

Coincidence, Synchronicity, Fate, Miracle
A Sermon by
The Reverend Bill Clark

We begin today with a story – this is a very true story...

This is the story of young Adam Levine of Cleveland Ohio. At the age of nineteen, Adam, after a powerful argument with his father, Joseph Levine, himself a Holocaust survivor, Adam made the painful decision to divorce himself from his Jewish religious practices and heritage. He journeyed down the painful path of separation. His father, in deep grief and despair felt Adam was making mockery of his legacy, his heritage and of his family's losses. They encountered walls. They both banged their heads.

“Get out here!” he screamed at Adam. “Get out of my home and never come back! You are not my son. I disown you from my heart, from my soul, from my life. I never want to see you again.”

“Well that is fine with me,” Adam shouted back, “because I never want to see you again either!” And he left. Young Adam began to travel the path of a spiritual sojourner to fill his religious void. In a year he found himself in India. Traveling from guru to guru in search of a spiritual path he could embrace. As often happens to distant travelers in far away places he met with a childhood friend from Cleveland. They agreed to meet in a café over some spicy Indian tea and share their traveling stories. After about an hour, as they prepared to depart his friend added that he was sorry to about his {Adam's} father's death.

Adam stood there a bit dumbfounded. He had not heard of his father's passing. No one knew where he was or how to get in touch with him.

Feeling overwhelmed with grief, guilt and despair, Adam wandered around India in a fog. “This country taste like ashes to me,” he commented. “I need to go to Israel.” His traveling companions were confused by his sudden interest in traveling to Israel.

“I just feel this sudden pull. I can't explain it, but I have to go.”

Upon his arrival Adam went straight to the Wailing Wall to pray. The wall is the only remnant left of the First and Second Temples. It is considered the holiest Jewish site in Jerusalem. Jews believe that God's presence is stronger there than in any part of Israel. It is where people from all over the world go to pray, to petition God and to ask for miracles.

Adam went there to pray for his father's forgiveness. Approaching the wall he felt awkward and uneasy as what he was supposed to do. He was given a yarmulke and a prayer book and he walk forward toward the holiest shrine for the Jewish people. He began to cry and pray. "I wish I could ask your forgiveness. How I wish I could tell you how much I loved you. How I regret all the pain I caused you. I left just to find my way in the world. You meant everything to me, Dad I wish I could tell you that."

When he had finished he turned to see what he was supposed to do next. He noticed people around him scribbling notes and inserting them into the crevices of the Wall. He asked a youth standing by, "Why are so many people putting pieces of paper into the cracks of the wall?"

"Oh these are their petitions," he answered. It is believed that the stones are so holy that requests placed inside of them will be especially blessed.

Adam decided he, too, wished to place a petition in the crevices of the Wall. He wrote his note asking for his father's forgiveness and began to search for an empty crevice. Many of the cracks were filled as the local boy had told him. As he finally found what he thought to be an empty space he carefully slid his petition inside. Upon doing so he accidentally dislodged another that had already been resting there and it fell to the ground. Adam quickly picked it up to place it back inside when he had as he described a tremendous curiosity to the read the words written. He unrolled the paper to examine its content. And this is what he read:

"My dear son Adam, If you happen to come to Israel and some how, by some miracle find this note, this is what I want you to know. I always loved you, even when you hurt me and I will never stop loving you. You are and always will be my beloved son. Please know that I forgive you for everything and only hope that you, in turn, will forgive a foolish old man. The note was signed, Joseph Levine, Cleveland, Ohio.

So? – Is this a mere chance that young Adam found his father's prayer stuck in the crevice of the Wailing Wall or – a meaningful coincidence? Is there some sort of force or power that guided these circumstances to unfold and take place? If so, what is it? Do these kind of things only happen to certain people and not others?

Louis Pasteur once stated; "Did you ever observe to whom the accidents (circumstances) happen? Chance favors only the prepared mind." Following this line of thinking is there something we need to do; open

our minds to the possibility; stay awake; be aware; so that such coincidences give meaning to our lives. Was it pure luck for Adam to find the note? Or was there some force; Divine or other wise activated by our own hand and heart, when we act in behalf of our truest dreams, when we commit to our own soul?

In the story Adam described it as a pull, an incomprehensible pull to go to Israel. When we are awake and aware to answer this call, (pull or otherwise) when we commit to it, we set in motion the principle that C.G. Jung called synchronicity, loosely defined by Jung as a “fortuitous intermeshing of events.” (The Artist’s Way; Camermon; p.64)

In researching this sermon the terms synchronicity and coincidences are often used interchangeably. And many of the stories researched demonstrated similar experiences – but many without any profound significant meaning to the actually events. For example;

There were a set of Finnish twin brothers, aged 71, who were killed in identical bicycle accidents along the same road two hours apart, police said. "This is simply a historic coincidence. Although the road is a busy one, accidents don't occur every day," police officer Marja-Leena Huhtala told Reuters. "It made my hair stand on end when I heard the two were brothers, and identical twins at *that*. *It came to mind that perhaps someone from upstairs had a say in this,*" she said.

Identical twins. Identical accidents. Identical deaths. Two hours apart. This astonishing coincidence was reported in newspapers and on newswires around the world in early March, 2002. The odds of it occurring seem remote in the extreme, and it causes one to wonder, as the woman did above - even for a moment - if there's more at play here than mere coincidence. Is it the hand of fate? Is it mere synchronicity? Is it true, as author Elizabeth Kubler-Ross writes, "there are no mistakes, no coincidences. All events are blessings given to us to learn from." (*Online: Paranormal Phenomena; Stephen Wagner*)

I firmly believe events like this happen quite frequently. Are these events the hand of fate – a mere coincidence or some sort of divine movement? Perhaps some of you have had similar experiences. You are walking down the street and thinking of someone important to you – and wham they suddenly appear. Or you are in desperate need of a certain amount of money or a car or anything and suddenly circumstances come together and these opportunities are given to you.

