

Cosmic Winks

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*“Remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity.
Be sure that every little deed counts,
that every word has power.
Never forget that you can still do your share to redeem the world in spite of
all absurdities and frustrations and disappointments.”*
Abraham Joshua Heschel

"We cannot be magically transported from where we are to a better place. We must forge the path ourselves, for in knowing how we arrived in that better place and what we had to go through to get there, we will have developed the knowledge, the wisdom, and the maturity to know how to sustain it."
David Spangler

It is said that Carl Jung came up with the idea of synchronicity during a dinner conversation with Albert Einstein in the 1920's. If true it stands to reason. Jung believed that synchronicity – defined as “meaningful coincidences” or two seemingly unrelated events connected by virtue of a common meaning – occurred because there is a unified field of consciousness, “a fusion of inner and outer reality” in which all past and future coexist.¹ Einstein's relativity speaks to the inter-connected whole, and synchronicity to those moments the cosmos “winks” at us through unexpected, mysterious, seemingly magical connections showing up between people and events. These moments are described as deeply personal, “boundary events” which often occur at periods of major life transitions, attention-grabbers through which we find the strength to endure those times when growth means slogging through a thick fog on an uncertain path. The creative process of change is like that sometimes. Here is an example.

Wandering through the Union Square Green Market in Manhattan one Wednesday afternoon, I ran into an old friend from college. It was April, 1983, almost a year into my first professional job, and I should have been thrilled to see another Midwestern transplant. After all, she was someone who knew the old me, before reality

bitch-slapped my idealism, and before my student loan debts came due and I needed a second job to make enough money to stay at the professional job long enough to figure out my life. But thrilled I was not. I felt obligated, trapped into an artificial show of warmth. I was in no mood.

Any other Wednesday at that time I would have been at work, wrapping up morning groups. I was a creative arts therapist on a psychiatric unit in a Newark medical hospital, and my last-minute decision to take a personal day from work had so far had done nothing to shake off the sense of futility that overwhelmed me on there. The gloom of the place darkened my thoughts well into the night, like the claustrophobic gray walls-air so thick with cigarette smoke you could write in it- dimmed our spirits during the day.

Here is what I was thinking when I spotted my old college friend: “what does it say about me that I am burned out after less than a year in my first professional job?” So I did not want conversation about how I was doing and what is new. All I could do was whine that professional life felt sadly like a fool’s errand, and that college now seemed a fool’s paradise. But there she was, and she seemed so happy to see me, and then there we were in a diner having coffee, going over our appointment books to make dinner plans, when she pointed to a date marked “anniversary.”

“Five years ago on that date,” she said thoughtfully, “I bought a book and it changed my life,” she said. This had to be some important book.

“What is it called? Who wrote it?” I demanded. She went on to describe exactly where she was – at Webster’s Bookstore on Downer Avenue in Milwaukee, near the University of Wisconsin where we had been students at the time – and what she was wearing. She remembered exactly what time of day it was – 3 p.m. – and that she often

had a drop in energy around then, so she wanted to stop at the Coffee Trader, just a block or so from the bookstore, for a cup of coffee - flavor of the day: hazelnut – and that flavored coffees were sexy back then but now they were just kind of sad.

“What was the book?” I asked.

“I can’t remember,” she said.

“You say a book changed your life but you can’t remember the name of it,” I said.

“You’re not listening,” she whispered.

Now, I did not say to her that listening is what I do better than anything. I did not, at that moment tell her that listening to a rotating group of mentally ill patients when there is no one else around to do it requires epic degrees of attention and empathy if not actual *skill*, although it seemed petty and dramatic to say how defensive and irritated I felt at her simple accusation. But then again. Here I was, a thousand grueling little tasks on my to-do list the only justification for an afternoon away from work, unpaid of course, but precious as only an afternoon in New York City can be when a person is feeling defeated and disillusioned and depleted. And because I had lost my sense of purpose that sort of compensated for low pay and low status in my profession, and I felt adrift and restless and angry without it, she was going to be damn sure I was listening and she was going to tell me the name of the book that changed her life.

“You must remember who wrote it.” I insisted. “One word in the title. Anything.”

“It was nothing special, just some book,” she insisted right back. “It was that coffee I really wanted, but I bought a book so I’d have something to read while I sat there by myself. While I was picking it out and paying for it, the waiters at the café changed

shifts. So when I sat down to order, Ben had just taken over that table. You know about Ben, right?” she said. I did not. Ben, she explained, was her boyfriend and the person responsible for her move to New York. And she met him when we waited on her that day, during his last shift at The Coffee Trader before he quit for his first paid acting job. Just in time for their paths to cross.

“If it wasn’t for Ben, I would never have had the courage to move out here,” she said. “I never would have gone this far from home without him.” But the relationship, it turned out, had changed since the move.

“I thought we both wanted a future together. To me the future was like, the next 30 years. To him, the future was next semester. When I started talking about getting married, Ben started talking about law school. Acting is too hard, he says.”

“So you get married. And he goes to law school.” I said.

“In Portland, Oregon?” she said, shaking her head. “I can’t see myself following him across the country again. I want to stay here.” I asked her if she thought they were going to work it out.

“I don’t know,” she said. What I do know is, its never going to be like it was.”

“I know exactly what you mean about that,” I whined, “I know now that nothing is going to be like it was. That life never goes the way you think it will.”

