

The Universe Doesn't Care About You – and That's a Good Thing

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With Christmas just around the corner, I want to spread the good news far and wide:

The universe doesn't care about you.

Don't close that browser window yet! If you give me 7 minutes of your time I'll prove this statement and make you appreciate that the universe doesn't care about you.

First, I want you to imagine it's Friday night and you're walking home after a night of barhopping with friends. Two blocks from your apartment a man wearing a ski mask pops up from behind a car, brandishes a knife, and forces you to hand over your wallet and cell phone.

If you count yourself among the tens of millions of Americans (and hundreds of millions of citizens around the world) who believe in a personal God — that is, a god that plays an active role in your everyday life — that unfortunate incident introduces three potential explanations:

Explanation 1: God willingly allowed you to be robbed for no larger purpose.

Explanation 2: God's attempt to protect you was neutralized or overcome by the powers of evil.

Explanation 3: God needed you to be robbed to teach you a lesson or give you a sign.

If you're a good believer, you'd have to reject Explanation 1 because it assumes God is a malevolent, heartless being. You'd also have to reject Explanation 2 because it indicates God is not omnipotent. That leaves Explanation 3 as the only plausible basis for your misfortune.

For this very reason, many who believe in a personal God go through life assuming events and occurrences both big and small have profound meanings.

Given the hypothetical scenario above, many believers would think they were robbed because God needed to show them something. Perhaps it's that they drink too much? Perhaps it's that they're too attached to their money and need to be less worldly? Perhaps it's that they're too mean and must be knocked down a few pegs so they can learn to embrace humility?

Notice a pattern? When you believe unfortunate events have deeper meanings, the responsibility for those events shift from the perpetrator to the victim to some degree. At the very least, the perpetrator was a conduit for a greater, divine outcome, making their actions necessary — if not beautiful. At the very most, the victim deserved what they got and the perpetrator was therefore justified in their actions.

This kind of thought process is the reason why some assume that when a woman is sexually assaulted it's because she did something wrong: that she drank too much or dressed too provocatively or knowingly put herself in a dangerous environment.

For those who steadfastly believe in a personal God, what other explanation could there be for such a heinous crime? If God needlessly allowed the assault to occur He's a despicable being not worthy of praise, and if He couldn't prevent the assault from occurring He's not really all-powerful and, thus, not truly God. A sexual assault, therefore, must in some way be a reflection of its victim.

Indeed, when you believe tragedies are a message from God, you tacitly assign unwarranted blame to their victims.

But those who believe that events have divine meanings don't reserve victim-blaming exclusively for others; in fact, they deploy it most harshly on themselves.

As a mental health technician at an inpatient psychiatric hospital, I've worked with hundreds of women and men who've been raped and abused. The one question I've heard them all ask is *Why?: Why did I cross paths with that person? Why was I the one they picked? Why couldn't I have had a normal life like everyone else?*

Why me?

They often get stuck asking *Why?* because the notion that they in some way earned their agonies initiates a fruitless soul-searching quest that culminates in cognitive distortions and irrational thoughts. At some point they inevitably deduce either that human existence is futile (*Life sucks, and then you die.*) or that they're undeserving of happiness (*I'm a terrible person.*). Both of these conclusions lead to self-destructive thought patterns that manifest most commonly as depression, chronic anger, and suicidal tendencies.

Buddhism teaches that when you sustain an injury you feel pain twice: the first pain is the physical pain that results from the actual injury, and the second pain is the suffering you experience when you become saddened that you have an injury.

When you believe everything that happens to you is in some way a sign from God, you always experience both pains because your injuries always mean something is wrong with you.

But here's the good news: the universe doesn't dwell in meaning; it's merely an inanimate medium for cause and effect. Whether or not God exists is irrelevant because events in our world occur because the conditions were ripe for them to occur — not because they needed to occur in order to fit a certain narrative.

In short, the universe doesn't *care* what is; the universe simply *shows* what is.

