

Weird Coincidences, Supernatural Events, Funny Feelings – Is That You God? The God You've Already Experienced

Mako A. Nagasawa

November 4th, 2004 for BUAACF

Introduction: The Voice

I think a lot of us have experienced something subtle and small that we couldn't really explain. So let me tell you one of my experiences. It happened when I was about 16 years old. I had been bodysurfing at the beach, Huntington Beach in Southern California, to be exact. I had been a competitive swimmer for 8 years already. I was the captain of my high school Varsity water polo and swim teams. So I had no fear of water, no fear of drowning. In fact, I had hopes of getting a swimming or water polo scholarship to college. Now my friends and I went to the beach once or twice a week during the summers. We swam around the Huntington Beach pier – which is 400 yards long – for fun. But on this particular day, I remember walking out along the pier, eating a burrito or something. I stopped to watch some fishermen. I looked at the ocean. And, as if for the first time, I was struck by how big and powerful it was. I felt very small. I started shivering. And it was though a voice said to me very quietly and said, 'You see Mako, there is someone greater than you.' I stepped back and said, 'What was that?!? Where did that thought come from?' I normally wasn't afraid of swimming. I didn't believe in any kind of God at that time in my life. But everything I thought about evolution and stuff still didn't stop me from thinking about someone greater than the ocean and the world. The best phrase I can use to describe that feeling is: primal fear. Then I thought, 'Boy that was weird,' and pushed that thought to the back of my mind and didn't think about it for a while.

But what was that? Was it just a random thought that popped into my mind? Or was it that the 'Someone who was greater than me' pulling back an invisible curtain for just a moment and allowing me to see reality in a fresh way? Was it God? Bear with me for a moment, because I know this sounds strange. But many people have had these kinds of experiences. Two weeks ago, Curt Schilling, the Red Sox pitcher, said he had some of these experiences. And I'm willing to bet that some of you have, too. It was probably something subtle, small, almost unnoticeable, or just barely extraordinary. And maybe you too have thought, 'That was weird.' And you've pushed it to the back of your mind.

It comforts me that very smart people have had these experiences, too. A woman named Martha Beck lives right here in Boston. She and her husband both were educated at Harvard and got Ph.D.'s from Harvard. Her husband John studied Economics in Asia. Martha studied the Sociology of Gender. When they learned that their son Adam would be born retarded, their lives took a dramatic turn. Not just because they now had a special needs child, but because somehow they slowed down enough to listen to another side of life, a spiritual side perhaps. They started to experience weird things, like people they had never met knowing things about them even before they did. One time, just after Adam was conceived, they lost control of their car on the road to New Hampshire. They spun around four times into the oncoming traffic but didn't get hit. She writes, 'The odd thing is that I never had any doubt we were completely safe. I remember being mildly concerned that the spinning motion might make Katie [their daughter] carsick. I tried to turn around to look at her, strapped into her car seat behind me, but I was pinned against my own seat by a centrifugal force stronger than anything I had ever felt. I couldn't even move my head. So I just relaxed and watched the leaves go by.' (p.15) Then when their car stopped, two men rushed over to make sure they were okay. One of them was retarded. He looked straight at Martha, who was pregnant with a boy, and said, 'He's a good baby, ma'am. You take good care of that baby.' (p.17) This happened even before they knew Martha was pregnant. How come Martha felt like everything was under control? How come a retarded man talked about a baby boy that she would later have, who would be retarded? How come when Adam was born, she could look back on this event and say, "Huh! What was that about?" You should read her book, *Expecting Adam*, which is a national bestseller. She talks about a whole lot of other experiences she's had.

Interaction

Is it coincidence? I don't think so – there are too many similarities across multiple people, not just me. Is it the human mind looking for patterns? Maybe, and I'm sure sometimes it is, since many people experience a sense of awe when they look at the natural world, like I did at the ocean. But even if that were

true, it still begs the question, 'Is there Someone greater than us? Someone who has set up patterns in the universe – these aren't just constructs of our mind.' What if this is **God**? Well, here's one test: If it's God, then will He interact with me in some way? Is there a way to interact with Him?

