

A Shiver Runs Through It

Rev. Susan Milnor, Guest Minister

On December 5, 1664 a ship sank in the Menai Strait off the coast of North Wales. Of its 81 passengers only one survived; his name was Hugh Williams. On December 5, 1785 a ship carrying 60 people sank in the same waters; its sole survivor was named Hugh Williams. And, on December 5, 1860 a ship with 25 passengers sank in the same spot. Its one survivor? You guessed it: Hugh Williams.

If that coincidence doesn't intrigue you, try some others. What about the German woman who found a ring she had lost forty years earlier – inside a potato?

Or, finally, there was the mysterious clock in Winnipeg, Canada that stopped when its 72 year old owner died. Family tradition called for the clock to pass to the eldest son, but since this couple had no male offspring, the widow tried to have it repaired. No one was able to fix it or even figure out what was wrong. One day years later, she entered the house to find the clock ticking loudly. Just then the phone rang, bringing news that her first grandson had been born fifteen minutes earlier.

“Just coincidences,” we say, “mere coincidences.” If you are anywhere near as rationalistic as most of us here, you immediately come up with questions to debunk such events. How common *is* the name Hugh Williams in Western Britain, after all? Did the potato come from the woman's own garden? Could someone have sneaked in and started that clock?

Yet admit it. At the same time we want to explain them away, we *love* coincidences. They *thrill* us. And it is no wonder, for we live lives in which connections are torn apart. We move and leave family and friends behind. We divorce and part from mates. We rip ourselves from religious traditions, or cultural contexts, to which we can no longer, in truth, be faithful. And sometimes, then, we are left feeling disjointed and alone. *But somewhere in our souls we know that's not all: we know the world is filled with dimension, and depth, and unsuspected alliances.* It is like that famous line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, “There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of, Horatio.” *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.*

That's where coincidences come in. Coincidences are gemstone moments, shining, reflecting, breaking through our everyday lives to remind us of the depth and sparkle of the world. All we have to do is let them call us to the connectedness that is always possible. When we say something is *just a coincidence*, we are really saying that there is no cause and effect between two events. *They happen to happen.* In some cases, that's right. Most of the examples with which I started are like that: they don't seem to mean anything (though if your name is Hugh Williams and you are sailing in the Menai Straits, you might take heart). But in other cases, so-called coincidences run deeper, and they reveal to us something important about ourselves and our world. What

they almost always reveal is that *we are more connected to each other and our world than we dare to imagine.*

There is a word for the deeper coincidences, a word coined by the great psychologist of symbol, dreams, and myth, Carl Jung: *synchronicity*. Jung created the term because year after year, patients told him stories of coincidences that astonished and shook them. Jung was struck by how events flowing together in time could add to people's spiritual wholeness, to their sense that there is a magic in reality in which we can all participate. One of the classic famous stories of synchronicity is one he witnessed himself, with a young woman he had been treating for some time.

In Jung's view, the woman was so totally immersed in rationalism that she could not reach a deeper level of human understanding that might help her with her problems. She had the logic, the answers, and the explanations for everything and, thus, could go nowhere. Jung was intensely frustrated with his inability to "sweeten" her rationalism, and he found himself hoping that something would burst her intellectual cocoon.

Late one afternoon, he was seated across from her in his consulting room. She was telling him about a dream she had the night before, in which someone had given her a valuable piece of jewelry, a golden scarab, which is a beetle. Keep in mind that according to ancient symbolism, the scarab represents transformation or metamorphosis. As Jung listened, he heard something tapping against the window pane behind him, trying to come into the room. He rose, opened the window, and caught a large insect as it flew in. When he looked at it, he was startled, for it was a scarabaeid beetle of a mostly gold color. Handing it to her, he declared, "Here is your scarab." The woman was stunned. In subsequent days, that single synchronistic event pierced her life long resistance, and she broke through her emotional paralysis. Yes, perhaps she was transformed because she was ready to be. But it took an incarnation of the mystery of this Universe to free her. Jung knew what to do with a gemstone moment because he knew its simple, profound meaning. *We are more connected to the world than we dare to imagine.*

If you need scientific respectability for synchronicity, consider this. Carl Jung's thoughts about this matter developed during a series of dinners he had with physicist Albert Einstein. Evening after evening, the two men sat in Jung's house talking late into the night as Einstein explained his emerging theory of relativity. Gradually, it began to dawn on Jung that if the warps of relativity are true for space, they might be true for time as well, and they might intersect with the psyche. Another acquaintance of Jung, mathematician W. Pauli taught that there are other forces at work in the Universe besides cause and effect. For our part we would do well to remember that we live in the age of quantum theory and complex astrophysics. Writer Philip Cousineau says that we need to realize that synchronicity is not a linear matter, but a matter of field theory. Reality does not consist simply of one thing causing another, which leads to the next, which causes the next, in a straight line. It is more like a field of influences and events, all operating on each other at the same time and often unpredictably.

