

Crossing to safety: Synchronicity and soul-making

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Phoenix, Arizona, March 12, 1999. That afternoon I spend several hours revising a lecture. Having just used the ideas a few days before to write a draft of a chapter for my new book, re-cently submitted for publication, I am particularly eager to discuss them. The central idea is that for Plotinus, the great second-century Neoplatonist, the very essence of soul is finite, divisible, and subject to the destruction of time and simultaneously infinite, indivisible, and immortal. In each experience, at every level, no matter how mundane or exalted, we are both limited, finite creatures, subject to decay, and simultaneously immortal, transcendent beings. This is the unique nature of soul.

Revising the talk puts me in a lovely feeling state. I am grateful for the privilege of being able to discuss such noble ideas, but it is after 5:30 PM. My hosts are going to meet me in the motel lobby and give me a ride to the lecture at 6:45. I have to eat and shower in a little over an hour. I have to get going!

I walk briskly in the brilliant sunshine alongside a six-lane highway full of zooming cars. It feels good to get out and move. But where is that restaurant the motel clerk told me about? After walking for five minutes or so, I see the restaurant, but it must be another five minutes away. Maybe this was "down a little ways" by car, but it is a full ten minute walk. Now I am really feeling time pressure.

At the intersection, I see the restaurant directly across the street from me. There are stopped cars in the nearest two lanes, but the third lane, farthest from me, is empty. Despite the flashing red hand telling me not to cross, I think I can make it to the median divider. I run out into the crosswalk, in front of the two lanes of stopped cars to my left. Just into the third lane: thud!

I come to consciousness lying on the ground and hear a car skidding to a halt ahead of me. I drag myself up from the pavement. I am way outside the crosswalk now and cars are flying by on all sides of me. There is a deep pain in my left shoulder and I am sore all over as I stumble toward the little black sports car that just hit me. My heart is racing.

"I am really sorry," I tell the driver.

"You scared the hell out of me! Are you all right?"

"Can you call an ambulance? My shoulder is busted and I am pretty banged up."

I feel an extraordinary combination of extreme gratitude and pure terror. He pulls the car off to the intersecting road and calls the police with his cell phone. Two beautiful young women come running up to me.

"Are you all right? Wow! I never saw anything like that! You just flew through the air. Can we help?"

With the low sun streaming through their hair to give them halos, they look like angels. I ask them if they can get the book I was carrying. I point it out to them, forty feet from the site of impact.

From past experience, I know that when my ego is off center stage as it is now, the chance for an inspired lecture increases. Although the pain is severe, I still want to give that talk. I

ask the police, "Do you think I can make a 7:30 lecture?" They stare at me as though I am from Mars. In fact, maybe I am. Who else would run out in front of cars to save time?

While they are taking pictures of the sports car I sit on the grass beside it and look it over. The right headlight is smashed, a bit of my blood and scuff marks are on the hood, and the right side of the windshield is badly smashed up.

"The patient is ambulatory and we are taking him to the emergency room now," says the paramedic on his cell phone. I get on a gurney and appreciate lying down. On my back, I notice the vast cobalt blue sky. It seems to lift me up and out of myself.

"You have a beautiful sky here." "Oh, you will really like the ceiling of the ambulance."

They put an intravenous line into my hand, put an oxygen mask on me, and test for internal injuries, nerve damage, etc. They are so kind. I feel such genuine concern for them. I don't want them to worry about me. I know I am OK. I want to reassure them, to put their minds at ease. I thank them repeatedly and inwardly give sincere thanks to all the higher powers.

"You were amazingly lucky. You really damaged that car and you seem pretty good."

At the hospital emergency room, kind and capable hospital staff take care of me. More questions, more probing, blood pressure measurements, and more amazement. They clean the wounds on my left knee and put ice packs on my right leg and left shoulder. The nurses point out to each other the book I was carrying and keep remarking on the title-*Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner. It never occurred to me before they mentioned it.

After being there for about twenty minutes, I hear a great roar from a helicopter. It sounds like it is coming through the roof. There is much bustling about and people leave me for more pressing matters. They wheel in a burly man in his thirties, his head in a restraining cage to prevent spinal injury. His plaid shirt is soaked in blood. For a second our eyes meet and I fall into deep pools of terror. I feel such compassion for him and realize that it could easily have been me.

I am very thirsty, but they will not give me water for fear that I will vomit. After an hour and a half, the police come and make me fill out an accident report. I give them all the detail possible and fully admit my guilt and stupidity. Another helicopter delivery interrupts us. They give me a ticket for \$98.00 for crossing against the light. After three hours in the emergency room, x-rays, and various tests, all they could find is that I have a badly separated left shoulder, banged up legs, and a nice selection of bruises, aches, and pains. I have no broken bones and not even scrapes from where I hit the pavement. They put my arm in a sling and discharge me. In my shaken state, I take a cab back to my motel.

I have a prescription for some powerful painkillers. Although I am in a good bit of pain, it seems manageable. Despite the doctors warning that I won't be able to sleep without the pain-killers, I decide to skip them tonight and not look for an open drugstore. I'll just take some aspirin. I think it is more important for me to face the significance of what happened with a clear head.