Illus: During my senior year of high school, I had one other strange experience that I couldn't really explain. It was April of 1990, and I was deciding what college to go to. I had gotten into four schools in California and also the 8 year pre-med and med program at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. I wasn't sure I wanted to be a doctor, but I did think about it. So my parents and I decided that I should at least take a look at it. So we booked my ticket. I asked my friends to drop me off at the airport. Before we left, I prayed. I was just beginning in my spiritual journey, and I really didn't know who I was praying to, but I prayed anyway. Something like this: 'God, this is a big decision I'm making. I could really use Your help in making it. Would You show me something about what I should do?' My friends Malcolm and Harvey picked me up, and they were going to meet up afterwards with some other friends. So we stopped at our high school, since that was on our way, and hopped the fence to use the payphone. When we hopped the fence again, Malcolm tore his sweatshirt on the fence, all the way up from the bottom to his arm. It was one of his favorite sweatshirts, and Harvey and I laughed. When we got to the airport, someone came on the PA system and said, 'Mako Nagasawa, please pick up the white courtesy phone; Mako Nagasawa, please pick up the white courtesy phone.' I thought, 'That's weird.' My mom had called. I called her back, expecting something to be very wrong. She said, 'You forgot your toothbrush. You need to buy another one.' I said OK. I got on the plane to NY and caught a small propeller plane to RI. During that short flight, I fall asleep only to wake up to the stewardess spilling orange juice on my lap. So I get off the plane with a big wet stain on my khaki pants. I'm waiting for the water polo coach to come and pick me up, because we had wanted to meet each other. Turns out he forgets. I call his home and his wife tells me to just take a taxi into campus. I do that, meet some guys on the team, drop in on some classes, walk around the campus, go to a dance performance with some people, and afterwards to a small party. The last day, the water polo coach takes me back to the airport, and we're driving down a street still near campus. We come up on a police squad and a TV camera crew looking into a small side street. We pass it, and I look to the right, and see a dead body. I said to God, 'Okay, that's enough! I get it! Five clues.' So I didn't go to Brown. I went to Stanford instead. That wasn't the only reason, but I did decide that way.

So that was strange, and again, I'm not saying that prayer is something magical. I don't feel like God always answers my prayers in ways like that, or even answers them in ways I recognize or expect. Heck, I don't even think God should answer all my prayers, because some of my prayers are really silly. But there is an element of mystery. In that case, and in some other cases, it was just enough, just enough to make me wonder.

Now here's a disclaimer: I'm not saying that God causes everything, especially not evil and suffering. Not at all. What we're talking about tonight is that there is a certain genre of experiences that many people seem to have. And that is: Occasionally there is the sense that God is opening the curtain into His reality and showing us a glimpse of it.

Incidentally, this was the view of J.R.R. Tolkien. He believed in Jesus, and you can sense glimpses of that throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Like when he quotes the story of the resurrection of Jesus when he describes the resurrection of Gandalf. Someone is moving this story along. Someone is behind the scenes, greater than Gandalf, who wants evil to be defeated. There is Someone greater, greater even than the Lord of the Rings, who acts in a mysterious way to bring about good. When Frodo is being chased by the Nazgul in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, according to Tolkien, 'he heard himself say,' the name 'Elbereth.' It's an ancient name, and it drives the Nazgul away. And it's as if someone else speaks through Frodo, since he 'heard himself say' that word. Those are just some glimpses of a deeper reality. The veil is opened for just a moment.

Does God Want Relationship?

But ultimately, we would have get into some more serious questions. What does God really want to communicate? Does He want to stay hidden? That doesn't make sense – if we grant any of these events, God must want to reveal something about Himself. Maybe He wants to have an ongoing relationship with us?

