

The Coincidence That Made Me Realize How Small Our World Is

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The Coincidence That Made Me Realize How Small Our World Is

By Alvin Wang
UCF Forum columnist
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During a summer trip to Europe, UCF Professor Alvin Wang realized the significance of synchronicity and patience.



We tend to think of human development as an unfolding of stages. As we mature from infancy through adulthood, we exhibit common developmental landmarks such as taking our first baby steps, saying our first word, experiencing puberty, and adapting to the vicissitudes of middle- and late-adulthood.

One problem with this view is that while it emphasizes our shared commonality, it masks the fact that we end up as individuals with our own distinct constellation of traits,

predispositions and quirks. Even identical twins will display nuanced differences in their personalities despite having the same genotype. In short, the question of what makes me *me* and you *you* is not easily answered with stage theories of development.

Carl Jung's concept of synchronicity is a refreshing counterpoint to this view because it directly addresses the issue of how we develop as individuals. He defines this concept as a "meaningful coincidence" between outer and inner events that are not themselves causally connected. The gist of this concept is that we will experience unplanned and unpredictable convergences of events that will have a profound impact on our individual development. For Jung, these serendipitous concurrences are catalysts that propel us in developmentally exciting and unimaginable ways.

Jung reports that he had started seeing a patient in his clinic. The patient was a middle-aged woman who happened to be an Egyptologist. For several weeks she appeared to be making very little therapeutic progress. The patient was so reticent and guarded in her personal disclosures that Jung was actually thinking of referring her to another therapist. But he didn't.

It so happened that during one session his patient recounted a dream she had in which a giant scarab figured prominently. The scarab (*scarabaeus sacer*) known commonly as the "dung beetle" is an important cosmological symbol for ancient Egyptians. At the very moment she finished recounting her dream, Jung and his patient were startled by a rapping on this office window. When he ran to the window and flung it open, a giant beetle flew into his office. At that instant his patient had an insight into her troubles—an "aha moment." She began to understand the source of her troubles and that her preoccupation with Egyptology interfered with achieving a healthy work/life balance.

Having this insight allowed her to begin disclosing her thoughts and feelings. Good therapeutic progress was now possible. As Jung states, this unplanned convergence of events (retelling her dream of the scarab and the surprising entrance of the giant beetle) was the breakthrough that restored her to a state of healthy development. Synchronicity.

I have had moments of synchronicity. The first happened during the summer after my graduation from high school.

I have had moments of synchronicity. The first happened during the summer after my graduation from high school. My good friend Ed and I had planned a one-month camping trip to Europe so we spent our senior year working and saving money for our backpacking adventure. But as soon as we arrived in Europe, things went wrong. Very wrong.

We started bickering like a couple on the verge of a divorce. We argued about everything. Who was going to carry the tent that day? What were we going to eat for dinner? Where would we visit next? No one was having any fun.

One week into our trip, we took the Paris Metro to the small town of Chartres—a lovely pilgrimage destination since the middle ages. When we arrived, Ed decided to walk around town while I pitched our tent at the town's campground. By dinnertime, Ed

hadn't returned to the campsite. A few hours passed and it was getting dark. Still no Ed. Eventually, I fell asleep and in the morning Ed was still missing. I wandered about town looking for Ed, but he was nowhere to be found. Later that day I returned to Paris without him.

Inexplicably, I found myself in Notre Dame Cathedral. As I was walking down one of the aisles I heard a voice yell: "Hey Al!" I turned around and it was...my sister! What? Amazingly, I had no idea that she was in Europe, let alone Paris and Notre Dame. How could this have happened? I start babbling to her about Ed's disappearance and my search for him. My sister stared at me and said, "Are you crazy? Ed just walked around the corner!" And sure enough, I found him just a few steps away from me.

Meaningful coincidence. The fact that the only three people I knew in Europe somehow found themselves at the same location at the same time had a profound effect on me. It made me realize how small our world is.

Moreover, it prompted me to be more patient with others and to not let relationships disappear into a void of pettiness and negative thinking. I endeavored to become a better person. I hope I am.

This is the significance of synchronicity.

***Alvin Wang** resumed his role as a professor in the University of Central Florida's Department of Psychology this year after serving 11 years as dean of the Burnett Honors College. He can be reached at Alvin.Wang@ucf.edu.*