

SYNCHRONICITIES – Communications from Spirit

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My life has changed course several times. One of those times was in the spring of 1989. I remember the events of that day like it was yesterday. A few months before, I had gotten a promotion to engineering analyst at Los Alamos National Laboratory. Our team of half a dozen men had been using one computer program, but a new and better one had recently become available called MESA. The problem with MESA was that the format for the input file was very different than the older, familiar program. For those familiar with Fortran, the old program used fixed-field format, whereas MESA used Namelist. As in nearly every such case of changing tools that I'm aware of, there was a certain hesitancy by all of us to convert to the new program, so everyone was waiting for someone else.

One day, as I was walking to work, I felt a very insistent urging to simulate a certain device with the new program. The device had become a standard test problem for modeling studies. It was an explosively formed projectile made by Honeywell, and so we had come to call it the "Honeywell EFP." These explosively formed penetrators are used in anti-armor applications by the Army. Remember this took place in 1989 when the cold war was still in full swing. But please set aside all the details and just remember the words MESA and the Honeywell EFP.

As I said, the urging was very insistent, so I decided to do it. Converting the input from the previous program to the input for MESA was, let me say, tedious. I checked, rechecked, and double checked to make sure the Namelist names were spelled correctly and that the

numbers were all correct. To complicate matters, the simulation had to be stopped at a certain time so that some technical fiddling could be done. In addition, a post processor had to be run to generate the computer graphics.

Finally, sometime in the middle of the afternoon, more than six hours after the urging, the simulation was complete to the time when a diagnostic radiograph had been taken. I had the graphic of the simulated projectile on my computer screen, and I saw immediately that the overall shape was correct. "Not bad," I muttered to no one in particular. Then I subtracted coordinates and noted that the length and width agreed well with the actual device, and said, "Hey, this is pretty good!" So I pushed the button on my terminal that caused the printer to take a picture of the screen. Then a few minutes passed as I waited for the printer to do its thing.

As the piece of paper was coming out of the printer, my supervisor, Larry Schwalbe, walked into my office, unexpectedly, with a visitor in tow, and asked, "Jerry, have you ever run the Honeywell EFP with the MESA code?"

I was dumb struck, with my jaw hanging open. But a couple of seconds later the paper landed in the paper tray with an audible click. The click woke me up, so to speak, I picked up the sheet with the plot on it, and handed it to Larry, with the words, "How's this?"

Then he leaned back with his bottom against the front of my desk. "Not bad," as he glanced at the plot. Then I watched as his fingers moved, subtracting the coordinates to get the length and the width. "In fact, this is pretty good!"

Then he stopped. He looked at my computer screen for a couple of seconds with his mouth hanging open. He looked at the printer for another couple of seconds. Then, "Wait a minute. What just happened here?"

That's the question I want to talk about this morning. It's called a synchronicity, to put a name on it, and roughly speaking it means a meaningful coincidence. I'm sure you've all heard the word. Last week when I was preparing for this talk I signed on to amazon.com and searched for books containing the word synchronicity. The result was 16,812 hits. Glancing down the list, I noticed several repeats, but that's still a huge number of books. Doing the same thing on Google produced more than 2,300,000 hits.

The first problem with synchronicities is their definition. The word "meaningful" makes the experience subjective. My experience with the Honeywell EFP on the MESA code was very meaningful to both me and Larry. In fact, it changed the direction of my life. As soon as Larry left with the computer print, I tried to remember that special urging—what it felt like. On subsequent days, when I felt a similar urging to do something, I followed through. At first, I had to learn how to distinguish what I came to call true guidance from the guidance of my ego, which was seldom a good guide. I did that learning process by trial and error, and just as the reading suggested I paid for my mistakes with all sorts of weird behavior. But eventually I did learn, and then that intuition became a working part of the mind. I certainly didn't receive that true guidance every day, and not even once a week, but when I received it, I acted on it. More often than not, I got done what was suggested just when it was needed.

