



Amaranth Foundation

Existentialism, Synchronicity & Spirituality in End of Life Care

*They are all linked by the human propensity
to find meaning in ones experiences.*

The goals of palliative care are to prevent and relieve suffering and support the best possible quality of life for patients, their families and caregivers. Palliative care is applicable early in the illness and also for families in bereavements. The diagnosis of a life threatening illness often results in the person reflecting on the meaning of life with concomitant spiritual, religious and existential questions. The mind and body are closely related in all health and illness.

Existential

The word '*existential*' describes experiences related to existence and experience; with emphasis on human existence and how a person makes sense of experience and existence. From a philosophical stance it describes those elements that exist and are identified as known by an experience rather than that known by reason. The importance of the patients' existential concerns in end of life care was described by Cicely Saunders in the 1960s when she introduced the term *total pain*, acknowledging that pain was more than just a physical sensation, including the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimension. Existential needs are linked to the wish to maintain a meaning in life, to infuse life with freedom and relationships as well as sustain purpose and hope. *Existential suffering* needs a biopsychosocial response, nurturing courage and maintaining each persons sense of meaning, value and purpose. ¹(for more information please see: Vol 5 Issue 3 September, 2016)

Synchronicity

Synchronicity is the phenomenon of experiencing two or more events as meaningfully related; they may be connected by meaning without having clear causal relationships; a grouping of events by meaning need not have an explanation in terms of cause and effect. Acceptance of this phenomena opens up new avenues to help give meaning to and make sense of, our and others experiences.

Spirituality

Modern *spirituality* involves a search for meaning and is centered on the deepest values and meanings by which people live. It embraces the idea of an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality. It envisions an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his/her being. Research shows that interest in spirituality confers physical and mental health benefits including reduced incidence of depression, lesser suicide risk, and increased individual happiness. ²

There are more things in heaven
and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt
of in your philosophy.

William Shakespeare

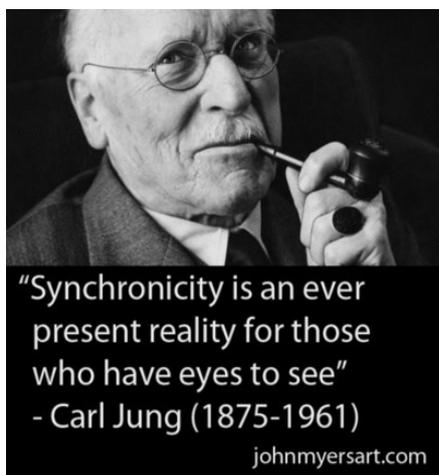
Inside this issue:

Synchronicity and Carl Jung	2
... and apophenia	2
... and spirituality	3
... and Chris Mackey	3
... and Mental Health	4

The concept of synchronicity was first proposed by the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, in the 1920s in a book co-written with Wolfgang Pauli, the father of quantum mechanics. It was the power of synchronicity to overwhelm the rational mind that held significance for Carl Jung (1875-1961) : the apparent lack of explanation for the occurrence of two simultaneous events. Jung noted that the occurrence has special meaning for the person who experiences it. This implies that unknown forces in our universe have the capacity to make visible, in the world of concrete form, the contents of the invisible realm of consciousness.³

The concept does not question, or compete with, the notion of causality, but rather maintains that just as events may be connected by a causal relationship, they may also be connected by meaning without clear causal relationships — a grouping of events by meaning need not have an explanation in terms of cause and effect.⁴

Jung recognized that synchronicity, which he defined as meaningful coincidence, had the effect of breaking through the “rationalistic shell” of the modern scientific mind. It is a form of coincidence powerful enough to shatter the notion that material science has discovered all there is to know about the universe. A classic illustration of synchronicity presented by Jung involved one of his patients, a woman with a highly developed rational mind— a fact that made her psychoanalytic treatment difficult. One day she was telling Jung about a dream she had had in which she received a golden scarab, a beetle with significance in Egyptian mythology. Just at that moment, Jung reported, he heard a noise “like a gentle tapping” on his window. When he opened the window, a scarab-like beetle flew in. Jung caught the beetle and presented it to his patient saying, “Here’s your scarab.” The stunning impact of this synchronicity overwhelmed the defences of her rational mind and led to a breakthrough in her treatment.⁵



Plato wove historical fact into literary myth.

Michael Shermer

Many believe that synchronicity is “apophenia”, or the experience of seeing false patterns in random and meaningless data. Both exist. The trap of synchronicity is to create connections that are misleading; the trap of apophenia is to refuse to accept valid connections that lead to important insights and improved life choices.⁶

Other psychological phenomena may affect apophenia. By selecting data, consciously or unconsciously, apophenia can include “hindsight bias” (the ‘knew-it-all-along effect’) where seemingly meaningful events are interpreted as having “obviously” led to the present situation. “Priming” (exposure to one stimulus will influence the response to another stimulus) a stimulus will increase the likelihood that it will be “seen” or noticed even when it isn’t actually there. A feeling of a loss of control can also increase the detection of false patterns in random data such as visual noise and stock market reports.

