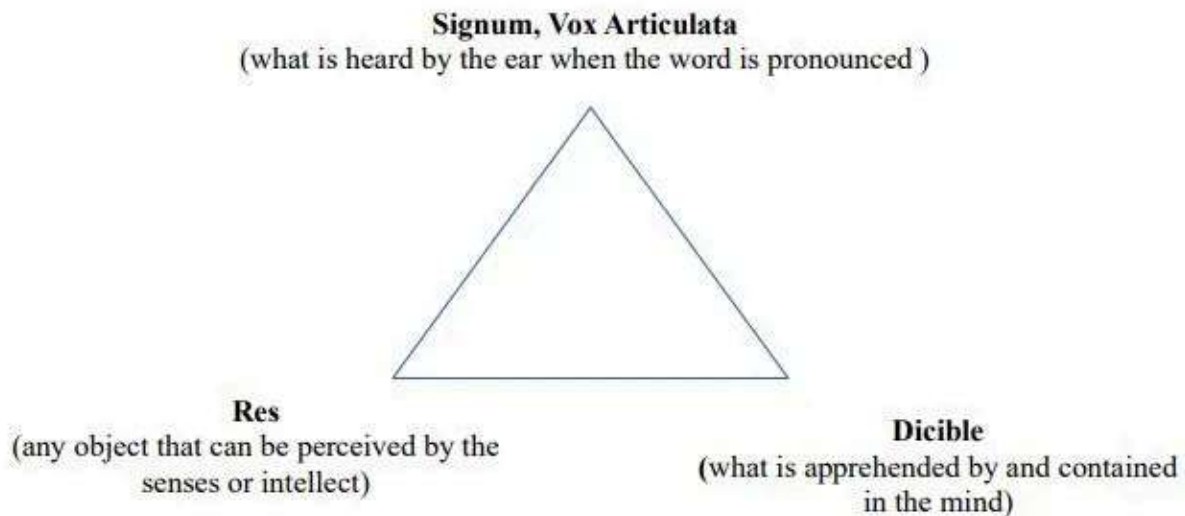
The semiotics developed in *De Magistro* is bipartite; semiosis exists due to a relationship between an individual and Christ. This interpretation is supported by Philip Cary in his work on Augustine's semiotics.<sup>17</sup> There is no explicit role for the Holy Spirit, who is largely absent from *De Dialectica* and *De Magistro*.<sup>18</sup> This absence is reflected in some contemporary studies of Augustine's semiotics as a whole. **For example, Cary's *Outward Signs* mentions the Spirit just 20 times, versus the Son in 484 instances. However, I will argue that Augustine's later semiotics develops into a tripartite model, with the Spirit playing a central role.** Further, the new role of the Spirit can serve to elucidate contemporary disagreements as to whether it is the human soul or the Spirit that is analogous to the Plotinian hypostasis of *Psyche* in Augustine's thought.

# Augustine's Mature Semiotics

It is worth noting that a tripartite model of semiosis can be found in Augustine's work as early as the unfinished *De Dialectica*, although it appears to be abandoned in *De Magistro*.<sup>19</sup> Giovanni Manetti identifies this tripartite model in his *Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity*, mapping Augustine's terms to the model of C.S. Peirce (compared below).



**Figure 1:** A contemporary semiotic triangle based on the theory of C.S. Peirce



**Figure 2:** Augustine's semiotic triangle, adapted from Manetti, 1993, pp. 158.

Despite being absent in *De Magistro*, this tripartite structure reappears implicitly in *De Doctrina Christiana* (426) and *De Trinitate* (419 or 426), with a much larger role for the Holy Spirit. In *De Doctrina*, a mature Augustine turns to the problem of the interpretation of the Bible, an issue of paramount importance for his theory of signs. **Here we see the Spirit with a key role in the transmission meaning.** It is the “implanting of the Holy Spirit,” which “yield[s] the fruit... love of God and neighbor,” and this love is essential to draw the correct meaning from the Scriptures.<sup>20</sup> More overtly, it is the “Holy Spirit [who] minister[s] unto us the aids and consolations [that come from] the Scriptures.”<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Augustine, citing Mathew 10:19–20, admonishes those preparing to preach to seek the guidance of the Spirit, that they might *understand* the will of God.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Spirit has a twin role, both aiding the reader in properly interpreting what they read (a task accomplished solely by Christ in *De Magistro*), and in guiding the authors of the Scriptures as they infuse the words they set down with meaning. The Spirit helps us interpret the words, while “[Christ] is called the Word of the Father because it is through him that the Father is made known.”<sup>23</sup>

#### **In this model:**

- **The Father is the source of all knowledge, the thing about which all signs ultimately refer, the *ground* of being;**
- **The Son is the Word, the *Logos*, the mediating symbol through which all things are intelligible and made known;**
- **And the Holy Spirit is the meaning, the interpretant, that which indwells the soul and interprets and understands.**

Thus, a model based on the Plotinian hypostases, with their necessarily hierarchical nature, gives way to a model where all three parts are equally necessary components for meaning to exist.