Continuing with Larry Schwalbe's question, what are the characteristics of synchronicities? After I retired almost eleven years ago, I began collecting stories of synchronicities. Ernest Rutherford, about 90 years ago, infamously asserted that all of science is either physics or stamp collecting. Actually, that statement was a put down about other branches of science, but I took it to heart. After all, if you don't even know what the metric is, the best you can do is collect stamps, that is, stories. To do that, I had to learn how

to read, how to see. I'll illustrate with a story. Embedded in longer story was a quiet little synchronicity told in just a few sentences. A young, single mother developed a problem with alcohol. Her family and friends staged an intervention and convinced her to go to a treatment center for a month. The treatment was successful, and she resumed her normal life—minus the alcohol.

Two weeks out of treatment she was stressed to the max. She had a job, she was mother to an enthusiastic young boy; single, she was a housekeeper, and cook. She needed help coping with life, and so she found herself in the local grocery store, standing in the liquor aisle, and staring at a bottle of her favorite booze. It's called romancing the drink, and for an alcoholic it's a deadly activity. As she reached out to take the bottle off the shelf, her little boy came running down the aisle and shouted, "Hey Mom!" Those words snapped her out of her reverie, and she jerked her hand back.

Those few sentences were embedded in a much longer story, and at first I didn't get it. I almost turned the page of the magazine and went on, but then the thought came, "Did I miss something?" After a second read of the whole story, I still didn't get it. It took a third read to see that the crucial words, "Hey Mom!" or some similar words, had to be said by the one person that meant the most to her, and they had to be said at exactly the right moment. That was the synchronicity. So the lesson I learned is that speed-reading doesn't work. I also suggest that speed-reading through life doesn't work either. Sometimes it pays to slow down and think about things.

While most of the dozens of synchronicities I've collected aren't apparent until reflection afterward, occasionally a person can recognize they're in one even as it's happening. Bernie

Siegel, in his book *Love, Medicine, and Miracles*, told the following story. He had been trying to teach this person how to read the messages of the universe, as he put it.

One morning Rose, a student who worked with me, got into her car to come help me in the operating room. Her car broke down, so she got on her bike, and it broke. At that point she said to herself, “Well, according to Bernie, I belong back in my apartment.” She went back, and as she entered her apartment, the phone rang.

It was her brother, a former drug addict, calling from Maine. He said, “Thank God you’re there. I was just about to head for New York and go back on drugs.” They talked for about an hour. She calmed him, and he promised to stay until another family member could go and be with him.

She then went out to her car and lifted the hood, saying to herself, “I don’t know why I’m doing this. I don’t know anything about engines.” At that moment her other brother drove up and said, “I was driving down the parkway, and a voice said to me, ‘Go by your sister’s house.’ ” He fixed her car, and she came to the hospital with her eyes wide open. [*Love, Medicine, and Miracles*, p. 214, 215.]

An important lesson of these stories is that we have a choice. Rose, when her bike broke, could have become willful and egocentric. She could have chosen to walk, or thumb a ride. Instead, she chose to heed the message of the universe.

I faced a similar choice in October 1990. I had been working for nearly a year on an anti-tank missile for the Army Missile Command. After a huge amount of work, I stood up in a meeting during May of 1990, if memory serves, and made a prediction. I remember watching the faces of the forty or so men in that room—they didn't believe a word I said. However, in July one of my co-workers at Los Alamos did a test that verified my prediction. Soon afterward, the program manager at the Missile Command pronounced, "This problem is solved." I was on a high that lasted a week.

But the pronouncement was premature, because in August one of the contractors added a part to the missile. Everyone knew that the function of that part was needed, but they put it in the worst possible place. Another test showed that the system as a whole did not work.

What to do? Through late September and October 1990, I received "guidance" to run a certain simulation. The problem with doing that simulation was not technical. Rather it was political. The senior management of one of the contractors has specifically forbidden its workers from even considering the option. It is well-known that I have initiative, perhaps even too much initiative at times. But this degree of initiative was way over the top. So I said "No." Several times through that month.

