

“VERY SUPERSTITIOUS”
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Poconos
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My father was struck by lightning. Six weeks ago, there was a thunderstorm out on Martha’s Vineyard, where my parents live. It was about 7:30 at night, and my father was standing in the bedroom in front of a window. The storm was about to hit, and he was getting ready to unplug the TV. At that moment, a bolt of lightning came in through the window and hit him in the leg. Of all the places he could have been standing, and of all the places the lightning could have struck, it had to be there, at the window.

The good news is, my dad survived. He had surgery to repair a torn tendon, but it appears that he will be just fine. Not to minimize his injury but, considering that he was struck by lightning and that he could have been killed, he got off pretty easily. I asked my dad whether he felt unlucky or lucky, and he said, “Both.” Which seems pretty reasonable.

I’ve been thinking about the concept of “luck.” I remember a fellow seminary student who once commented that he never used that word, because he believed that everything that happened outside of human will was God’s will.

I looked up the word “luck” in a couple of dictionaries. One equates “luck” with “fortune,” the chance happening of fortunate or adverse events. Another, Merriam-Webster, says that people also may use “luck” to refer to a “force” that brings good fortune or adversity.

So maybe my seminary friend was saying that he wanted to make it clear to people that he was not referring to some quotidian force, but rather to the Force with a capital “F.”

I actually believe that what we call “luck”, or, “what God gives us” or “what comes into our lives,” that these are all different ways of expressing the same thing. And I’ve been pondering two questions: One, can we influence our luck or what comes into our lives? And then that gets into what some would call superstition or the supernatural. And two, is what comes into our lives totally random or is there some kind of plan, or pattern, or meaning to it all?

Author Richard Bach, in *Nothing by Chance: A Gypsy Pilot's Adventures in Modern America* (1969) wrote, “Nothing happens by chance, my friend... No such thing as luck. A meaning behind every little thing...”

Does the fact that my father got struck by lightning and survived have some kind of larger meaning? Or is it just a random occurrence? Some people might say that getting struck by lightning is a “sign from God.” I don’t know about that. Somehow, it “strikes” me as superstitious. (And yes, that was a terrible pun.)

The name of this sermon comes from the song of the same name by Stevie Wonder. He sings:

Very superstitious, writing's on the wall
Very superstitious, ladder's bout' to fall

And then,

When you believe in things that you don't understand
Then you suffer
Superstition ain't the way.

I first had the idea to do a sermon on superstitions a couple of months ago, before my dad had his close encounter with a bolt of lightning. When you’re a minister, sermon ideas can come from just about anywhere. I do counseling, and one morning I was sitting at my round, glass table across from my client and listening to her tell her story. She said, “So, hopefully, we’ll never have to deal with that again –knock on wood.”

She was about to knock on the table, but, of course, it was glass, so together our eyes glanced around the room until they simultaneously lit on the wooden arm of her chair and she knocked on that. I found myself getting involved and wanting to help her complete the ritual!

You know, I consider myself to be a rational person. Personally, I don’t knock on wood. I know a lot of other rational people who do. And what about keeping our fingers crossed? Even I do that sometimes. Let’s say a friend and I plan to go to the beach the next day, but the weather is iffy. One of us might say, “Well, we’ll just have to keep our fingers crossed.” Think

about...throwing salt over our left shoulder when we spill it, buildings that don't have a 13th floor; we could probably come up with a pretty good list of the superstitions that are still alive and well in American culture.

Sometimes I think these kinds of things are like cultural appendixes –those little organs that sometime, long ago, were probably there for a reason; and these days, they don't seem to have much purpose, but they're still around.

Superstition is basically a belief in supernatural causality: that one event causes something else to happen without requiring the laws of the natural world. Superstitious beliefs and practices exist, I believe, in order to diminish the sense that utter chaos lies just beyond our sphere of existence.

Whatever our cultural background, there's a tendency to use the word "superstition" pejoratively to refer to practices of religions other than the one that prevails in our own society, but not to our own religion, which may include just as many supernatural beliefs.

I think about how most Christian missionaries dismissed Native American beliefs as superstitious, even though traditional Christian creeds include belief in the supernatural.

It was these supernatural beliefs that 18th century intellectuals were concerned with. Thomas Jefferson was one of those rationalists who took issue with the Christian Bible. He blamed the writers for corrupting the religion *of* Jesus into a religion *about* Jesus, "producing the monstrosities of dogma, superstition and priest craft," according to Jaroslav Pelikan, who contributed a scholarly article to the recently republished Jefferson Bible. Jefferson literally cut and pasted the Christian Bible, removing anything he considered to be supernatural in his desire to discover the essence of authentic Christianity.