**Augustine expands this model further in *De Trinitate*, where he explores how our souls are themselves trinitarian in nature, having been created in the image of God.** In Book 11, Augustine describes the process of semiosis using the example of sight. For sight to occur we must have, “the object itself which we see,” “vision or the act of seeing,” and “the attention of the mind.”

In Book 8, we see another example that hews even closer to Peirce’s model, where the Trinity is described as a Lover, the Beloved, and the Love between the two. **At first glance, this example can seem more dyadic than triadic. However, it closely parallels Peirce’s triangle of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness.** Firstness is the ground (the Lover/the Father); Secondness is reference or reaction, (the Beloved/the Son); and Thirdness is “that wonderful operation of hypostatic abstraction\* which... furnishes us the means of turning predicates from being signs that we think or think through, into being subjects thought of.”<sup>24</sup>

- \*Hypostatic Abstraction: the introduction of a new term that represents a property possessed by the original predicate. E.g., the move from “the Father loves,” to a unique entity, *the love* (of the Father).

**Augustine’s mature semiotics is able to find a distinct role for all the persons of the Trinity, while at the same time *De Trinitate* shows how the Trinity maps on to essential elements of experience.** This shift allows Augustine to explain how signs convey intelligible meanings in a way that avoids having to rely on a necessarily hierarchical Neoplatonic model, while

also arguably making Augustine's model more compelling by tying it to the nature of experience.

Augustine's early work is simply ambiguous. This is why Du Roy can identify the Holy Spirit with Plotinus's concept of Logos (intelligible concepts embedded in Psyche), O'Connell can identify all of Psyche with the Spirit, and Gerber can deny both by pointing out that, in the *Soliloquies*, Reason is part of Augustine — a created being — instead arguing that the Spirit is “that which leads us to truth.”<sup>25</sup> It seems highly plausible that Augustine recognized this ambiguity, resolving it over time.

This view of Augustine is not only important for how it informs our understanding of his work, but also has implications for how we view the works of later thinkers and contemporary theology.

## **Augustine Today**

At first glance, Augustine's semiotics seem like they should have little in common with modern theories of meaning. The idea that we learn all things through God, grasping eternal, intelligible forms with our souls, seems anathema to today's physicalism. However, it is worth noting that Bertrand Russell's popular theory of meaning and the many variants it inspired, revolve around the mind “grasping” *propositions* — abstract entities that exist eternally, outside spacetime.<sup>26</sup>

Further, the distinction between necessary “logical/analytical truths” and “empirical facts,” first elucidated by David Hume, continues to be influential in philosophy. In many ways, this distinction closely mirrors the Platonic division between “sensible” and “intelligible” that Augustine followed, a similarity I will follow up on in future articles.

**Similarities also abound in a most unlikely place: physics.** With the rise of quantum information theory, many physicists have argued the reality is reducible to Platonic objects. For Carlo Rovelli, only relations fundamentally exist. For Max Tegmark, the world *is* an eternal mathematical object. For John Wheeler, “it,” — physical reality — emerges from “bit,” — immaterial mathematical information.<sup>27</sup>

This has led to a rising popularity for “pansemiotic” conceptions of reality. With this in mind, theologians with naturalist inclinations might do well to take a closer look at Augustine’s theory of meaning and how it relates to contemporary naturalist metaphysics.

Finally, as we have already noted, Augustine’s model has remarkable similarities to that of C.S. Peirce. This is no accident! C.S. Peirce was a diligent student of the Latin Scholastics, who developed St. Augustine’s theory of signs as the *Doctrina Signorum* over the centuries. This fact is well documented in Peirce scholarship, but often gets left out of introductory texts on semiotics.

### Works Cited & Footnotes:

1. Some will no doubt object that any such “ontological” theories are *necessarily* parts of philosophy, not physics. I place such theories under the umbrella of “physics” solely due to the fact that they are largely advocated for by professional physicists.
2. Tornau, Christian (2019). *Saint Augustine: Work*. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
3. Diogenes Laertius. *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Book VII “Zeno and Stoics”, 42 from Graminga, Remo. (2020). *Augustine’s Theory of Signs*,



*Signification, and Lying*. Religion and Reason. Volume 60. Semiotics of Religion. Sub-Volume 3. Edited by Massimo Leone, Fabio Rambelli, and Robert Yelle, pp. 19, an earlier open access version is accessible at [https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/59821/gramigna\\_remo.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://dspace.ut.ee/bitstream/handle/10062/59821/gramigna_remo.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y).

