



Destiny, Fate and Luck
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READING/WORSHIP FOR ALL AGES

A Taoist story from “Soul Food: Stories to Nourish the Spirit and the Heart,” Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, eds. pp. 240-1 (adapted liberally, using other sources with the same story)

There once was a man who lived in a small village. He was a farmer. One day, for no reason, his mare broke the fence and ran away.

His neighbor walking by noticed the horse was gone, and stopped to speak to him. “Now you have no horse to pull your plow at planting time. What bad luck this is!”

“Good luck, bad luck,” replied the farmer. “Who can say?”

Several weeks later his horse returned, bringing two splendid stallions with her. Everyone congratulated him. “With three horses you are now a rich man,” the neighbor said. “What good luck this is!”

“Good luck, bad luck,” replied the farmer. “Who can say?”

That afternoon the farmer’s only son tried to tame one of the stallions, but he was thrown and broke his hip. “Now you have no one to help you with the planting,” said his neighbor. “What bad luck this is!”

“Good luck, bad luck,” replied the farmer. “Who can say?”

Soon after, the emperor’s soldiers rode into town and conscripted all the town’s young men to fight in a terrible, bloody war that had broken out in a far-away province. The farmer’s son was left behind because of his broken hip.

“Your son is the only young man in the province who was not taken from his family,” said the neighbor. “What good fortune this is!”

And of course you know the farmer’s reply.

READING

From “Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life,” by Nicholas Rescher (pp. 172-3)

“Good luck!” was Theodore Roosevelt’s favorite parting expression. But of course the reasonable person does not believe that wishing people good luck will somehow help them to get it. The expression displays good will and supportive fellow feeling: it is not a way of rendering aid.

The idea that luck is a somehow personified power or agency whose services can be enlisted and whose favor can be gained or lost is an ancient belief, reflected in classical antiquity by the thriving cult of the goddess Fortuna. Philosophers (especially Cicero) and theologians (especially the church fathers) have consistently inveighed against such credulity, and the diffusion of Christian belief in an all-powerful deity did eventually make some headway against a superstitious belief in luck. Nevertheless, as with other ancient superstitions, ... the practice of seeking to win her favor by paying homage to Lady Luck has never been altogether extinguished.

To be sure, our fashionable modern belief in scientific reason has undermined this tendency to some extent. ... We pride ourselves on living in an age of reason, science, and

technology, where the things that affect our material and social well-being are predictable, calculable, manageable. Or ... as the German poet Goethe puts it:

No one is ready to luck to extend
Thanks for all those gifts that from it we take.
No! All of us much prefer to pretend
That we ourselves our own fortunes do make.

But such a congratulatory self-image is in large measure delusory. Now, as ever, human life largely proceeds in ways not of our making or choosing. Reason can, at best and at most, project its small light into the darkness of luck-determinative chance, chaos, willfulness, and unknowing that surrounds us. No matter how carefully we plot our journey, an unexpected squall can always blow us off course.

SERMON

Whenever I think about luck, I think of my sister Eileen. Not because she is an especially lucky person, she’s no more lucky than anyone else, really. But when we were growing up, and she was the pitcher and captain of the Green Gremlins, the girls’ softball team we both played on, she had a really awesome pair of lucky socks!

Eileen’s lucky socks were nylon knee socks with wide red-and white stripes. Around the top of each sock was a navy blue band with a white star on each side. When she would wear those socks out on the pitcher’s mound, Eileen was invincible!

Or so it seemed, at any rate. How the Green Gremlins actually performed in terms of wins and losses has been lost to

history. But the image of those lucky socks remains vivid in my mind.

Despite the fact that we Unitarian Universalists are reasonable people who don't really believe that we can control and manipulate luck, I wonder how many of us have ever tried anyway. If you've ever wished on a star, avoided a black cat or went out of your way to avoid walking under a ladder; if you've carried a rabbit's foot, avoided taking risks on Friday the 13th, or played certain special numbers in the lottery, you know what I mean. This also goes for "knocking on wood," keeping your fingers crossed, or nailing a horseshoe over your garage door! Many of us have probably done things like this and felt a little silly about them, but figure that they certainly can't do us any harm.

My own mother has an uncanny ability to find four-leafed clovers, and loves to send them to me taped on little pocket-sized cards in advance of auspicious occasions. Just the other day as I was looking through a book, I found pressed between its pages the one she gave me in 1995 on the day before I was ordained as a minister.