The general term “pattern-seeking” is sometimes used synonymously with apophenia. Michael Shermer coined the term “patternicity” in 2008 to describe apophenia. He contends that “reality exists independent of human minds, but our understanding of it depends on the beliefs we hold at any given time”. Our beliefs are formed for a variety of reasons, ie subjective, emotional and psychological; they are formed in the context of environments created by family, friends, colleagues, culture and society at large.⁷

Although all living things recognize patterns, humans may be the only ones to assign symbolic meaning-sometimes deeply nuanced or with powerful emotional content-to those patterns. Anthropologist Leslie White suggested that the tendency to create patterns/symbols is actually what makes us human. All of these evoke connections, sometimes pulling them from the hazy subconscious or even deep recesses of unconscious memory. Music and especially smells do this. It's what makes us feel nostalgia. However, when those connections are spurious and erroneous, that's apophenia.

Apophenia is a normal human experience. It's not usually pathological but can become so in schizophrenia, when pattern recognition and interpretation run wild. A famous example is that of the brilliant MIT physicist John Nash, featured in the film “A Beautiful Mind,” whose preoccupation with “meaningful” patterns became disabling. When the noises in the air conditioner are interpreted as voices telling you to do bad things, it's time seek some help.⁸

Footnotes

1. Kissane, 2012
2. <http://chrismackey.com.au/synchronicity-science-and-spirituality-2/>
3. http://whentheshoulawakens.org/synchronicity-and-the-soul_288.html
4. <https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Synchronicity>
5. http://whentheshoulawakens.org/synchronicity-and-the-soul_288.html
6. <http://personaltao.com/teachings/shamanic/synchronicity-signs/>
7. <http://www.michaelshermer.com/2011/07/the-believing-brain/>
8. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reality-check/201111/11-11-11-apophenia-and-the-meaning-life>

Modern *spirituality* is centered on the "deepest values and meanings by which people live." It embraces the idea of an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality.⁹ Puchalski et al., who argue for "compassionate systems of care", offer the following definition of spirituality in the operationalization of spiritual care: "Spirituality is a dynamic and intrinsic aspect of humanity through which persons seek ultimate meaning, purpose, and transcendence, and experience relationship to self, family, others, community, society, nature, and the significant or sacred. Spirituality is expressed through beliefs, values, traditions, and practices"¹⁰

Synchronicity is just one way of tapping into a spiritual dimension in one's life. For many, the phenomenon of synchronicity provides a direct and unmistakable encounter with the mysteries of the spiritual realm. Because the experience has particular meaning to the individual involved, it has the power to open a portal to "the world of meaning,"

Nancy Seifer (2008) states that the invisible, subtle dimension of spirit that is closest to our personalities is the realm of the 'soul', a realm technically related to the higher dimensions of mind, but one which also provides access to the plane of higher intuition. While the personality exists in a world of constantly changing circumstances and events, the soul dwells in a world of meaning. From the perspective of the soul, the world of outer circumstances is a kaleidoscopic collection of symbols. Everything that we experience on the material plane is symbolic of something hidden within the deeper folds of consciousness. The task of the soul is the uncovering of the meaning of life experiences, attempting to discern what each new circumstance may be trying to teach us. The how and why of these events remain great and unsolved mysteries. But we do have some hints about how synchronicity may work, both from physical science and esoteric science. In the science of electricity, one of the meanings of the word "synchronous" is "having the same frequency." In esoteric science, we learn that the key to opening a portal to a higher dimension of consciousness lies in attaining the same frequency as that higher dimension. The Tibetan Master has written: "Only synchronous vibration to that which lies on the other side of the door produces its opening." By observing synchronicities and trying to garner their meaning, the individual is drawn into the realm of their very personal spirituality and their very personal understanding of the meaning of their experience or experiences.¹¹

<http://chrismackey.com.au>

Chris Mackey is a Geelong-based clinical and counselling psychologist with 35 years' psychotherapy experience and a Fellow of The Australian Psychological Society. Chris has a particular interest in promoting more optimistic approaches to mental health, including positive psychology .

Chris Mackey defines Synchronicity as: the uncanny and fortuitous timing of events that seems to go beyond pure chance. He believes that synchronicity can act as a guide along our life path, helping us through challenging times and nudging us toward self-fulfilment. He states that "once we entertain the potential validity and meaningfulness of synchronistic experience, including in the setting of a psychologist's consulting room, a whole new interpretive world opens up for how we might make sense of our own and others' life experience. It can expand our perspective and facilitate new ways of perceiving life challenges and potential ways to address them. "

He offers astounding case studies, alongside a lucid explanation of the brain science underlying synchronicity and many practical suggestions for working with it, from journaling and symbol analysis to dream interpretation and ideas for accessing flow. He is convinced that synchronicity has a crucial role to play in helping us "go within" and tap into our intuitive and spiritual selves.