Let me give you an example of this. I'm going to ask Amy to come up and share her story and then I'm going to comment on it and continue on: *Amy's testimony*

Some time in the middle of high school I declared myself an agnostic, meaning I acknowledged some sort of higher being that controlled the universe, but I did not connect it with the God in the Bible or any other religion. I became very skeptical and very confused about life questions. I figured that I would never know the answers.

All of this changed later on and it started with a retreat, which was basically a few days to get away from everything and just focus on reflecting on life, myself, and other issues. It was a new experience for me because I got to hear about people's life stories and their struggles, and they challenged us to think about our own lives and struggles. It was surprising to learn these things about these people that I hadn't known that well and had judged before. It was also a new experience because I had never prayed with other people before, and I really liked doing it even though I wasn't necessarily acknowledging God because my beliefs weren't set at the time. But I tried praying nonetheless and it felt comforting. I learned a lot and came out of the retreat with a newfound sense of love.

My older brother Michael became Christian when he was in college and I always thought it was so weird how religious he became all of a sudden. I admired and respected it, but I never thought I'd be like him. So after retreat was over, I was chatting with Michael on instant messenger. He works in Hong Kong so I don't normally see him and I don't get to talk to him much. But one day he was online and I was telling him about how great retreat was. And then he says to me, "I also went on a retreat this past weekend – also spiritual and a find yourself thing." I thought that was really cool. What are the chances that we're on retreat at the same time? I then said to him, "What a coincidence!" And he simply replied, "Probably not a coincidence, dude." I pondered what he just said and was overcome by a sort of eerie feeling.

Anyway, I proceeded to tell him what happened and what I learned. A lot of family issues that revolved around my dad came up and I came to some conclusions about how I think and why I act the way I do. He told me that he went on a similar retreat when he was around my age, and it also revolved around himself and our dad. Then he said to me, "You may not have realized it then or even now, but I believe that God has a plan for you and he was there with you this weekend." As soon as I told him that I had gone on retreat and what happened, he said that he knew for sure that God was working.

Here's another "coincidence." Michael said that he had been planning to write his personal story on paper that week, and I just reminded him of some things that he had forgotten about and otherwise would have left out of his story.

All of these so-called coincidences – the fact that my brother and I were on retreats at the same time, that my first eye-opening retreat and his first eye-opening retreat both revolved around the same issues, and the timing of this conversation and my reminding him of things to add to his own personal story – all of these things just made me think for a while that maybe they would mean something.

During this conversation, Michael and I were connected for that moment even though we were so far away from each other. I really liked this connection and I think that maybe for me, these coincidences meant that we weren't so different and his Christianity and insights to life didn't have to be so foreign to me. So I began to look out for these happenings in my life. I also began to think about not just the absurd ones, but I began to ponder everything. Why did I meet this person, why was I led here, and questions like that. Eventually, through paying attention and recalling things that happened in the past, I found that Jesus was leading me toward Him partly through my brother, either directly or indirectly. I later gave my life to Jesus.

I would just like to leave you with the last thing that my brother had said to me on that day when we were talking. It really stayed in my mind, so I encourage you to think about it as well when you go home tonight or during the week. He said to me: "These 'coincidences' are happening to us all the time. The only difference is that some people notice them and others are too busy to notice."

Amy's story raises one major question for me: Why would it be Jesus? Anne Lamott is another popular writer who had an experience with Jesus. She lives in the San Francisco area, and wrote her story in a book called *Traveling Mercies*.

"I didn't go to the flea market the week of my abortion. I stayed home, smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little, and went for slow walks along the salt marsh with Pammmy. On the seventh night, though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop over the next hour. I was going through a pad every fifteen minutes, and I thought I should call a doctor or Pammmy, but I was so disgusted that I had gotten so drunk one week after an abortion that I just couldn't wake someone up and ask for help. I kept on changing Kotex, and I got very sober very quickly. Several hours later, the blood stopped flowing, and I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had left over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

"And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

"I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

"Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

"This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

"And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hungover that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me.

"I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "F--- it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

"So this was my beautiful moment of conversion."