But truly, we know that indulging in superstitions is silly. For if they worked, luck would no longer be luck – that uncontrollable force in the world that intervenes now and then in our lives, for good or ill. According to philosophy professor Nicholas Rescher, "Luck is a rogue force that prevents human life from being fully domesticated to rational management." If we can saddle and tame luck with our rabbits' feet and horseshoes, it isn't luck, it's something else.

Rescher also makes a distinction between luck and fortune. "You are fortunate," he writes, "if something good happens to or for you in the natural course of things. But you

are lucky when such a benefit comes to you despite its being chancy – and particularly so if it occurs against the odds and reasonable expectations. (For example) A person who has inherited enough money to be able to travel first class is fortunate, but not lucky in the stricter sense. By contrast, the airline passenger who finds himself shifted from coach to first class for the convenience of the airline is lucky." (From Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life." p. 23)

That's not to say, however, that sometimes having the feeling that luck is on our side can't make a difference, especially in circumstances where our attitude affects our performance. I'll never forget the time when Mr. Stocker, my high school tennis coach, had somehow convinced the whole team that we were on a lucky streak – that day we went out onto the courts and beat players we never dreamed we could defeat.

So, if luck has to do with what chances to happen to us, and is mercurial and uncontrollable, what then are destiny and fate? The concept of fate as an independent power comes from Greek mythology. The Fates were the three goddesses of Destiny, the daughters of Necessity, who presided over the birth, life and death of each human being. They were Clotho, the spinner, who appeared as a maiden and spun the thread of life; Lachesis, the caster of lots, who appeared as a matron and measured the thread of life; and Atropos, the unbending, who appeared as a crone who cut the thread of life.

These three did not necessarily impose an entire life plan upon each person who came into the world, but they did set up conditions within which that person had to operate in their lifetime. I like to think of them as sort of like the fairies who gathered at the birth of the princess in the story of Sleeping Beauty. There were twenty-one fairies in the original story, I

believe, but room at the princess' christening party for only twenty – so one, who was grumpier and more difficult to deal with than the others was left out. But she showed up at the party anyway, just as all the other fairies were bestowing upon the princess lovely gifts like beauty and intelligence. The cranky fairy's gift was that the girl, upon reaching a certain age, would prick her finger upon a spindle and die.

Talk about fate! What a bummer. And of course, you notice, that it was a spindle that would cause her death? Definitely a symbol of the Fates, with their various functions having to do with the thread of life! Fortunately, after the cranky fairy had spoken, there was still one fairy left, and so it ended up that the princess would not die, but only fall into a deep, deep sleep, as would everything and everyone around her, until a prince with the proper moral principles would come and free her with a kiss.

And of course we all know the happy ending to the story (at least in the Disney version). But in the original version, I believe, the fairies had to intervene to discourage the wrong princes who came seeking and to give the right prince a hand in whacking his way through the briars that grew up around the castle where the princess lay sleeping.

This is how it is, too, with the Fates – they were said to help – or hinder – humankind from time to time along our way through life, not simply to set us in motion along a certain path at the beginning.

It's interesting to me that while fate is defined as the principle or determining cause or will by which things in general are believed to come to be as they are or events to happen as they do, we usually think of it as having a negative connotation. Destiny, on the other hand, also implies

something foreordained and but usually suggests a great or noble course or end.

Too great an investment in either, however, means fatalism. According to psychoanalyst James Hillman, fatalism says: "It's all in the stars; there is a Divine plan; whatever happens, happens for the best The world is off my shoulders, for I am living the particular fate that has come straight from the lap of Necessity. So it doesn't matter what I choose. I'm not really choosing, anyway; choice is a delusion. Life is all predetermined." Fatalism accounts for life as a whole – ... it raises no questions. There's no need to examine or reflect upon how events fit in since it's all predetermined. (From "The Soul's Code")

I have a hard time with fatalism, particularly when someone tells me they believe that everything that happens, happens for a reason, or that things happen because they were "meant to be." I understand that such beliefs can be very comforting, but they also choke off what I understand as one of the most important aspects of being human – our free will, especially as it applies to our ability to create meaning from the things that happen to us.

There's another "ism" I have a hard time with that sometimes walks hand-in-hand with fatalism. It's called "teleological finalism," and it says that everything that happens has a hidden purpose and it's all for our growth. Finalism similarly robs us of the opportunity to make our own meaning by dictating that every event is plopped down into our lives to somehow edify us. To this I say, "Stuff and nonsense! Things happen – both good things and bad -- and it's up to us to consider them carefully and process them and find the meaning in them that helps us grow – or not!"