"I believe any attempt to promote truly holistic health services would require some shared focus on aspects of health that relate to body, mind and soul. "

Chris Mackey believes that it is important to be open to discussing spiritual beliefs, including an individual's values and sense of life purpose. Conflicts at that level can show up as psychological and physical problems, but are too often ignored. He believes that to be truly holistic in the presentation of health services, the soul must be acknowledged. This remains remarkably out of fashion in psychology and particularly psychiatry, even though the historical roots of these words suggest that they relate to the "study of the soul" and "soul doctoring".

Mackey states that we don't have to be religious fanatics to consider the notion of soul. We just have to be open to there being a deeper level of awareness beyond the usual conscious realm. Mackey believes that partly relates to deep intuition and he feels it helps if health professionals are open to our own and our client's intuition as an additional important source of information.

Interesting link:

"Synchronicity: Empower Your Life with the Gift of Coincidence" (<https://www.youtube.com/embed/-kH4gEt8Kqk>)

I believe we shall increasingly come to accept that anything that is good for our mental health, such as explicitly acknowledging a spiritual dimension in life, is also a good thing for our physical health.

Chris Mackey

“HOW PEOPLE *Live* MATTERS”

... it really does.

COROWA COUNSELLING CENTRE
Cnr Redlands Rd & Guy St
COROWA NSW 2646

HEALTH & WELLBEING CENTRE
46 Peter St
WAGGA WAGGA 2650



Phone: 02 6033 1738
Mobile: 0408 388 533
Fax: 02 6033 3507

info@amaranth.org.au

We are on the web:
www.amaranth.org.au



[@AmaranthOz](https://twitter.com/AmaranthOz)

**There is not one big cosmic
meaning for all;
there is only the meaning we
each give to our life,
an individual meaning,
an individual plot,
like an individual novel,
a book for each person.**

Anais Nin

... and Mental Health

For mental health in particular, it is important to be open to discussing an individual's spiritual beliefs, including their values and sense of life purpose. Conflicts at that level can show up as psychological and physical problems, but are too often ignored. Mental health is enhanced by positivity, hope and meaning.

The benefits accrued from the adoption of an optimistic outlook are generally accepted. This relates to the innate connection between mind and body and health and illness. Our mindset can make us better or worse. The use of optimistic language, with a focus on an individual's strengths and supports, encourage resourcefulness and hope. Chris Mackey¹² contends that to be truly holistic one must acknowledge not only the body and the mind but also the notion of 'soul'.

We just have to be open to there being a deeper level of awareness beyond the usual conscious realm. I believe that partly relates to deep intuition.

Positive psychology is the study of human flourishing; a study of strengths and virtues to enable individuals to thrive. Synchronicity relates directly to the "PERMA" model of positive psychology developed by Martin Seligman in his 2011 book "Flourish". In this model there are five essential elements that should be in place for us to experience lasting well-being. The five domains are *positive* emotions, *engagement* in activities and roles, *positive relationships*, *personal meaning* and *accomplishment*. Anything that enhances these aspects of our life experience is consistent with positive psychology.¹³

Synchronistic experiences have proven to have potential beneficial, even profound, impacts on individuals. Synchronistic experiences can have immense personal significance, often reinforcing one's sense of fate, or destiny, or life purpose. Such experiences enhance our sense of connectedness with the world and with others, an important component of good mental health.

Synchronistic experiences may provide specific benefits to peoples' mental health, some of which are related to neurogenesis and neuroplasticity or the development of new brain cells and connections between them. Mackey asserts that these novel and numinous experiences are associated with a sense of wonder, fascination and awe. He states that they are especially powerful for stimulating neurogenesis (the development of new brain cells) and neuroplasticity (development of connections between brain cells), triggering the release of dopamine, which boosts energy as well as motivation and pleasure in pursuing a goal, and consolidating the new brain connections that support such rewarding activities. These outcomes have obvious potential benefits for pursuing purposeful goals and enhancing mental health.¹⁴

The powerfully energizing nature of synchronistic experiences induce positive emotions that can strengthen a person's sense of life purpose and meaning. This helps them engage more fully in life roles and tasks that they are performing which in turn helps them achieve what they set out to do. This then helps with their sense of connection with other people and with their world, with obvious benefits for enhancing mental health.

Footnotes

9 <https://en.wikipedia.org>

10. Puchalski Christina M., Vitillo Robert, Hull Sharon K., and Reller Nancy. Journal of Palliative Medicine. May 2014, 17(6): 642-656. doi:10.1089/jpm.2014.9427. 11 Adapted from : Nancy Seifer 2008 *Synchronicity and the Soul* http://whenthesoulawakens.org/synchronicity-and-the-soul_288.html

12 <http://chrismackey.com.au>

13 http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/synchronicity_and_Positive_psychology.pdf

14 Mackey, C. *Synchronicity: Empower your Life with the Gift of Coincidence* Watkins Media Ltd 2015