It felt good to whine, so I did it some more. I whined that everyone around me advised that to survive in the field of psychiatry I must learn to detach from the crushing realities of life for the mentally ill, but this was something I could not grasp, much less master. I told her that the trouble really was—besides my rank inexperience—I felt my own position

in life to be uncomfortably similar to these people who lived on the margins of society with neither security nor safety. I told her about my growing preoccupation with budget cuts that threatened as ominously as the constant threat of random violence on the unit, upon which my position precariously teetered. This was, after all, a period when the true effects of savage government cuts in social services that began in 1981 were just settling in, when every local resource available to those on the bottom rung of the economic ladder was strained to capacity. Jobs were scarce. The job I found had staff levels lower than what I had been led to believe. The patients were given meals, medication and me. I was a solo act, eight hours a day, five days a week, dancing as fast as I could to engage the energies of a rotating group of patients that ranged from suicidal adolescents to chronic mentally ill homeless people to grief-stricken retirees unable to cope with sudden, tragic loss. It was therapy by improvisation, which should have made sense given my music and theater training, but daunting and lonely with neither support nor supplies. I whined about the collective psychological toll of this, which was an exhausting degree of hyper-vigilance that was difficult to turn off at the end of the day.

“You should get a job at NYU,” my friend said. “You could go to school for a higher degree than what you have now. Its free if you work there,” That was helpful. I walked her to class, and while on the campus applied for any job for which I was qualified. I stopped at the Music Therapy Department and read the bulletin board for job postings. I picked up brochures for conferences coming up in the Manhattan area. One was sponsored by the American Association of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City in about a month’s time.

Here comes a synchronicity. At that time I was reading *Man's Search for Meaning* by Austrian psychiatrist Dr. Victor Frankl, which chronicles his experiences as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp and his revelations about suffering that transformed his approach to healing psychological trauma. I had only begun to digest this writing, but from the start had felt deeply, desperately connected to it. A workshop write-up in the conference brochure quoted Frankl and referred to psychodrama as a positive and poetic means to consciously form our responses to suffering and create our destiny, a way to explore what Frankl describes "our relationship to life."

Tolstoy is quoted as saying "true life is lived when tiny changes occur." Tiny changes can turn on seemingly trivial decisions, which can change the course of a person's life. It may seem an insignificant connection, the confluence between reading the book, then through a series of seemingly random events, having the information about this workshop directly *about* the book cross my path, but that is the point. The coincidence caught my attention, shifted my focus in subtle but substantial way. These twists of fate captivate us enough to allow a little more light into our murky, moody mindset and defensive beliefs, to imagine that perhaps there are friendly forces in the universe, if only we can line up our consciousness to work with them.

That particular workshop was a wash, but the conference changed the direction of my life. I made friends. I dug into a wealth of much-needed resources and professional community. I met my husband. No new job with free tuition ever materialized. Oddly enough, the greatest opportunities came through doing the old job in a new way.

With ongoing training and continued reading of Victor Frankl and Rollo May and other great teachers, I began to adjust my vision of the circumstances of my daily struggle and that of my patients. And with that, I could more clearly discern that even with all the poverty and oppression my patients faced, their greatest difficulty was the profound disconnect between them and the rest of the world, a disconnect many of us feel as the world speeds up and our communities break down. These people on the margins of society are like the rest of us in this way, and in our common capacity to connect through art. The creative process heals through connecting us to the highest expression of our humanity, through even the hint that we might transcend the darkness. Even when a person broken by trauma cannot go back to who they were before or a person brought low by oppression cannot change the system that limits her choices, they can choose. And in choosing, create. In the gloom and grey of a psych unit, the patients and I connected through song-writing and painting and music-listening and story-telling. And laughing. Lots of laughing. Together we could co-create a moment, an hour and maybe more, of meaning. Sometimes, when all the elements came together and someone was able to discover a new idea about life after all the foundations of their old life crumbled, there was an energy that might be properly be called magic.

“Everything can be taken from a man,” writes Dr. Frankl, except for what he refers to as “the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.” Of holding onto one’s soul while in the concentration camp, he wrote, “what was really needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves and, furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that *it did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what*

life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life - daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.ⁱⁱ

We can use Einstein's revelation of the enormous force that exists within the infinitesimal atom to grasp the idea that the largeness of existence can be experienced in the most mundane, daily occurrences. Real change happens in small decisions, on ordinary days, about seemingly insignificant things. We cannot know which moments are the defining ones, but sometimes synchronicities shine a light on a dark path and remind us we are part of some magnificent, unfolding wholeness. It helps to have a goal, but only to overcome the inertia that sets in when things do not turn out the way we hoped, or we decide not to decide anything because it might turn out to be wrong. We have to act, hopefully with a vision that we are part of something larger and better than what we can see or know. After that, it is a matter of choices, each one building on the one before. Whether to make small talk with the good-looking guy at the workshop. Whether to give him your phone number (good move). Leave now instead of later. Take Wednesday off instead of Thursday. Walk through Union Square instead of taking the subway. To sit down at a cafe with a fresh book and enjoy the flavor of the day.

References

ⁱ Combs, Allan & Holland, Mark, *Synchronicity: Through the Eyes of Science, Myth and the Trickster* (New York: Avon Books, 1996): 97.

ⁱⁱ Frankl, Victor, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1969).