In November there was a big meeting in Huntsville, in the same room as the May meeting. In contrast to the working meetings, everyone who was anyone was there. A one-word description of that meeting was rancorous. The program manager from the Missile Command and the program manager from the contractors basically yelled at each other. As a man at the worker level, I had learned that when big cannons were firing, it was best to stay in my foxhole and keep my head down. Nevertheless, there was a moment during that November meeting when I could have stood up and asked for ten minutes of everyone's time

to present a constructive suggestion. But I hadn't done the simulation, and I didn't have the supporting numbers, so I stayed in my chair.

In December 1990 the Missile Command cancelled the project. Funding went to zero. They didn't even spend a phone call to tell us to stop work. By a "coincidence" I discovered the cancellation after the Christmas-New Year break, when I just happened to pick up an *Aviation Week* and see a one-column-inch news announcement. I showed it to my boss, and there followed a flurry of phone calls.

I will not be so presumptuous to claim that my simulation would have made any difference in the final outcome, because there were some very big egos clashing. But I do claim that I could have given them a viable option they didn't know they had.

William Shakespeare described the situation very well:

There is a tide in the affairs of men,
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

After the cancellation, I was reassigned to other projects, and I lost any direct contact with the antitank project. I noticed occasional news articles here and there. First there was litigation by the contractors. That was resolved in favor of the Missile Command—which

took time. Then the Missile Command attempted to restart the project and chose another contractor. That choice was challenged by the original contractors—which took more time. By 1995, nearly five years later, they still didn't have a working missile, so the project had indeed become “bound in shallows and in miseries.”

I would like to make an analogy. We all like to feel that we are in control of our lives—that we're paddling our own canoe, so to speak. And there are times when we are. When we're on a placid lake with calm winds, we can set our own course and go at our own speed. If we want to explore some cove, say, on a yonder shore, all we have to do is point our canoe and paddle. There are hundreds of self-help books that will teach you how to set goals, how to achieve those goals, and what to do after you've gotten there.

But sometimes we're on a swiftly flowing river, with rocks both above and below the surface. Then, our best course is to point the canoe downstream and go with the flow. If you get broadside to the current your canoe can be swept against a rock and break in two. Or an underwater rock may have formed a huge wave that will capsize your canoe. I don't want to take the analogy too far, but it is scary to go with the flow, because in those cases we are not the ones in control. But let's take heart from two other stories:

Joseph Jaworski, in his book *Synchronicity: The Inner Path of Leadership* describes the incredible sequence of events leading to his starting and organizing the American Leadership Forum. Each person he went to see was very receptive to the idea. After listening to his vision, many contributed significant sums of money to support the endeavor. Then, typically, they would say something like, “Now the next person you need to talk to is ...” A few hours later, Jaworski would find himself flying to a distant city to talk to the next person. Describing the process, he wrote:

If we have truly committed to follow our dream, there exists beyond ourselves and our conscious will a powerful force that helps us along the way and nurtures our growth and transformation. Our journey is guided by invisible hands with infinitely greater accuracy than is possible through our unaided conscious will. [Joseph] Campbell says it is the “supernatural assisting force” that attends “the elect through the whole course of his ordeal.” [p. 119]

The name Joseph Campbell came up a lot in my research. In *The Power of Myth*, we read the following interchange between him and Bill Moyers:

MOYERS: Do you ever have this sense when you are following your bliss ... of being helped by hidden hands?

CAMPBELL: All the time. It is miraculous. I even have a superstition that has grown on me as the result of invisible hands coming all the time—namely, that if you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. When you can see that, you begin to meet people who are in the field of your bliss, and they open the doors to you. I say, follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be. [Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

with Bill Moyers. Edited by Betty Sue Flowers. Anchor Books, 1988, p. 150.]

So, we can become fearful and say “No.” But we can also gather our courage and say “Yes.” In October 1997, about eight months before I retired, the day started like hundreds of other days. I got to work a few minutes after 8:00. Hung up my hat and coat. Mixed the fixings for a mug of coffee and started for the coffee room. Just outside my office door, Al Charmatz came around the corner, walking faster than an Olympic race walker. I said “Hi, Al,” because we had worked together in the past. He said “Hi” back.