This marks me, quite clearly, as a person embedded in modern Western culture. Our Western view is that we don't like to feel fettered to fate, an outside power controlling our lives. We want to be 'masters of our own destiny,' and we believe that if we just try hard enough, we can do and be just about anything we want. This concept emerged fully-fleshed from the time of the Enlightenment philosophers – whom we UUs claim as ancestors, who believed that human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition, and tyranny and to build a better world.

Other cultures take a different view. The concept of Karma, in Buddhist philosophy, means, in simple terms, that the sum total of all a person's actions and experiences in all previous incarnations determines the fate of their next incarnation. And I have read that in Chinese culture, fate is much more real and knowable. Certain divination methods help people understand the gifts and limitations that they were born with, and thus are an aid to success. Why waste time pursuing paths in life that are likely to be blocked? Luck, too, is much better respected – it is viewed as variable with time, and at least as predictable as the stock market (according to one writer). If you pay attention to the condition of your luck, you can base your actions on how strong it is at the time. And in the traditional culture of the Finnish people, my own ancestors, there is a strong practice of casting various kinds of spells to influence luck and fate.

I believe that the best place where we can meet destiny, fate and luck is somewhere in the middle of all this.

James Hillman gives us some help – particularly in understanding fate without slipping into fatalism or finalism. He writes, “The Greek word for fate, ‘moira,’ means a share, a portion. ‘Moira’ derives from the root ‘smer’ or ‘mer,’

meaning to ponder, to think, meditate, consider, care. It is a deeply psychological term, requiring us to scrutinize events with respect to the portion that comes from elsewhere and is unaccountable, and the portion that belongs to (us), what (we) did, could have done, can do. ‘Moira’ is not in (our) hands, but ‘moira’ is only a portion. Fate does not relieve (us) of responsibility; in fact, it calls for more... it calls for analysis.” (pp. 194-5)

This reminds me of some words I once read from Herb Gardner's play “A Thousand Clowns.” In the play, the chief character is trying to help his young nephew understand the nature of life, and he uses an image he thinks the boy will understand. He says, “Every day is like going to the circus. You remember how a little car always drives into the middle of the ring, and it looks so tiny, and then all of a sudden, all of the sides open up and out pop a thousand clowns? You never dreamed that all those people could be in such a tiny vehicle, but somehow they were.

“That's the shape of life, my boy. There is always so much more to any event than we humans can see on the surface. Do not ever assume you know everything about anything. Every day is a little car filled with a thousand clowns – learn to be humble, and a friend of mystery, and who knows how you will be surprised?”

That's what Hillman is trying to get at – that no matter how much we understand about something that happens to us, there always is that portion of ‘moira,’ of that which we cannot define or understand – the unaccountable. Learning to be a friend of mystery, acknowledging the portion that is not ours but is ‘moira’ leaves us with another responsibility, too – to accept the portion that can be accounted for, and to delve deeper into the meanings it might hold.

Unfortunately, it's usually when life throws something really awful into our path that we find ourselves doing the hard work of making sense out of our fate.

My own best example of this is the time, nearly 20 years ago, when I had the bad luck to be in a terrible car accident. I was in the process of moving at the time – moving from Denver to Los Angeles so that I could be with a young man I had fallen in love with. He and I were headed down the freeway on a hot, sunny afternoon in my small, non-air-conditioned, very heavily loaded car when I fell asleep at the wheel. We went off the road and the car rolled over and over like a barrel before coming to rest on its wheels in the freeway median.

I'll never forget that horrible moment when the car stopped moving and I realized what had happened. Fortunately the man with me was not badly hurt. And thankfully, because I was wearing a seatbelt I was alive. But the fingers of my left hand had been crushed between the car and the road when I grabbed the windowsill to brace myself during the accident and my hand felt like it was on fire. My scalp had been cut and was bleeding profusely. And the hatchback on my small car had opened during the accident and most of the possessions I valued most in the world were either lost or damaged beyond repair.

In the wake of this disaster, many of my friends thought I should view it as an omen that the relationship I was embarking on was doomed. Others thought that I should try to figure out why I had "created this reality," or "what lessons I needed to learn." I struggled with self-blame, knowing that I had been too tired to drive that day, knowing that I knew that

my car was dangerously overloaded, knowing that I knew I was taking a risk.