4. For a more detailed investigation Augustine's relationship with pre-Christian philosophy of language and semiotics, see Manetti, Geovani. ([1987] 1993). "Theories of the Sign in Classical Antiquity." Trans. Christine Richardson. and Graminga, Remo. (2020). "Augustine's Theory of Signs, Signification, and Lying."
5. *De Dialectica*. Jackson, B. Darell. (1975). pp. 87
6. More formally, Umberto Eco notes that Augustine's move is to posit a implication relationship between a sign and the signified rather than the equivalence relationship posited by the Stoics. Eco, Umberto. (1984). *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. pp. 33–34
7. *De Magistro*. Harmless, William. (2010) pp. 68–69
8. For a brief but detailed overview of downward causality in Neoplatonism, see Philip Cary's *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought*, pp. 6–8.
9. Ephesians 3:14–17
10. *De Magistro*. Harmless, William. (2010) pp. 70
11. Philip Cary's term, denoting that we can only share our thoughts and feelings with others through our shared link with God.
12. This "bridging," was the traditional meaning of "logos" in Plotinus.
13. Cary, Philip. (2008). *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought*. pp 62–64.

14. Jean-Claude Larchet's *Therapy of Spiritual Illness: An Introduction to the Ascetic Tradition of the Orthodox Church* surveys several of these views towards the end of the first chapter (Volume I — "Man's Original Health").
15. This argument is made in detail in O'Connell, R.J. (1968). *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386–391*, Chapter IX: Faith and Understanding. pp.227–257
16. For examples of such criticisms see: Chad Tyler Gerber's *The Spirit of Augustine's Early Theology*, Luigi Gioia's *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine's De Trinitate*, or Michele Rene Barnes' *Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology*.
17. Cary, Philip. (2008). *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought*.
18. It is worth noting however, that Augustine makes a more general reference to the role of God in understanding in *Eighty-Three Different Questions*, also an early work, which could be taken as a reference to the Spirit, although it seems to be more general. See Question 46: "To the degree that the rational soul is united to Him by charity, by so much does it contemplate these intelligible principles (rationes), through whose vision it is made supremely happy, being bathed, so to speak, and illumined by Him with spiritual light."
19. "The four-fold distinction of verbum, res, dictio and dicibile spelled out in the *De dialectica* is not found in any other of Augustine's works, being a unique trait of his early treatise." pp. 54 — Graminga, Remo. (2020). *Augustine's Theory of Signs, Signification, and Lying*. Religion and Reason. Volume 60. Semiotics of Religion. Sub-Volume 3. Edited by Massimo Leone, Fabio Rambelli, and Robert Yelle.
20. *De Doctrina Christiana*. Book II, Chapter VI. Translation from Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers. [Link](#)

21. Ibid. Book III, Chapter IX. Chapter XXVII shows a similar role for the Spirit as well.
22. Ibid. Book IV, Chapter XIII
23. *De Trinitate*. Book 3, Chapter 3. Translation from Harmless, William (2010) pp. 282
24. Peirce, C.S. (1906). Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism”, *The Monist*, vol. XVI, no. 4 r
25. See: Du Roy, Olivier. (1966). “The Understanding of Faith According to Saint Augustine,” O’Connell, Robert J. (1968), and Gerber, Chad (2012) “The Spirit of Augustine’s Early Theology.”
26. Lycan, William. (2018). “Philosophy of Language: A Contemporary Introduction.” Chapter 5: Traditional Theories of Meaning. pp. 75
27. This positions is quite common with the current generation of physicists publishing popular science. A veritable “who’s who” list of eminent physicists such as, Rodger Penrose, Vlatko Vedral, Paul Davies, and David Deutsch have expressed similar sentiments

Augustine Of Hippo

Semiotics

Philosophy

Christianity

Philosophy Of Language



**Written by Timothy Brown**

9 Followers · 1 Following

Edit profile

Fiction author, philosopher, climber, former city manager, and consultant.

No responses yet




What are your thoughts?

Respond

## More from Timothy Brown




 Timothy Brown

### Why Francis Fukuyama's "Last Man" is Not a Paradox

Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man," has two distinct theses: the...



 Timothy Brown

### World War II: The Foundational Myth of Modern Liberal Democra...

Next time you're in a bookstore, take a quick look at the history section. You will likely find...