I think most of us have some unexamined beliefs, the sometimes unspoken or unacknowledged ways that we expect life to work. When we take the time to examine some of these beliefs, sometimes we realize that they are irrational and superstitious. When something bad happens, how many times have you heard someone say, "I'm just waiting for the other shoe to drop."

By the way, this comes from tenement life, where the upstairs tenant would remove one shoe with a clunk, and the tenant below would wait for the

inevitable second clunk. Here's another one of those beliefs: I have several friends and acquaintances who find it hard to enjoy their good fortune, because they always have a sense of foreboding that something negative will follow.

As I sat with the news about my father being struck by lightning, I noticed that I had a sense of dread. It took me a minute to put my finger on it. Both of my grandparents had been pretty healthy until they each had "the first thing" happen. For one, it was a broken thumb. For the other, it was a broken shoulder. In each case, that first thing had led to a downward spiral in their health, until they died.

I saw that my mind was unconsciously creating a pattern, a superstition really, which was saying to me that this might happen with my dad, too. Once I recognized what my brain was doing, I was able to shake off that thought. But I wonder if that propensity to scan the horizon for patterns and connections is something that other people do, too.

The fact that the end of my grandparents' lives bore a parallel is probably just a coincidence. Just as my father's lightning strike was probably a coincidence.

But then there are those coincidences that really make me wonder. We've all probably heard about some pretty incredible coincidences. There are whole books devoted to amazing coincidences. I remember reading about a vagrant who appeared in court and when the judge asked for his address, and the Defendant gave it, the judge replied, "That cannot be your address. That's my address!" (Poor guy.) Or what about the two holocaust survivors who had been young lovers and who found each other, decades later, sitting across from each other in a New York subway car. That's one of my favorites.

It's almost as if, the less likely the coincidence, the more likely we might be to ascribe the event to a divine power. Or to something.

I know some people who say there's no such thing as coincidence. Some of us see everything as a sign, as carrying larger meaning.

The Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho was at one point having trouble getting his career off the ground. One morning, he woke up and felt that he was

going to receive a sign. He said to himself, if I see a white feather today, I will commit myself to being a writer. Later that day, he saw a white feather in a shop window. Long story short, he went on to become an internationally-known author.

Some people call these kinds of things “God-incidences.” Was the fact that my father was hit by lightning right when he was standing near the bedroom window a coincidence or a God-incidence? Is there a larger meaning in what happened to him? I don’t know the answer to that.

I would be comfortable saying that what happened was “meant to be.” I don’t know if there was a plan involved. I say it simply because it has already happened. For me, it’s a way of accepting reality.

If we see patterns or order, if we ascribe meaning to events in our lives, if we believe in things that fall into the realm of the supernatural--those are conclusions based on our own direct experience, which is upheld as one of the sources of our UU Living Tradition:

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life.

Direct experience that leads us to openness and a renewal of spirit. That’s the litmus test. Whether our personal experience leads us to believe that there is some kind divine order or that the universe is completely random, or somewhere in between, how does it make us feel?

Ultimately, there are things we will never know with absolute certainty. And Sharon Salzberg, whose book I read from this morning, notes that in Buddhist teachings fixation on these unanswerable questions would be considered a form of “unskillful doubt.”

I tend to be a practical person. On a practical level, how much does deciding whether I believe in randomness or order matter? I’m OK living with not knowing. And for me, it depends on the day. Sometimes I see order and sometimes everything seems completely random.

I do know that what matters is this: how we respond to what we find before us. What do we make of these events? How do they impact our lives? With

the exception of our own thoughts and decisions, our own words and actions, we really have no control over our lives.

What we DO have control over is our “take” on what happens in our lives. How we interpret these events. The attitudes we take. We can see life as happening “to” us, blaming circumstances and other people for what our life is like. When we are in this place, we usually feel powerless and afraid, angry and resentful. Our world becomes very small and we feel trapped.

Or, we can see life as simply happening, accept, and, this may sound corny, but, oh, well, and we can reach into our toolbox. That toolbox contains the messages we can pull out when life feels overwhelming. Messages like, “I can choose how I respond to this situation.” “I can stop worrying and focus on the here and now.” “I can look for what life has to teach me in this situation.” You can put whatever messages you find helpful into that toolbox.

In this way, we reclaim our personal power. We regain a sense of inner peace. Our world expands and we no longer feel trapped.

What have I gotten out of the experience of my father being struck by lightning? As time goes on, I may have other thoughts, but for now, I know I will probably always have unanswered questions. Life is stranger than fiction sometimes. A lot of gratitude feels right. The time to tell someone you love them is today.