Some of you have experienced that sense that Anne Lamott called 'the little cat running along at your heels.' Jesus leaves a small hint of himself, just a trace.

So why Jesus? Because Jesus said, 'I am the place where God and humanity become one,' Jesus claimed to be both truly human and truly God. In all other belief systems, human beings locate evil somewhere outside of them. But the Old Testament, Jesus, and the New Testament writers located evil in humanity; we were created good but we tarnished our human nature. Our problems are not simply the result of a bad education or bad political system. Those are factors, but ultimately our problem is our humanity. So Jesus said that God was healing humanity first by Jesus' own choices to clean out the self-centeredness in the

fallen humanity he had, and then to become a new kind of human being in his resurrection, so he could offer his new humanity back to us, a God-soaked humanity. So if **God** were to want a deep relationship with **humanity**, it makes some sense to say that Jesus would exemplify it. It's also reasonable to say that if **humanity** were supposed to have a deep relationship with **God**, that Jesus would exemplify that, too.

When I gave my life to Jesus, nothing spectacular happened. Actually, it felt a little bit to me like dying. It was a humbling experience. This was in late high school, and I felt like by coming to Jesus, I was admitting that I couldn't really run my own life. It felt a little like dying. But slowly, I started having experiences of him giving me his life. The most powerful instance of this was during the summer after my junior year of college. That was the time my parents finally decided to get their divorce. My dad's drinking had escalated to an alarming place. Now my way of dealing with my family, ever since 10th grade, was to leave. After I got my driver's license and my car keys, I was out of there. I'd go over to a park or to a friend's place to distract myself. I didn't even have a thought for my younger sister, who was four years younger than me, who I left at home to deal with the mess I didn't want to deal with. But that summer, I felt Jesus say to me, 'I want you to stay.' I said to him, 'I don't have the strength to do that. If what you said is true, Jesus, then you need to be here in me, living your life out through me.' And he did. My parents couldn't afford a lawyer, so they had *me* arbitrate who gets what. I remember going into that time saying, 'I can't do this!' But during that time, Jesus filled me with a sense of his love for me. And he gave me his love for my parents. I was able to listen sensitively to both of them. In fact, every other time before that, my response to them was, 'You have to stay together – for my sake' or 'You have to get a divorce – for my sake.' But I had never considered it for their sakes. Jesus helped me separate myself from my parents' marriage so they could make a decision that was best for them. Jesus gave me his love for my parents. He gave me his strength to stay at home. He gave me insights so I could counsel my sister with what she was feeling. At the end of that summer, I was talking to my friend Malcolm, whose family had gone through a similar thing earlier. I told him what I was experiencing and how I was meeting Jesus throughout it all, and he said these words to me that I'll never forget: 'Mako, how can you be so other-centered at a time like this?' I treasure those words as a reminder to me of the difference Jesus makes.

Jesus Living Through Me

This was the critical shift, and I want you to know this. It wasn't so much that things happened *to* me, as things happened *through* me. I experienced Jesus living his life out through me. I had a totally different level of certainty about this. Jesus had me experience God in a totally different level than ever before. Jesus shared his own experience of God with me. Jesus doesn't just experience God as God, someone who is vague and shadowy and at a distance; he experiences God as Father, someone who is loving, attentive, and present all the time. He poured his relationship with God into me, so that I experienced what he experiences. I have come to know God, not just as God, that Someone who is greater than me, but as my Father, someone who I know, who gives me hope when I'm hopeless, power when I am powerless, and love when I am unloved.

And if there is a God who wants to relate to us, then Jesus makes sense, my experience makes sense. And the great thing is that Jesus wants to relate to others through us. He wants to be a blessing to others through us.