Aug 14, 2023 12 1



Sep 6, 2023

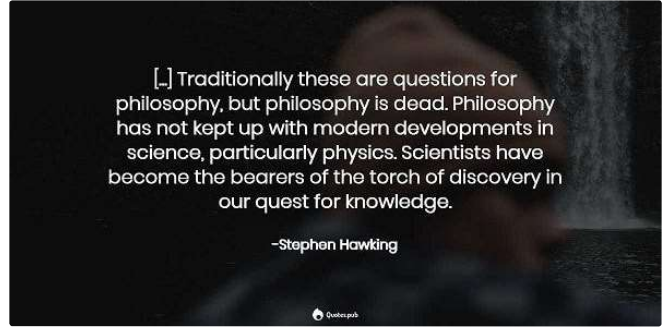
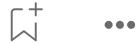


Timothy Brown

## Blind Brain Theory and the Role of the Unconscious

Blind Brain Theory (BBT) is a theory developed by novelist and philosopher R...

Aug 11, 2023 50 1



Timothy Brown

## Has philosophy been replaced by science?

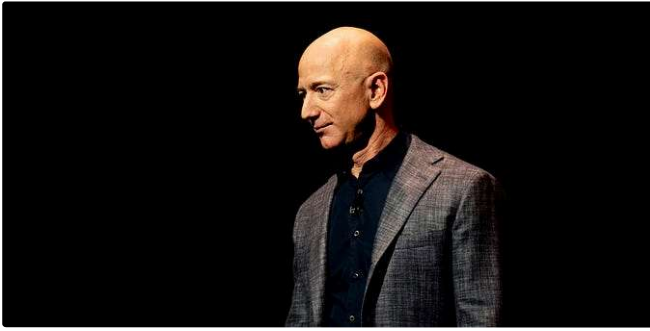
Is the quote from Hawking above correct? Has science taken over completely from...

Aug 3, 2023 53 1



See all from Timothy Brown

## Recommended from Medium

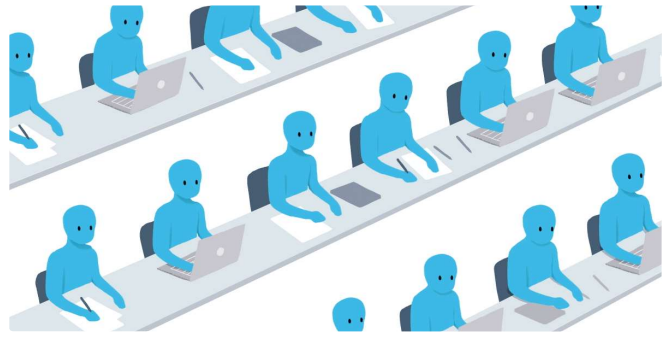


Jessica Stillman

## Jeff Bezos Says the 1-Hour Rule Makes Him Smarter. New...

Jeff Bezos's morning routine has long included the one-hour rule. New...

★ Oct 30 🖱️ 18.4K 💬 483 📌 ⋮



In Human Parts by Devon Price 📖

## Laziness Does Not Exist

Psychological research is clear: when people procrastinate, there's usually a good reason

★ Mar 23, 2018 🖱️ 337K 💬 1971 📌 ⋮

### Lists



#### Stories to Help You Live Better

22 stories · 3549 saves



#### Good Product Thinking

13 stories · 789 saves



#### Self-Improvement 101

20 stories · 3173 saves

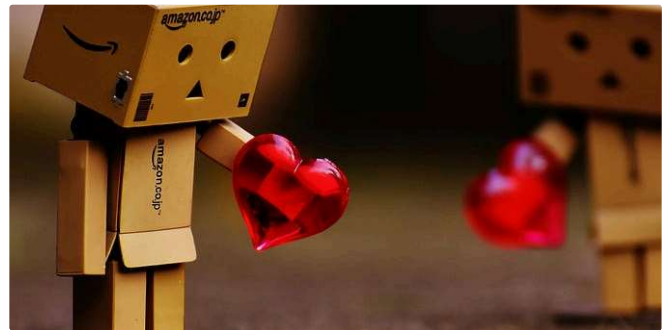


#### Visual Storytellers Playlist

61 stories · 568 saves



Kris Gage





JenFireHeartMama

## How to \*really\* know you're in love

Because most of "the signs" they tell you are garbage

★ Aug 3, 2017 🖱 148K 💬 1044 📌+ ⋮



 Carlyn Beccia 

## Trump Fiddles While Musk Burns Down MAGA

Musk unleashes his anger on MAGA Republicans and vows "war."

★ 2d ago 🖱 8.6K 💬 158 📌+ ⋮

## The Question That Ended My Marriage

In a rare moment of vulnerability, I asked my husband this question, and knew I'd just...

Jul 8 🖱 36K 💬 588 📌+ ⋮



 In ILLUMINATION by Kallol Mazumdar

## I Went on the Dark Web and Instantly Regretted It

Accessing the forbidden parts of the World Wide Web, only to realize the depravity of...

Mar 13 🖱 26K 💬 584 📌+ ⋮

See more recommendations