Consider this: when you hold an ice cube to an open flame it melts. Does the ice cube melt because God believes ice is evil or because ice is less valuable than fire? No; the ice cube melts because the chemical makeup of ice is such that when it's exposed to heat it liquefies.

The universe cares as much about you as it does that ice — which is to say, not at all.

When we accept this, the way we analyze life events completely changes and the outcomes of our analyses become objective and, therefore, productive.

You were molested by your neighbor's father when you were a child? No, it doesn't mean life is one long, painful march to oblivion or that you're less important or less precious than your peers.

It means there's something very wrong with your neighbor's father, and you just happened to grow up next door to him.

Notice something? When you accept that events in your life don't have deeper, supernatural meanings, the crimes of others don't define you. You're not to blame for things you didn't do. You retain your free will.

When you take negative occurrences to mean something deeper, however, you forfeit your right to self-determination because you agree to be characterized and shaped by the actions of outer actors — actors you can't control.

You live on a planet populated by more than seven billion people. Of those seven billion people, the only person you have the ability to control is yourself. Unfortunately for you, however, a fraction of those uncontrollable seven billion people around you possess distorted psyches resulting from either organic brain diseases or misguided beliefs and it's inevitable you'll bump into a few of them over the course of your life.

When you do, it won't be because you're a bad person or deserved it in some way; it'll be because you exist on a planet with seven billion uncontrollable people who have competing interpretations of right and wrong.

That means if you believe you were robbed in the hypothetical scenario above because God needed to give you a sign that you're not healthy enough, not holy enough, or not humble enough, you've made yourself a helpless vessel in a sea of pain and you'll spend your entire life questioning your value and wondering what you're doing wrong.

For a change of pace, let's analyze your hypothetical mugging with the understanding that the crime doesn't have a deeper meaning from God: the reason you were robbed was because an extremely troubled individual sought to make money by mugging strangers and you happened to be passing through as he was carrying out his plan.

That's it. Done. Over.

The fact that you were out late after a night of drinking doesn't make you in any way liable for your mugger's actions. After all, if you believe you're to blame for being mugged after a night of drinking, you're claiming that armed robbery is a fitting punishment for a night of drinking. If that's indeed the case, what, then, would be a proportional punishment for the armed robbery itself? Could such a punishment even exist?

Now, if you want to determine the objective causes that led to your robbery, go for it. Maybe you'll seek to find out what life events led the perpetrator to think it reasonable to steal from others, or maybe you'll investigate the crime statistics of the neighborhood to determine trends, or maybe you'll work with the police to evaluate their coverage of the area. Any of those quests will lead you to tangible, actionable outcomes that'll empower you and improve the standard of living for yourself and those around you.

On the other hand, however, if you sit around and wonder why God allowed you to be mugged, you'll end up with nothing but frustration and self-hatred because that question has no legitimate answer.

Besides, if you believe in an omnipotent God that created the heavens and the Earth and everything in between, why would you commit the folly of assuming you'd be able to decipher His messages? Such a God would be operating on a level far, far above you.

If your response is that God only transmits messages in ways that He knows will be received, how do you reconcile situations when individuals suffering from schizophrenia, psychosis, and similar mental disorders commit crimes because they believe God commanded them to do so? Are they wrong? Or just misguided?

Then again, maybe you believe bad things happen because God needs them to occur in order to prevent an even worse tragedy or create a more beneficial outcome. That theory assumes God is all-powerful but at the same time not wise enough to devise a more efficient way to protect or motivate His children than to force them to endure tragedy. Sounds irrational, doesn't it?

When you believe everything that happens has a divine meaning, you dwell in the irrational. You also become a passive actor in a turbulent world; a puppet who's shaped and molded by the actions of those who've done nothing to earn such immense power.

If you accept that the universe doesn't care about you and that events don't have deeper meanings, however, you keep yourself in the driver's seat. You stay grounded in the pursuit of objective truths.

You are the author of your life story, and you decide what gets written.

So with that, I want to spread the good news far and wide: the universe doesn't care about you.

And thank god for that.

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