

Reflection: 10/18/17

I want to share a moment with you that, when I looked to find what I had written about the incident, I realized happen exactly a year ago tomorrow. October 19th of 2016. Coincidence? Or a Sign?

That day I had an important business meeting in NYC in an office building near Battery Park at 3pm. I boarded a train in Stamford at 12:25 pm, giving myself a good hour cushion to be there on time and prepared. The conductor announced, at about Greenwich, that the train had a technical failure, and they were going to take the train out of service. This turned out NOT to be the kind of “take the train out of service” that is to park the train at the Greenwich station, and put all the passengers on a working train. Oh no. This meant we limped along at about 10 mph for the duration of the trip. The planned arrival for 1:15 became 2:05 pm.

Next, the subway was delayed 20 minutes. I was, at this point, agitated, annoyed and completely stressed out. There seemed to be no way to make the meeting on time. And in my life at that time, and for much of the time since, completely stressed out was becoming my new normal.

For those of you who know me personally 2016 had been a challenging year so far. My appendix had burst that June and I would undergo 2 medical procedures and then surgery in August before I was on my way to recovery. My appendix burst the weekend I had to tell my children their parents were getting divorced, which was just after I had switched jobs. I would say to my friends, “I think I am stuck in the spin cycle of life”, and it seemed I was.

On the subway platform a younger African American woman struck up a conversation with me. She turned out to be a lawyer with the Women’s Media Center and Women Under Siege project. Let’s just say this meant she had a lot of experience with the suffering of female slaves and others in 3rd world countries, which she shared with me in her thoughts about “real” stress as we chatted. She made me consider that even on our worst day, 99% of the population thinks what we have is their idea of great. She gave me her advice and wisdom on stress, and the cumulative impact of stress. It was an engaging and helpful conversation. It helped me consider what “real” stress is, and distract me from the despair I was experiencing that my plan for being punctual had fallen apart.

In those 20 minutes she made it her job to ensure I didn't take the 6 (local) that kept coming instead of waiting for the 4 or 5 late Express train that she was certain would have me make my high stakes appointment on time. She kept insisting that my desperation as to "why am I having the worst day of train luck?" was instead an example of how everything was working out.

She had this conversation with me not even knowing that I was going through the difficulties of a long-term marriage that ends in divorce. As far as she knew I was subject to appearing stressed out by train delays, and close calls on business meeting punctuality.

Indeed, the Express train finally came, and I arrived at Battery Park and the office building for this 3pm meeting at 2:50pm, with 10 minutes to spare.

She was pure inspiration, and her ability to help me see that what I thought was going wrong was going fine has stayed with me.

I have been to the subway platform for the 4, 5 and 6 subway hundreds of times, and I can't recall striking up a conversation, then or since, much less one that was so inspiring. If I find out some day Jesus planted her there I would not be surprised.

In this moment last October on the subway platform, taking in the advice of a total stranger, it turns out that the stress I was feeling was not as intense as the stress I would encounter over the course of the next year in a series of stressful events that lay ahead: finalizing the divorce, the stress of moving out, the plan to buy a home in Stamford that fell through, and the plan to rent that same home that fell through, too. It was before the cat died, and my hair fell out, and before on a warm day this July when I found myself on my way to the animal hospital ER with our new kitten, Bailey, who was covered in the yellow pollen of tiger lilies that, it turns out, is deadly poisonous to cats. We did not need to lose a family pet just now!

(I do know that everyone has stuff going on! This is not just "woe is me".
Promise.)

And yet because of that random moment at the subway platform, because this stranger made me reflect on the difference between hope and despair—two words that are both a noun and a verb—she changed my mindset. I was, from then on, able to think deliberately in each of these situations about whether, like the pocket of time I built into the timing to make the meeting on time..... that in each situation whether it is life falling apart, or working out.

The home purchase falling through in early April is a case in point. I would like to think that during the weeks that stretched from a process that included finance approval, a dismal and disappointing home inspection report, new relationships with representatives from Pella and Andersen Windows, to ultimately deal rejection, that I was resilient. That even toward the end as it turned into a rental conversation, and receiving a lease written as if the dog and the cat were a bear and a mountain lion, that I was able to toggle between disappointment and a sense of optimism that everything would work out.

The afternoon that the rental fell through I drove to New Canaan to see the one place left in a dismal inventory. I remember the drive up the Merritt well because my anthem from the 80's, Bob Marley's "Everything's Gonna Be All Right" was on the radio, and as I travelled in the second lane I became stuck behind a Fiat with "think mac" emblazoned across the back window. "Not amused!" is what I thought. (a. You will need to "get" my prior Father Mac references to understand this detail. b. think mac is a computer repair store in Norwalk.) Long story, short. We ended up in a lovely and comfortable in-town rental townhouse in New Canaan. It has been one of the best examples yet that what seemed to be going terribly wrong was going fine.

I love pondering what's random, what is coincidence, and what is a Sign from God. If I ever get a PhD in life my thesis will be on the topic of coincidence—it fascinates me.

I sent an email to Mark, which I do when coincidence strikes, to have him tell me definitively whether or not it is, in fact, a Sign. I put a lot of pressure on him for certainty, which he can not give me, but he is peerless in providing an intelligent and insightful response along with something to ponder.

He said back to me, “I don’t know if Jesus planted the woman on the platform for you. Another way of thinking about it is that the woman was Christ herself. It’s the distinction between the historical Jesus and the cosmic Christ.”

The cosmic Christ. This was a new idea for me, and it has stayed with me, too.

In response Mark sent me a Gerard Manley Hopkins poem to read and reflect on called, “*As Kingfishers Catch Fire*” that captures this idea in the last stanza.

So, let me read it to you.

“As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

And so, I keep looking for those God moments, or the face of Christ for me.

And working on choosing to keep my mindset focused on hope, rather than despair.