I call my wife, Elaine, who is visiting friends in Tucson. No answer. I leave a message saying it is not an emergency, but please call me back. I keep putting ice on my various bruises and reading *Crossing to Safety*. I am looking for some clues to the meaning of it all. Because of

travelling, I only got a few hours of sleep the night before. However, I am so full of pain, adrenaline, and joy that I cannot consider sleeping now.

Over the years, I have developed a method for dealing with nightmares and dreams with troubling imagery. I get out of bed, sit in a meditation posture, close my eyes, and hold the troubling images as vividly as possible in my mind. I set aside any intellectual formulations and interpretations and just concentrate on the images. I become one with them, soak myself in them, no matter how horrendous the images. Eventually this technique drains the fear and loathing from them and I can get back to sleep. I also believe that it allows the images to do their work, to perform the unconscious compensations even when I don't understand them analytically. Several times, I try this technique on my accident. I let the thud, blackness, pain, terror, and the fear of what easily could have been bathe me in all its ferocity. Still, the adrenaline pours through me. It is difficult getting comfortable in bed, but I eventually get to sleep around 3:30 AM. I awake a few hours later and feel like the voltage in my nervous system is on too high a setting. Despite the pain and exhaustion, I am in a state of extreme joy and gratitude.

I have been to the edge of the abyss. In my thanksgiving, I rededicate myself to realizing soul in both its divisible and indivisible nature.

Type 1 Explanation: Sir Isaac Newton and Causality

While in the emergency room I try to reconstruct what happened in the accident. I never did see the car coming, nor did the driver see me. When I ran in front of the car, its headlight hit the left side of my left knee. There could have been little or no weight on that leg, otherwise my knee would have been shattered. Instead, judging from the huge bruise on the inside of my right calf, my left foot slammed into my right calf and knocked me off my feet. Then, as the marks and blood on the car hood showed, I flipped up on the hood with my feet toward the driver's side. The windshield then slammed into my left shoulder throwing me up and outward and the car drove underneath me as it screeched to a halt. I cannot remember either how I went through the air or landed. The impact must have knocked me unconscious and I flew through the air like a rag doll and hit the ground in that state. It must have prevented me from trying to catch myself and, since I could not resist, it reduced the injury of the fall to the ground.

Around 6:00 AM the morning after the accident, I return to the accident site. I go there as part of my exercise of facing the terror as directly as possible. I also realize that two simple measurements and some easy calculations based upon Newtonian physics could yield an estimate of how fast the car was going. I need to measure the distance between the site of impact and where the headlight glass landed and get the height of the headlight.

I learned many years ago how to pace off strides that are very close to three feet each. I find that the first fragments are fully 13 paces (39 feet) from the impact site in the crosswalk and the farthest ones are 18 paces (54 feet). I revisit the site at noon on the next day and re-measured the position of the glass fragments. I want to see if the traffic moved the fragments. I can measure no noticeable change in the position of the glass. I even return a week later, just before flying home. I pace off the distance of the fragments again and find no noticeable change. You don't need much physics knowledge to appreciate that the car must have been going fast to throw glass more than fifty feet.

My calculations show that the car was traveling 40 miles per hour, with an uncertainty of about ten miles per hour in either direction. These estimates seem high, but the driver was passing the cars still stopped in the two outside lanes. He was also test driving the sports car from a dealer. It would not surprise me if he were enjoying the acceleration and handling of that car.

Being hit by a car going at that speed and ending up with only a badly separated shoulder and a few cuts and bruises is not a miracle. The Catholic Church defines miracles as divine interventions that suspend the physical laws of nature. I agree with David Hume who long ago pointed out how incoherent such an idea is. Nevertheless, within the context of what could have happened in my accident, I am extremely fortunate. Appreciating how fast the car was going only deepens my gratitude.

Type 2 Explanation: C.G. Jung and Synchronicity

As the terror and adrenaline rush subsides, the gratitude and devotional feelings grow. I only want to live each moment as though it is my last and devote myself to finding out who I truly am. I used to react so passionate to all sorts of inconsequential things. Now all this ballast of normal consciousness is thrown overboard as I sail on sacred seas. From now on, I have no time for trivial concerns or activities.

Despite the reality and sincerity of my new realizations and associated reforms, I am a boring saint, full of pious platitudes and worn nostrums. However, I know Elaine will not have to suffer me for too long, since the shadow will erupt soon enough and send all my pious philosophizing out the window. I know the old Vic will return, but now it is all light and gratitude. I want to make the most of it.

We had planned some touring on our way to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where I will give another talk. However, I need to recuperate, so we find this extraordinary hacienda in the desert and stay there for several days. There I am in a state of unmitigated bliss. Every detail of the desert is radiant, fresh, and clear. The lodge owner loans me a little CD player and I listen to the music intended for the canceled workshop in Phoenix. Each note of Samuel Barber's second movement of his violin concerto is a blessing. I write some email to friends back home telling them what happened and expressing the depth of affection for them that in normal circumstances goes unsaid. The flood of loving and supportive email that comes back surprises me and moves me to tears.