Along those lines, there was one more incident that summer I want to mention. There was one night – a weeknight – when I went to bed at around 10:30pm; I was exhausted and normally when I'm like that I sleep like a rock. But during the night, I woke up. There was no reason why I woke up – no sounds, no dreams. And I wasn't groggy at all. I was instantly wide awake. I thought, 'That's weird...' I looked over at my digital clock, and it read 1:18am. I decided to get out of bed and go downstairs, and I discovered my mom. She was about to commit suicide. She had closed all the doors in the garage and started the car. I went in and discovered her there. I talked her down and stayed up that night. Who woke me up? I think it was Jesus. I have no other way – and certainly no better way – to interpret that. How would you interpret that? I think it was Jesus.

Illus: I want to share one more story that illustrates this. My dad is not a believer, but within the space of two Saturdays, my dad experienced something supernatural. My life changed on May 15, 1999, the day I was married to my wife Ming. We were married out here in Boston. On that day, I entered a new life

joined to another. Ming and I had prayed, 'Lord Jesus, would you use our wedding – the joy, the symbolism – to communicate something of you?' Well, my friends and family flew out from California to be here. My Dad and Mom came separately, since they're divorced. My dad went back home to California, and the next Saturday, on May 22, 1999, he went to a funeral. The funeral was for his former supervisor at TRW. This gentleman was also a Japanese American. And my dad didn't know it before, but this deceased man's Japanese name was Makoto, like mine. My full name is Makoto. My dad walked into the funeral service and noticed this man's name. He thought, "Boy, that's odd; he never went by his Japanese name, so I never knew it." Then he looked at the day this man died. It was the same day that I had gotten married, the previous Saturday, May 15. And for some reason, my dad started shivering. He sat down, and the pastor presiding over the funeral said that the deceased man had been a believer in Jesus. The bible passage that he talked about was John 14, where Jesus says, "I am the way, the Makoto, and the life." My name and the deceased man's name, Makoto, means TRUTH. In the Japanese New Testament, that teaching of Jesus gets translated, "I am the way, the Makoto – the truth – and the life." My dad at this point was trembling and sweating. There were just too many weird coincidences going on. Just a few verses later, in the same conversation, Jesus says, "No one comes to the Father but through me." Which is what we've been saying: Jesus is the only way to experience God as a Father.

My dad and I talked a few weeks later, and he told me about the funeral. He said, "I feel like that was a message for me somehow." I said, "I think so, Dad. I think you were on the edge of the Eternal, and you were experiencing God. But the scary thing about experiencing God is that you're not sure how He's going to relate to you, and you don't know how to relate to Him. That's why when you believe in Jesus, what happens is that you are joined to Jesus, and you inherit the way Jesus relates to God, as his Father. Outside of Jesus, you can't be sure how to relate to God. It's like when I was young and I stood on the beach looking out at the ocean, the power of the waves that could hold me down and sweep me away, and I trembled with a primal fear. Relating to God as God is sometimes scary. But relating to God as Father through Jesus is awesome. What's more, I think you saw a representation of my spiritual journey. There was a time that the old Makoto died, in a sense, because coming to Jesus involves that I die to who I was before, like in a funeral. But at that same instant, the new Makoto was joined to another for the rest of my life, like in a wedding, and I became a new person for the rest of my life. That is truth. That's why Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." My dad has not come to Jesus yet, but he thought about it seriously on that day and we've had significant conversations that I could tell you more about.

I'm willing to bet that some of you, maybe many of you, have had an experience of God as mystery. Maybe it left you with a sense of primal fear. Maybe it left you with a sense of 'Someone is trying to get my attention.' But I have no guarantees for you if you try to experience God as God. If you want to experience God as a loving Father, then the only way to do that is to join yourself to Jesus, the only one who can call God his Father.

I want you to know, though, that what Jesus wants to do is pour His life out through us. He wants for us not to have things happen *to* us, but to have things happen *through* us. This is not a 'religious' thing, but it is deeply spiritual. Jesus wants to bring God to us, to bring us God's hope when we are hopeless, to bring us God's power when we are powerless, to bring us God's love when no one else loves us. If you've experienced some hint of God, some glimpse of God, I want you to know where He is going, and where He wants to bring you. He wants to bring you to Jesus.