

The Sympathy of Clocks

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Over the past several months, I have been reading a number of books that on the surface may seem unrelated. Some of the books are based on scientific discoveries and theories, like brain evolution, the unification of physics and consciousness, the new science of networks, the science of attention, and one of my favorites, *Sync*, which explores how order emerges from chaos in the universe. Some of the books are more spiritual in nature, like books by Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist* and *Valkyries*; Lynne McTaggert's books, *The Bond: Connecting through the Space Between Us*, and *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe*.

A diverse group of subjects and authors, but still one idea seems to hold them all together, at least for me. The theme, is emergence. It's a theme we are all most likely to be familiar, most notably in the idea that the something is more than the sum of its parts. A more technical understanding of the idea is supplied by P.W. Anderson, "The ability to reduce everything to simple fundamental laws does not imply the ability to start from those laws and reconstruct the universe. The constructionist hypothesis breaks down when confronted with the twin difficulties of scale and complexity. At each level of complexity entirely new properties appear. Psychology is not applied biology, nor is biology applied chemistry. We can now see that the whole becomes not merely more, but very different from the sum of its parts."

Emergence is nothing new, the concept has been around since Aristotle but it seems the more we learn about the universe, the examples of its emergent qualities have increased dramatically. It's an idea you will most likely be hearing about from me again in different forms, in large part because it speaks to every level and line of creation, from the emergence of something out of nothing at the Big Bang, the emergence of life out of non-living molecules, the emergence of intelligence out single celled life forms, and the emergence of consciousness out of it all. It all leaves one asking, what might emerge next?

But that is a subject matter that far exceeds the time constraints of this particular service or any singular service. Today, we are talking about the Sympathy of Clocks, which you may be wondering has to do with all this. Well, let me explain. The clocks in question are pendulum clocks. And from its invention in 1656 by Dutch physicist, mathematician, and astronomer Christian Huygens, until the 1930's, the pendulum clock was the world's most precise timekeeper. About 10 years after his invention, however, Huygens noticed something peculiar about his clocks. He noticed that the two clocks he had on his wall had a strange tendency. He noticed, that when he would stop and restart one of the clocks, no matter which one and no matter when it was, that in a matter of 30 minutes or so, the swinging pendulums would synchronize their motion.

Suspecting that the clocks were "communicating" somehow, being the scientist he was, he performed some experiments. First, he took the clocks off the wall, suspecting they were "communicating" somehow through small vibrations in the wall. He hung them both from hooks on a ceiling joist. He found that as long as the clocks were in close enough proximity, their movements would synchronize. He thought maybe they were communicating somehow through the air, so he placed a barrier between them, still they synchronized. Then he tried hanging the two clocks on separate joists, both suspended on the backs of chairs. Still, so long as they were in

close proximity, they would move in sync. Huygens called the phenomenon, an odd kind of sympathy.

He never did figure out the exact cause of the phenomenon, and it remained a mystery until only very recently. Researchers at Georgia Tech, recreating Huygens original experiments and using very intricate measuring devices not available to Huygens, were able to measure minute vibrations that would cause the clocks to move in sympathy. It turns out, with our ability to look at our universe with ever greater degrees of intricacy, it turns out that synchronization is a very widespread phenomenon: From Atoms to Asteroids, synchronization has shaped our world. From Quanta to Quasars, synchronization is still shaping our universe.

What makes sync an emergent quality, why it matters so much, is that when, for example two atoms synchronize, it increases the likelihood others will sync with them. Sync creates order where only chaos once reigned. Sync is a mechanism through which the universe organizes itself. I'm not a scientist, I'm not here to lecture you on the intricacies of this theory or even the validity of it. If your interested, I can suggest some books.

What I find interesting about this theory is what it means. And what exactly does it all mean? Well, it could mean absolutely nothing. After all, we are talking about the sympathy of clocks. We are talking about the tendency of inanimate object to synchronize and create order out of chaos. So what, right? So what? Well, I gave this some thought. Why does this idea matter? I had a strong feeling that it is an important idea, but what implications could it possibly have for me? Or you? Or any of us?