Looking back, it is clear that the week following my accident was the most beautiful spiritual experience of my life. I certainly would not have chosen that way to get such an experience, but it was still priceless.

There are some obvious and important lessons from the accident. I have been blessed with much energy. However, I often squeeze in too many experiences and rush like a madman to execute them all—the hubris of Mars. I can abuse my blessing. Without dismissing that critical lesson, there must be more to it. Beside my own belief in this, there is the uncanny title of the book I was carrying: *Crossing to Safety*. Although I don't recommend the book, under the circumstances, the title is striking. The title of that book is taken from a Robert Frost Poem entitled *I Could Give All to Time*

In my new book, I give a detailed analysis of this poem. I'll not duplicate that here, but merely say that the poem explains how "Crossing to Safety" only occurs when we make contact with the indivisible, immortal aspect of soul. Only that element of us is safe from the

ravages of time. Any intimation of the immortal aspect of soul is a profound spiritual experience and therein lies our true "crossing to safety."

In my accident, I crossed to safety physically and was profoundly grateful for it. However, I also crossed briefly to the side of immortal soul and that safety is of a deeper order. Although I could not hold on to that light from beyond my ego, I will always cherish my experience of it. I will also always cherish how the two types of knowledge deepened each other. The physics made me appreciate the grace more fully. The grace helped me appreciate the lawful-ness of the Newtonian cosmos, while showing me its limitations.

In this light, I can interpret my experience as an initiation into the indivisible and im-mortal aspects of soul, into that beyond the reach of time, the realm of real safety. It came about through nearly destroying the body, the expression of the finite aspect of soul. In a sense, I had a mild form of near death experience, one of those life-transforming events, which some people have when they are very close to death and are resuscitated. I did not have the usual visionary component, but did experience a transpersonal reality and its transformative effects.

Comparing Types 1 and 2 Explanations

In type 1 explanations, the emphasis is on *causality*, one well defined thing effecting another through the exchange of forces, energy, or information. For example, the headlight hits the left side of my left knee with little weight on it, my left foot slams into the left side of my right calf, and I am flipped up on the hood without having my knees shattered. This is a completely *impersonal* and universal process, governed by Newtonian physics. Although the timing had to be just right, there is nothing special or unique in this for me. You could replace me by a crash dummy and study the phenomena with a high-speed camera. Since the phenomena are all entirely *objective* in this explanation, not dependent upon our likes or dislikes or whatever local customs apply, we could repeat the experiment with the crash dummy as many times as necessary and expect *repeatable* outcomes. The meaning that emerges from such explanation is restricted entirely to the impersonal, material, *factual* level of the event. In other words, it is *devoid of higher meaning* with a complete emphasis on the literal significance of events.

In contrast, type 2 synchronistic explanations are *acausal* or noncausal, not governed by forces and physical energy exchange. Instead, they are *symbolic* expressions of *transformative meaning*, of significant episodes in a person's individuation, of coming to be what we are meant to be, of actualizing our unique wholeness. Because of this, they are *unique* to the individual. If you put somebody else in front of that little sports car, it would have a different significance for that person. Of course, such experiences are *unrepeatable*. Yes, I could run in front of speeding cars more than once, but each time it would be a different experience, since I am transformed and therefore different after each event. Finally, rather than objective in the scientific sense, these experiences are deeply *subjective* intuitions of meaning. The table summarizes the two types of explanation.

Synchronicity and its Challenges

As a physicist, I revere a scientific view of the world. Science brings us many fruits, both good and bad, and it has irrevocably transformed our knowledge of the universe and ourselves. Yet, it does not answer all our needs for explanation. For example, standard science has no place for soul. In contrast, Type 2, synchronistic explanations, are dramatic acausal expressions of mean-ing critical for our psychological and spiritual development-our soul-

making. They cannot be understood scientifically, nor should they be. However, taking synchronistic seriously poses several challenges.

Acausality.

My carrying the book *Crossing to Safety* certainly did not cause the favorable outcome of my accident nor did my accident cause me to carry the book. Although quantum mechanics with its pervasive acausality helps us appreciate the limitations of causality, most of us find acausal explanations difficult to accept.

Spacetime Transcendence.

Although not appearing in the synchronicity story above, such experiences often involve knowledge that transcends the normal boundaries of space and time. Despite the inability of science to explain such phenomena, we can get information through non-sensory channels. As I have shown in my previous book, *Synchronicity, Science, and Soul-Making*, synchronicity experiences often express such knowledge. Occurrences of spacetime transcendence are also well documented in controlled laboratory experiments.

Unity and Meaning.

Despite our usual belief in a Cartesian split between the subject and the world, synchronicity experiences give us empirical evidence for a unity underlying spirit and matter. The unity expresses itself in the soul-making meaning embodied in both our psyche and the world. Perhaps this experience of unity is what makes synchronicity so memorable.

Nevertheless, I suggest that the greatest challenge presented by synchronicity is neither its acausality, nor its spacetime transcendent nature, nor its implication of unity. Instead, it asks us to re-evaluate affliction and appreciate that our greatest healing often springs from our deepest wounds.

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