

“The Golden Scarab”  
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The great psychologist Carl Jung was frustrated. He was good at what he did, but with one particular woman, he was at a loss. He had been working with this patient for months, but he wasn't getting anywhere. No matter what he asked her, she had the logic, the answers and the explanations for everything. Jung found himself hoping that something would break through her intellectual armor so that he could help her to access her inner world.

Jung later wrote, “I was sitting opposite her one day with my back to the window, listening to her flow of rhetoric. She [had] had an impressive dream the night before, in which someone had given her” an expensive piece of gold jewelry in the form of a scarab beetle. “While she was still telling me this dream, I heard something behind me gently tapping on the window. I turned around and saw that it was a fairly large flying insect that was knocking against the windowpane from outside, in the obvious effort to get into the dark room. This seemed to me very strange.”

He opened the window and caught the insect as it flew in. It was...a scarab beetle with gold-green wings. He handed the beetle to his patient and said, “Here is your scarab.” The incident poked a hole in the woman's rationalism. In a flash, she saw a connection between the outer world and her own inner world of thoughts and dreams. The experience was life-changing for her. Some would say that this is as it should be, since the scarab is a common symbol of transformation.

It was an important event for Jung, too. For him, it was a perfect example of what he called “synchronicity,” “meaningful coincidences that cannot be explained by cause and effect.” Synchronicity involves an interplay between what's going on inside ourselves and something else that takes place in the outside world. So, synchronicity happens when we dream or think something in our heads, and it seems to be connected to an external event. Like the woman describing her dream and a scarab beetle flies into the room.

And Jung said for it to be synchronicity, the coincidence of the internal mental and external physical world has to have some kind of meaning. I remember hearing about a woman named Maryann, who moved to London to be with her boyfriend. But once she got there, she hated the city and she also discovered that her boyfriend was sometimes pretty difficult to get along with. One morning, she ran out of the house after a fight with him. She was walking along the damp, gray streets, feeling completely miserable. Suddenly she saw something fall out of the sky. It landed right at her feet. It was a dead pigeon. She said later, "That did it." The pigeon was clearly saying, "Go home!" And that's what she did.

I think we've all had things like this happen when we said, "This must be a sign!"

Jung believed that such coincidences offer a glimpse into the underlying order of the universe. He developed his thoughts about synchronicity during a series of dinners he shared with physicist Albert Einstein. Every evening, they talked late into the night as Einstein explained a new theory he was working on. He called it "relativity." As Jung listened, it dawned on him that their work might be connected. He began to see parallels between synchronicity and certain aspects of relativity and quantum physics.

In fact, he and the physicist Wolfgang Pauli talked about the idea that maybe life is not random but rather a reflection of a deeper order, which they called "unus mundus." Pauli's work was showing that there were forces in the universe that went beyond cause and effect. He said, "It would be most satisfactory if physics and psyche could be seen as complementary aspects of the same reality." And it may be that reality is not linear; that it's more like a field of influences and events, all affecting each other at the same time, often in unpredictable ways.

Astrophysicists suggest that there is not just one universe, but multiple universes. Quantum physics theorizes that there are other dimensions that exist between atomic particles. These are mind-boggling possibilities. So why not physics and psyche within the same reality? Why not the universe giving us something meaningful?

David Spangler, author, spiritual teacher and former co-director of Findhorn, says, "We live in a world more intricately and holistically organized than we may ever have previously supposed."

In Buddhist thought, separateness is an illusion. The reality is that everything is interconnected. And I think that we are all looking for evidence of our interconnections with each other and with the rest of the world. It may be that there's a real connection between our minds and the outer world.

In any case, perhaps the more important question for us is this: can being open to synchronicity be helpful to us in our lives? To put it another way, can synchronicity be a sort of spiritual "tool," whether it's an actual cosmic phenomenon or we are acting "as if?"

By spiritual tool, I mean something that can help us to break free of any of the things that are holding us back from being everything we can be. A tool, like meditation, for example, that can help us to be less fearful and more courageous, less cynical and more hopeful, less judgmental and more accepting of life and the options that life presents to us.

It seems that there are many people who have found synchronicity to be helpful. Some people follow their intuition and "watch for the results," says writer Meg Lundstrom. "If a meaningful coincidence occurs, it's a sign...that they're on the right track." She recounts the experience of a woman named Kathleen, who was driving toward the mountains for a hike when she made a split-second decision to go to a pottery studio instead. She knew about the place but she had never gotten around to stopping in there.

She walked into the studio and there was a woman there, who was putting the finishing touches on a large ceramic pot. She told Kathleen that it was a drum, but that she didn't have experience with drums, and said, "I don't know anything about putting a skin on it." "I make drums!" exclaimed Kathleen. They agreed to collaborate, and Kathleen provided the drum skins in exchange for pottery lessons.

Kathleen says that the synchronicity confirmed her intuition that pottery was something that she should pursue.

Allen Combs, the author of a book on synchronicity, says that there is something about turning our choices over to intuition that seems to avail us of synchronicity.

There's an element of trusting in our own deeper knowing. People who open themselves to the possibilities of life instead of being so intent on controlling their lives seem to experience synchronicity more often. Another author who has written on the subject agrees. "Just having an active interest...seems to make synchronicities happen more often –in part, of course, because we notice them more." (Alan Vaughn)

Jung believed that synchronicity often occurs during times of personal crisis and at milestones like birth and death. I'm reminded of two women, Mary and Sandy. They were lying on a beach, sunbathing, and Mary was feeling sad over the recent death of their mutual friend, Beth. Mary spontaneously started humming "Amazing Grace." When she had finished, Sandy said, "That's so strange. I was just thinking about Beth, and 'Amazing Grace' was her favorite song." Mary was stunned. She'd had no idea. They later learned that at that exact time, Beth's family had been holding a memorial service for her.

UU minister Susan Milnor says that, "In our souls, we long for the moments when we are reminded of the wondrous nature of the Universe, the moments that send a shiver through us about how strange and enchanted life can be." Like the golden scarab, these jewels of synchronicity stand out against the seeming randomness of the universe. They seem to fill some deep need that we all have. They can help us to feel connected in an often disconnected world. They can offer a sense of reassurance that there is some sense to it all, in the face of so much senselessness.

Kabir spoke of the Ultimate as a master weaver, intertwining the threads of the universe. When I hear that poem, I picture some of the beautiful old hand woven rugs that grace the floors of our home, and I marvel at their designs. We are ultimately the meaning-makers of our own lives, as we weave the threads of our individual lives into the carpet of the universe.

Maybe that's what synchronicity is all about. Maybe it's about being given the threads of our lives, and sometimes we know how to weave them together and sometimes the universe suggests, "put a blue one here. That will look beautiful. How about some green right here. Yes, just like that. See what a lovely pattern we've created together." May it be so.