But ten or fifteen feet past me he stopped, turned back and called out, “*Jerry!*” I stopped and turned around, too. “There’s a meeting in fifteen minutes,” he glanced at his watch and told me the name of a conference room. “Someone from your group needs to be there, but there’s no one in your group office. Will you be there and represent your group?”

I said, “Sure, I’ll be there.” It didn’t occur to me until later that Al did not mention the subject of the meeting. So I got my coffee, then my lab notebook, and less than fifteen minutes later was in a large, luxurious conference room, along with four others. Half an hour later the briefing was over, and the others turned to me and wondered aloud why I was there.

It happened, by some kind of coincidence, that a week or so earlier, Larry Schwalbe and I had done a pair of simulations. I built the target and ran the base case. He modified the starting conditions and did a second case. Those simulations were truly impressive, and so he extracted about ten frames from the output, blew them up to 8-by-10, and hung them on the wall down the hallway from our offices—in order to claim bragging rights.

Back in the luxurious conference room, I explained my part in those two simulations. All of them had seen the graphics on the wall, so they all agreed that I was the right man for the job. That turned out to be the case for more reasons than one. A week or so later the impromptu team met in a more austere conference room. One of the other men had just finished his presentation and had a very satisfied look on his face. A voice came in my head and said, “Jerry, say something!”

So, “That can *not* be the right answer.” The words just came out, unbidden.

Silence. Except the looks, with raised eyebrows, spoke louder than words: *And exactly who do you think you are?*

So I went on, “The Russians are not stupid. If that were the answer, they would not have spent umpteen billion rubles on this project.”

Silence once again. Then Al piped in, “You know, I think Jerry has a point.”

I have pondered many times the sequence of events leading to that moment in that austere conference room, and it gives me goose bumps even now, eleven and a half years later. The pair of simulations by Larry and me. His decision to hang the graphics on the wall to claim bragging rights. The chance meeting with Al in the hallway just outside my office. No one in my group office. More nebulous, my learning assertiveness, so I would have the courage to challenge an expert in his own field that I knew next to nothing about. In particular, after the project was completed, I asked myself how many other people could have done as well as I did on that project? Technically, there was Larry Schwalbe and one other man in our group. And there was a man at Sandia in Albuquerque. And then I ran out of names. Four. And of those four, who would have had the courage to challenge that other expert? Me. Just one. So it had to be me that Al just happened to intersect in the hallway outside my

office. It is my considered opinion that those three sentences, spoken in that austere conference room justified my salary for the entire thirty years I worked at Los Alamos. A couple of months later I received a written at-a-boy for my part in that project, and also a mid-year raise. And a week later that same expert came back to the austere conference room with the right answer. I can only say this. Yes, we won the Cold War, but there was a time when our entire civilization hung by less than a thread. It was closer than you ever want to believe.

I'd like to conclude with a story by Ken Gaub from *The Christian Reader*, Fall 1987. If you Google Ken Gaub, you can find the unabridged story on Gaub's web page. It was slightly edited for space by *The Christian Reader*. Gaub was a preacher—that's his word—in a Christian church that he didn't identify. I infer that before the start of the story, Gaub had published articles in his denominational literature, because he had spoken at a national conference in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He had driven there with his wife, Barbara, and their two children in their "home on wheels." The speech had gone well, and been well received. Now, as the story starts, they were homebound on Interstate 75. It had been a long day, and Gaub's son announced that it was time for pizza. He was joined in that announcement by Barbara and their daughter, so Gaub took an off-ramp and turned back along the access road to the pizza place. With that back story for context, I'm going to simply read the rest:

Before I had fully parked, the kids were clamoring to get out. Barbara stepped to the bottom stair of our "home on wheels" and stopped. "Aren't you coming, Ken?" she quizzed.

“Naw, I’m not really hungry,” I replied. “You just go ahead with the kids. I need to stretch out and unwind a bit.”

I stepped outside. Noticing a Dairy Queen down the street, I thought, “I really am thirsty.”

“After purchasing a soft drink, I strolled slowly back ... The sudden ringing of a telephone somewhere up the street jarred me out of my doldrums. It was coming from a phone booth at the service station on the corner.