But the truth is that making meaning of an experience takes time, sometimes a long, long, time. What it does not mean is to perform a reductive analysis of the situation, seeking to lay the blame for it at the feet of someone or something. In the case of my car accident, this kind of analysis might have gone something like this: I decided to move to live with my new boyfriend because I was rebelling against my parents, and therefore I got into the car and drove against my better judgment just to show them – and therefore the accident was really their fault

I'm sure you can hear how ridiculous that is. That's not what 'moira' calls us to do. It also does not call us to self-judgment or blame. In the case of my car accident, in time I came to accept the fact that I had, indeed, acted against my better judgment, and to take responsibility for the decisions I made that day.

I also eventually came to accept the reality that I would go through the rest of my life with a disfigured hand, and to accept the gifts of compassion for others with disabilities and disfigurements that came along with it. Also the gift of compassion for those who are in great pain, for my healing and treatment involved many surgeries, and a great deal of pain. I do not believe that I somehow "needed" those life lessons at the tender age of 24, but I can acknowledge that they have enriched me, even as I still sometimes long for the pretty, normal fingers I lost on that stretch of Interstate Highway 25.

And, as well, I eventually came to accept the irony that my car accident experience, while certainly seeming like bad luck at the time, did alter my life's course in such a way that

many good things have happened – like entering the ministry, meeting and marrying my husband, becoming a mother to my delightful and challenging daughter, and everything that has happened since, including coming here to this wonderful church and being with all of you! Like the farmer, I can only say, “Good luck, bad luck. Who can say?”

And truly, isn't this so for all of us? What event initiated the chain of events led to your arrival in this church community? Was it good luck, or bad? Was it fate? James Hillman names fate as a momentary “intervening variable,” and he invites us to picture it riding under the Germans term “Augenblicksgott” – which means something like “the small god that passes in the blink of an eye.” This little god or “intervening variable” has but a momentary effect – except that, of course, any momentary effect can change our life’s course forever. “Fate,” he writes, “intervenes at odd and unexpected junctions, gives a sly wink or a big shove.” (pp. 193-4)

That shove of fate happens to all of us from time to time. It's as Nicholas Rescher said, “Reason can, at best and at most, project its small light into the darkness of luck-determinative chance, chaos, willfulness, and unknowing that surrounds us. No matter how carefully we plot our journey, an unexpected squall can always blow us off course.” And, of course we cannot be sure that such squalls are fate, but sometimes, giving them that name can get us to reflect on what has happened with greater intention.

And that process of reflection is, ultimately, our redemption.

Because when we reflect on our fate, it changes. Let me explain. Back in 1927, theoretical physicist Werner

Heisenberg introduced an idea to the scientific community which came to be called the Uncertainty Principle. In simple terms, this is the truth that we cannot really know for certain what goes on at the sub-atomic level, because the very act of viewing sub-atomic particles changes their behavior, changes the paths they take when orbiting an atom. Imagine changing something as concrete as a sub-atomic particle, simply by looking it!

Now imagine how that translates into human lives. It’s like the man in *A Thousand Clowns* said, “there is always so much more to any event than we humans can see on the surface.” When we take the time to reflect, to meditate, to look deeper, to spend time considering what has happened and who we are, wonderful shifts can happen. What someone else believes is a failure; we might see as the beginning of wisdom. What others might label bad luck or misfortune, we might see as a date with destiny. As we reflect, we regain our power to choose life, to choose meaning, and to choose action that can bring us out of isolation, out of self-blame or victimization, and into the circle of community where we can heal, and help others do the same.

For, indeed, luck or fate can reach out a hand, anytime, and give any one of us a shove for good or ill. And thus, participating in religious community is one of the best ways we can inoculate ourselves and our children against life’s vagaries. Here we strengthen ourselves and one another for life's journey by sharing our experiences, by aiding one another in reflecting on them, and by adding the meanings we find to the greater pool of human compassion and caring. In this way, we fuel our own souls and help facilitate human health and wholeness.

Destiny, fate and luck. The one thing we truly know is that life will change, for life is always changing. And although

fate may intervene or our luck may change in ways different from our hopes and plans, it's always within our purview to decide how we will name what has happened.

So get out your lucky socks, your shamrocks, your horseshoes and rabbits' feet. Until Clotho stops spinning, and Lachesis finishes her measurement and Atropos cuts the thread of our lives, let us be friends with mystery, let us risk loving one another and taking action in our world for justice: let us live life to the fullest! Amen.