

# THE PLACE FOR SYNCHRONICITY IN LOGOTHERAPY

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The term synchronicity has been defined in many ways since Carl Gustav Jung first introduced it in the 1920's. (Jung.1931) The place for synchronicity in logotherapy is the subject of this paper, and in that context I propose the following definition: Synchronicity is the experience of two or more events that are apparently causally unrelated and that are observed to occur together in a manner meaningful to the observer. An example might be a sudden deep sense of inferiority immediately followed by garbage flying in one's face.

Various metaphysical claims have been made in the name of synchronicity. One notable claim is that all contiguous events are synchronous; that is, everything is miraculous. In the language of logotherapy – there is meaning to be found in every moment.

The virtue of the above definition is that it preserves the significance of synchronicity while not presupposing an explanation of the phenomenon or relying on questionable metaphysical claims. Although synchronicity is here defined as a subjective, metaphysically neutral experience, its subjectivity need not discount the possibility of synchronicity revealing objective meaning. This is parallel to Viktor Frankl's statement regarding the perception of values: "Unquestionably a certain subjective state is the necessary condition for making certain values visible at all; and unquestionably a particular receptivity in the subject was the necessary medium or organon for the comprehension of the values. But that by no means disproves the objectivity of values..." (The Doctor and the Soul, p. 41).

There may well be varying responses to synchronicities depending upon the circumstances and interpretation of what has been heard, but from the logotherapy perspective it would seem wise to take them seriously. A general denial of their worth would be appropriate only from a reductionist viewpoint that denies the possibility of finding meaning in experience.

With regard to synchronicity's place in logotherapy, there is reason to believe that in addition to listening to the voices of the client and therapist, therapy is enhanced by heeding the messages of a third "voice" (i.e., personally-meaningful values – whether it be viewed as coming from an Unconscious God, life, the world, or whatever). Such synchronicities may come up in the sessions or between them. Since a defining feature of logotherapy is the discovery of meanings and the guidance they provide, one might expect that logotherapists and their clients would explicitly intend to learn from synchronicities and perhaps even actively seek the experience of them.

In logotherapy synchronicity may serve as a promising vehicle for revealing meaning in life situations. Logotherapists are trained to pay attention to the "meaning of the moment" by attending to the natural ability of their "conscience" to perceive meaning cues ("logohints"). This same conscience acts as the interpreter of synchronicities. So logotherapists may view synchronicities as opportunities that can be employed to advance the therapeutic process.

Although synchronicities are not under our control (and indeed are more likely to take place precisely when control is relinquished, (Beilitz & Lundstrom, 1998) the intention to learn from them, together with character and attitude refinement, may invite their appearance, enable their perception, and give authenticity to their interpretation. At the very least, raising awareness of the nature of synchronicity can reduce the likelihood of discounting these experiences or even hiding the fact of their occurrence, and thereby missing the opportunity to learn from them.

Drawing from personal experience plus the considerable literature on synchronicity and psychotherapy, (Beitman, Coleman & Celebi, 2009; Guindon & Hanna, 2002) below is a summary of potential benefits of giving significance to synchronicity in therapy. (An uncondensed version with illustrations is included in the author's Diplomate Project, available in reply to an email request from the author.)

- Enhance comforting support – reassure patients that these are common experiences
- Offer Guidance – focus on purpose in life and helping negotiate life choices
- Motivate attitude and behavior change
- Strengthen the working alliance – showing receptivity, demonstrating knowledge, experiencing a common method, establishing psychotherapist-client communication, sharing basic humanity in the face of something greater
- Increase interconnectedness with others, Higher Power, or surroundings
- Inspire appreciation and gratitude (generally a healthy attitude to life)
- Provide psychological insight
- Broaden the experiential field of the patient to a wider spectrum of meaning
- Give prominence to psychotherapist–client parallels
- Facilitate examination and reporting of subjective experiences
- Bring inner and outer worlds into better equilibrium
- Provide opportunities for reflection by the therapist

Various qualities have been claimed to *assist in inviting* synchronicities. Below, is a list, compiled from the published literature, (Beitman, & Coleman, 2009; Beitman, Coleman, & Celebi, 2009; Guindon, & Hanna, 2002; Marlo, & Kline, 1998) of character traits of those who

frequently report synchronicities. The list is intended as a guide both for the client and the therapist.