I drew near and paused. I looked about to see if anyone was going to answer. The service station attendant seemed oblivious to the incessant ringing of the nearby phone.

I started to walk on past, but curiosity overcame my indifference. I stepped inside the booth and picked up the phone. “Hello,” I said casually.

The operator intoned nasally, “Long-distance call for Ken Gaub.”

My eyes widened and I almost choked on a chunk of ice from my Coke. Swallowing hard, I replied in astonishment, “You’re crazy!” Realizing my rude remark I added, “This can’t be! I was just walking down the street, not bothering anyone, and the phone was just ringing. . . .”

The operator ignored my crude explanation and asked once more, “Is Ken Gaub there? I have a long-distance call for him.”

Searching for a possible explanation, I suddenly had the answer. “I know what this is! I’m on Candid Camera!”

I reached up and tried to smooth my hair. I wanted to look my best for all those millions of television viewers watching me. I stepped outside the phone

booth looking quickly in every direction. I nearly broke the telephone cord as I stretched it to its limit. I couldn't find a camera anywhere. Impatiently, the operator interrupted again.

“I have a long-distance call for Ken Gaub, sir. Is he there?”

Flustered, I half-laughingly replied, “As far as I know at this point, I am.”

To avoid any further disasters, I set my Coke down as I heard another voice interject, “Yes, that's him, operator. I believe that's him!”

I listened dumbfounded to a strange voice identify herself. The caller blurted, “Ken Gaub, I'm Millie from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. You don't know me, but I'm desperate. Please help me.”

She began weeping. I waited until she had regained control of herself. She continued, “I'm about to commit suicide. I just finished writing a note and while writing it, I began to pray. I told God I really didn't want to do this. While I was writing this note, I suddenly remembered seeing you on television in Harrisburg. I thought if I could just talk to you, you could help me. I knew that was impossible because I didn't know how to reach you and I didn't know anyone who could help me find you. While I was writing, numbers began to come to my mind and I wrote them down.”

While still listening, I began to pray silently for wisdom to help her.

She continued, “I looked at the numbers and thought, ‘Wouldn't it be wonderful if I had a miracle from God and he has given me Ken's phone number?’ I decided to try calling it. I figured it was worth the chance. It really was. I can't believe I'm talking to you. Are you in your office?”

I replied, “Lady, my office is in Yakima, Washington.”

A little surprised, she asked, “Oh really, then where are you?”

“Ma’am, you won’t believe this, but I’m in a phone booth in Dayton, Ohio!” [Ken Gaub, “God’s Got Your Number!” *The Christian Reader*, Fall 1987, p. 10. See also Ken Gaub’s website.]

How do we judge these stories? And hundreds of others? Repeating Larry Schwalbe’s question, “What just happened here?” Can we write them off as coincidences and then simply go about our lives as if nothing happened? The writer we know as Matthew, whom I am persuaded was a rabbi of the highest caliber, speaking through his protagonist, said, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit ... Thus you will know them by their fruits.” [Matthew 7.15-18, 20.]

Surely you see that Matthew was not talking about apples and oranges, but rather to the long term results and consequences. This criterion is not to say that the end justifies the means, but rather it provides a basis to judge both the means and the ends. So what were the results—the fruits—of the synchronicities I’ve described? My first one got the small team of men unstuck and moving forward with the new program, and, more important, I was ejected from an inadequate worldview. Bernie Seigel’s student kept her brother from going out on drugs. The unnamed lady in the grocery store stayed sober. And Millie’s life was saved. Yes, it is true that my talk today suffers from what’s called selection bias, but selection bias

works both ways. There are people who refuse to believe in anything spiritual, selecting only the evidence that fits their case and rejecting any information that challenges their worldview. Personally, I am striving to be intellectually honest and, therefore, to go where the evidence leads. And also, I am striving to *not go further* than where the evidence leads into grand and glorious inventions that future evidence will show to be too much of a stretch. The Desiderata advises to “speak your truth quietly and clearly.” I hope I’ve done that today.

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