What came to mind as I considered this phenomenon, what kept coming to mind in fact, was an incident that occurred to me about ten years ago. I didn't understand the significance at first. I didn't understand how the sympathy of clocks could have anything to do with this incident, but it kept coming back to me. So I took the time to recount the story in my head, go over all the details and then it hit me. This is a story about sync. This is a story about . . . Well, let me tell you the story, then I'll tell you what its about.

As I said, this happened about ten years ago during my first or second year of seminary. I was studying at a Coffee Shop, Starbucks to be exact. It was late and more than likely I had been reading some required text, perhaps a subject as interesting and important as the intricate and complex differences between the pre-reformation and post reformation views on the transubstantiation of hosts during catholic mass and protestant services. I was very much ready to go home.

On my way out the door, however, I was stopped by two large men with long hair, wearing ragged jeans, Harley Davidson t-shirts, and wallets chained to their belts. These two gentlemen, for they truly were quite gentle in their manner if not in appearance, asked me if I truly believed the words on my t-shirt. I looked down to recall the words on my t-shirts, "The Meaning of Life is to Give Life Meaning" and I said "Yes, I do believe those words to be quite true." And though I had been very much ready to go home at that point, I ended up in a conversation that required yet another cup of coffee and another hour of my time.

The two men were brothers. They were in their forties when I met them, and that night I learned how they had been almost systematically physically and mentally abused as children by a family member. I learned how the men had started using drugs and alcohol at a very early age in the

false belief that it would somehow relieve their pain and suffering. I learned how the alcohol and drugs had left their lives in a chaotic mess and how their eventual acceptance of certain beliefs had given them the strength to turn their lives around.

It was a powerful story they told, how much was true and how much was for affect, I can never know. But that is beside the point. Sure they told me their stories in an attempt to convert me, but I could tell it came from a place of caring. I felt they were authentically concerned for the eternal adjudication of my soul. I was touched by their concern, as I was touched by their story. No, I was not converted that night. It was not their ideas, or their beliefs that touched me. Beliefs and ideas are ephemeral, they are transitory. It was their story resonated with me.

While their beliefs did not resonate with me, the very human needs and motivations that lead them to those beliefs moved me. Something in me shifted that night. I left that coffee shop with a new awareness about my connectedness to all of humanity, I left with a new awareness the role that religion and spirituality can play in our lives. Through our time together, a sympathy with the two men developed in me. I don't mean I was sympathetic towards them, that I felt sorry for them in any way. On the contrary. No, I mean that I felt an affinity with the two men, I felt a rapport, a fellowship with them.

Our proximity to each other, our mutual caring and concern for each other brought about an odd kind of sympathy, it caused a synchronization of sorts. When they were telling me their stories, about the abuse they received as boys, and their self-abuse with alcohol and drugs, I felt pain. When they told me about their conversion, how the Jesus entered their hearts and changed their lives, I could feel the love and acceptance they described.

Their new found faith filled a whole in their lives, it filled them with joy and love like they had never experienced before. We could argue the factual reality of a living, loving God all day, but the fact remain that their experience of it was quite real and accounted for some very real changes in their lives. What if, what I experienced that night was not all that different than the sympathy of clocks. What if, there is some yet explained natural law that explains both the sympathy of clocks and the sympathy of strangers. If given the right conditions, imperceptible vibrations can cause clocks to sync, can't there be imperceptible vibrations, waves, fields of energy that given the right circumstances can cause people to sync? It's something worth considering I think. The implications are boundless.

It would explain why the sages of the world's wisdom traditions remind us to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. It explains why some of those same sages tell us in so many words that the only way to defeat an enemy is to change the nature of the relationship. Imagine a world where the core needs and values of individuals is recognized and measured, instead of the more ephemeral and transitory elements of our character. What might become of the world if people saw in each other the bare bones truth about each , that we all want to love and feel loved, we all want to feel safe and secure. Whether we are politically liberal or conservative, whether we are rich or poor; Christian or jewish or Buddhist or atheist; regardless of all the superficial differences that we use to label and separate, underneath it all, we truly are the same, we have the same basic needs and desires.

So Be It. Amen. Blessed Be!