- Commitment and integrity – living by our deepest values
- Honesty and sincerity – telling the truth to ourselves and others
- Courage – overcoming our fears
- Passion and devotion –engaging deeply with what we care about
- Immediacy – being in the moment
- Openness – saying "Yes" to what comes our way
- Listening – discerning inner and outer messages
- Positivity – finding value in each situation
- Trust – having faith in self, life, universe, Higher Power, etc.
- Belief – believing in the possibility of synchronicities
- Extraversion – being social and outgoing
- Awareness – attending to surroundings such as conversations, music, billboards,

etc.

This same literature suggests that synchronicities are found to occur in situations of loss of control or vulnerability – in particular, when experiencing a disruption of ordinary routine or life challenges and changes. These include:

- life-threatening situations
- births
- deaths
- employment choices
- travel
- falling in love
- relationship difficulties

In contrast, when we become fearful, doubting, and controlling, synchronicities are found to diminish. Social context also influences the frequency with which people recognize and use synchronicity.

Optimal interpretation of synchronicities requires the ability to balance how they might have personal meaning while at the same time not over-interpreting or over-emphasizing them. Also, it should be noted that any suggested guidance be evaluated in the light of further reflection, and not simply accepted as some form of divination. For example, career counselors should integrate

the more objective indicators of interests, skills, values, needs, and personality with their interpretation of synchronicities.

Credence in the authenticity of an synchronistic interpretation of a coincidence may be strengthened by taking note of the personal qualities of the interpreter – qualities such as commitment and integrity (and the other attributes mentioned above as promoting synchronicities). Such qualities may increase the therapist's ability to "hear" the client and tune in to the "third voice" with less likelihood of distortion.

Despite the potential benefits of incorporating synchronicity in psychotherapy, there is need for caution in the manner it is employed. The therapist may choose not to share synchronistic connections in order to help prevent potentially disruptive reactions due to an inappropriate disclosure.

Some patients may become overly fascinated with synchronicities and thus limit their focus on pressing interpersonal and work challenges. Patients may seek synchronicities in coincidences that deserve no analysis and elaborate excessively upon the meaning of others. An over-emphasis on leading a life guided by synchronicity may devalue personal responsibility by requiring that decisions should be inspired primarily by synchronicity guidance.

The literature has suggested that some patients may find inner-outer connections that support grandiose ideas or provide evidence for plots against them. This can empower paranoid ideation, ideas of reference, and magical thinking. (Beitman, Coleman, & Celebi, 2009)

Human brains reward themselves when they find coherence in chaos. This pattern-seeking tendency can cause the brain to find patterns that do not exist. "Apophenia" is the term used to refer to the finding of patterns in random data accompanied by a "specific experience of an abnormal meaningfulness." (Konrad, 1958) *Believers* will see more synchronicities than those who do not believe in their usefulness. Skeptics will cry "apophenia," while devotees will claim proof for interconnectedness.

The surprising frequency of reported synchronicities may be due in part to: (Beitman, Coleman, & Celebi, 2009)

- Everyday life provides numerous opportunities to find connections between events
- People allow themselves excessive flexibility in identifying meaningful relationships between events that have a relatively high chance of co-occurring
- People are willing to include near misses
- People desire to consider their personal experiences as somehow extraordinary

Awareness of the above difficulties and cautionary comments may help the logotherapist avoid pitfalls and thus successfully employ the "third voice" of synchronicities to secure the benefits outlined above in this paper.

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During graduate studies in the philosophy of logic and metaphysics at M.I.T. (Ph.D., 1975), Aryeh Siegel became disillusioned with the analytic philosopher's bias toward reductionism and materialism. With the guidance of Professor Huston Smith, he began to develop a philosophy of the esoteric unity of religions which he further refined while teaching the philosophy of religion and mysticism at The William Paterson College of New Jersey (1973-1978) and also studying psychotherapy. Having settled in Israel for over 30 years, Aryeh has taught philosophy in assorted venues, but has lately focused more on sharing the wisdom and practice of Kabbala as put forth by Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag. Living in the Jerusalem area as the father of five, he is currently employed as a manager of computer projects in the Israeli institute for social security, as well as working independently as a logotherapy counselor.

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