How to explain these events? Is the world made up of random events and circumstances in our lives that merely occur as they occur? Or is there meaning and causality to be found for us in such events?

Norman Vincent Peale states like this: "This is a dynamic and mysterious universe and human life it is, no doubt, conditioned by imponderables of which we are only dimly aware. People sometimes say, "the strangest coincidence happened." Coincidences may seem strange, but they are never a result of caprice – a whim. They are orderly laws in the spiritual life of man. They affect and influence our lives profoundly."

There are lots of arguments for this idea of coincidences, synchronicity, fate and miracles being part of a moving unnamed force in the universe. This may imply that these events are somewhat planned – pre-destined if you will, leading toward a conclusion that there is a force or power greater than ourselves at play here.

There are also lots of arguments that these events are simply random acts, which occur and reoccur without any significant meaning. It is said that the human mind attaches meaning – out of a need for an explanation, to these seemingly meaningless occurrences.

Let me relate to you one more story from my own experience – an experience, which helped alter my thinking around these issues. I may have told some of you this story before but it is certainly worth repeating.

I was traveling in France. It was November of 1975. I was on a hitchhiking adventure through Europe with a good friend. One could do that safely in 1975. We were on the French Riviera staying at Youth Hostel in Nice. We had decided to spend the day apart. Traveling together, hitching hiking, camping together, placed a strain on our friendship. So we decided to spend the day apart. Mindy, went off to Monaco by herself and I choose to stay in Nice and spend the day alone. It was my first time being alone since we began traveling together in September. I strolled to a local seaside café and began writing in my journal of the joys, excitement and frustrations of traveling. I was anticipating the winter months ahead and our mode of transportation via hitchhiking. Although economical in nature it was also cold, unpredictable and becoming rather tiresome. I had also wanted to try this traveling gig on my own.

The original plan was to head to Israel in the winter. Mindy had many friends there from her undergraduate days of study in Jerusalem. I felt she was forcing me to Israel. Deep inside I wanted to venture out on my own. But where to go? How to do this? As I wrote on in my journal the idea of getting a job surfaced in my mind. I could get a job somewhere and be stationary for the winter and then travel more in spring. But where to find a job? I only spoke English. Go to England I wrote. Get a job in London and stay there till spring. It all became very clear as the movement of my pen guided my unfolding thoughts. How to find a job? Buy the International Herald Tribune, I wrote. We were looking at the paper just last night at the hostel and noted the many jobs being offered. Buy the newspaper. And my journal entry ended right there.

I immediately got up and strolled off to find the local newsstand to buy the International Herald Tribune. After purchasing the paper and my package of Drum tobacco and rolling papers. It was very European to roll your own cigarettes. I strolled to another café; I loved the French café society. Café au laite and your own rolled cigarettes. I felt very far from Connecticut. I felt very bohemian.

As I found the perfect table by the sea I turned to the back of the paper where the classifieds were found. Suddenly what I saw jumped out at me as if it were in bright bold letters. It was as if it were the only ad on the page. **“Bill Clark of Bethel Connecticut call home.”** I was stunned. I remember turning around thinking someone was playing a trick on me. I put the paper down. I picked it up again to make sure I wasn't seeing things that were not there. **“Bill Clark of Bethel Connecticut call home.”** I read again. There it was as plain as day. It must be my father, I thought. He had two heart attacks already. Something must have happened. I gulped my café au lait. I paid my bill and rushed out. It took me a few tries to finally locate the local Post Office and I made my call home.

It was not my father. It was my mother. She had suffered a stroke. She was in a rehab hospital. Things were different. Things had changed. My sister told me they had run the ad in the Tribune for three days hoping I would see it. I had not seen it yesterday. This was the final day the ad appeared.

A mere coincidence? Possibly. I could grant a yes if not for the fact that my thoughts and writing actually led me to buy the newspaper. Fate? Chance? All possible – but as our first reading from Lao-Tse stated; “How we explain coincidences depends on how we see the world. Is everything connected, so that events create resonances like ripples across a net? Or do things merely co-occur and we give meaning to these co-occurrences based on our belief system? Lieh-tzu's answer: It's all in how you think.”

My thinking and how I see the world is through, what I call. the movement of grace. Grace! The Reverend Peter Fleck, a ministerial mentor of mine; writes on grace....

“Grace is a blessing, a blessing that is undeserved, unsolicited and unexpected, a blessing that brings a sense of the divine order of things into our lives. The ways of grace are mysterious. We cannot always figure them out. But we know grace by its fruits, by the blessings of its works.”

I firmly believe it was the movement of grace that guided my thoughts and hands that day.

How I think in the world – how I interact in the world is with the belief that grace happens in the world – it happens to everyone – not just wayward travellers reading a newspaper – but, as the bumper sticker states; grace happens – plain and simple.

My friends, how do you view the world and your thinking in it? Is a coincidence a random occurrence without cause and effect? Are there miracles to be found in our lives in the 21st century? In this wondrous faith of Unitarian-Universalism, we get to decide for ourselves – we get to experience it for ourselves, we get to think for ourselves. As Lao-Tse said; “it’s all in how you think.”

What do you think?