In fact, theoretical physicists now entertain the possibility that there may be not one universe, but a multi-verse of universes. Conscious life may have evolved differently in other universes, or there may even be parallel universes to ours. This is the kind of theory that can blow your mind, but it is also a metaphor. Spiritually speaking, in this room we have a multi-verse of personal histories and experiences and perceptions. When we find common meaning and feeling and thought, we discover something important. *We are more connected to each other, and to all that is, than we usually dare to imagine.*

If we can let a shiver run through us at the great, grand nature of this world, we will also be ready for transformations in our own lives. Cousineau tells of the time he was working as a house painter in the Haight-Asbury district of San Francisco. One day, at the end of a brutal work week in which he found himself depressed and discouraged, he wandered into a bookstore, where he was drawn to a book that would change his life. It was Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, about Dana's thrilling, life threatening trip around Cape Horn. So intrigued was Cousineau that he read until dawn the next morning, marking the page numbers of three compelling episodes.

The next day he told his coworkers what an incredible book it was. When he returned to his apartment that evening, he found a package from his father on the doorstep. Inside was a copy of *Two Years Before the Mast*, same edition. Contained in the book was a yellow index card with a message that he should read it immediately. The card listed his father's three favorite scenes in the book – exactly the same three Cousineau himself had marked.

That sparkling surprise filled Cousineau with a sense of wonder. He felt more connected to his father than he ever had in their somewhat troubled relationship. When he told his father about the coincidence, the older man seemed at first skeptical, but then free to take pride in the connection the Universe had afforded him with his son. For the rest of his life, Cousineau's father continued to send him exactly the right books at the right time.

The ancient Hindus had an image of the world, an image not so removed from modern science, not so removed from our Unitarian Universalist affirmation of the interdependent web of all existence. The world, they said, is like a huge net. Holding the webbing together are brilliant, beautiful jewels. In each moment, any stone reflects all the other stones, yet is itself reflected in the others. That, says mythologist Joseph Campbell, is what coincidence is really about. The connections are always there: such is the nature of human energy, human creativity, and human understanding. But at certain brilliant moments, the connections shine through. We see them, and know them, and trust them. *For brief thrilling moments we dare to realize the truth: that we are more deeply connected than we dare to imagine.* All we have to do is to let that awareness call us into relationship, and community, and shared life together.

I'm always on the hunt for coincidences, particularly when I am seeking to connect with new people. The coincidences turn out to be "small world" experiences, not stunning in their nature, but usually enough to provide me with a shiver of connection.

It's also the case that while I don't have particularly developed research skills, I am interested in genealogy. I've spent some time investigating my Milnor ancestors and Terry's Sweetser forbears. His hold particular interest because some of them were very active in the Universalist history of this country.

This past year, when I came to New England to serve as an interim minister, I wondered what how a Southern woman minister, whose ancestors were rooted in Pennsylvania Quakerism and the Scots Irish immigration to the South, was going to connect with a Boston congregation. What beyond our faith, what that was personal, could we have in common? One Sunday, a few months ago, I was standing at the pulpit after the service, and Terry came up. Then a congregational member joined us, and as we talked, I happened to look down and notice for the first time that the big red pulpit Bible came from the Medford Hillside Universalist Church, one of the congregations that eventually merged with the First Parish Unitarian church. I mentioned that it was a Universalist bible, and Terry opened it. There was the dedication on the inside cover: "*In Memory of Mabel E. Sweetser, 1897-1959.*" And, yes, she was a relative.

The meaning of this coincidence was clear to me. The threads of our lives are not separate; our stories are not lone tales. Constantly, the world sparkles with the relatedness and community we can create. It reminded me, my friends, that we are living in a world that truly allows us to blessed be.