

Searching for Meaning Purpose and Patterns by Sky Nelson-Isaacs

Adapted excerpt From *Living in Flow: The Science of Synchronicity and How Your Choices Shape Your World* by Sky Nelson-Isaacs, published by North Atlantic Books, copyright © 2019 by Sky Nelson-Isaacs. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

Stephen Gaertner, a Czechoslovakian Jew living in Hamburg, Germany, was eight years old in 1937 when he came down with tuberculosis. Stephen's doctor advised him to go to a sanatorium in the Bavarian mountains, as was the common prescription of the day for treatment of tuberculosis. (Antibiotics were not yet fully developed....)

Even at that young age, Stephen had a sense of the unrest occurring in his country. He protested to his mother, "There would be Hitlerjugend [Hitler youth] in the sanatorium!" So his parents agreed to send him to Switzerland instead. A year later he was cured, and on March 9, 1938, his mother came to pick him up and take him back to Hamburg. But Germany had changed for the worse while Stephen was away. While his mother seemed to feel they were safe from the Nazi threat because they were not German citizens, he didn't want to return to Nazi Germany. He protested to his mother again, and she replied, "It's great winter weather, so I'll stay a week or two to ski; then we'll go." On March 15, news reached them that German troops had invaded Prague. Stephen's mother realized the danger and agreed to delay their departure indefinitely. They stayed in Switzerland until 1946, surviving the Holocaust unscathed. Stephen's father, who had remained in Hamburg, perished.

Stephen thinks about his experience in the following way: "Had the Nazis invaded a few days later, I would have gone back to Hamburg and perished with my father. That timing, together with my getting tuberculosis, saved my life." [1]

I propose that although such circumstances cannot be controlled or predicted, we can learn to navigate the flow of circumstances in a manner that defies chance by paying attention to synchronicity (or meaningful coincidence). This view is based on research (mine and others') in physics and is consistent with research in cognitive studies, psychology, and philosophy. It is far from proven or accepted in the scientific community, but I will try to demonstrate that these experiences are ubiquitous in everyday life and that the scientific view advanced here, which explains synchronicity on the basis of meaning, provides a better explanation than the mainstream worldview, which relies on chance accidents. Although the proposal may require adjusting ideas we take for granted both in science and in daily life, it does not conflict with any known theories or experimental data. Rather, it removes or clarifies certain aspects of things we assume to be true so we can understand what may be really going on beneath the hood.

Living in flow is a rich, complex process in which human values and experiences play an essential role. When has anyone ever been happy they got sick? Yet Stephen's illness was

part of a chain of events in which he ultimately survived the Holocaust. I say that Stephen's "negative" experience contracting tuberculosis was just as much of a synchronicity as the "positive" experience of, say, bumping into a good friend at the airport or finding two quarters on the ground just in time to pay the parking meter.

A synchronicity is an event with significant consequences that is woven into our life in a meaningful way. "Meaningfulness" in this sense can be thought of as the degree to which an experience we have in the external world relates positively or negatively to a feeling or inner experience we have. We consider an event meaningful to us if it aligns or shares properties with values, needs, thoughts, feelings, emotions, or ideals that we have expressed recently or are on our minds. Often it can be difficult to embrace synchronicity because we get caught up in what the meaning of a situation really is.... The ultimate interpreter of meaning is our inner knowing, which comes from the thoughts in our head, the feelings in our heart, the sensation in our gut, and whatever other sources we have for making decisions.

The willingness of Stephen's mother to stay and ski for an extra two weeks, the timing of Hitler's invasion of Prague, and probably many other small twists can be seen as meaningful because they aligned with Stephen's gut sense that he was in danger. Together they can be seen as flow. Neither Stephen nor his mother knew what effect their decisions would have, but by attending carefully to the choices available to them in the moment, they avoided a threat to their lives.

What is Flow, and Why Does it Matter?

The notion of flow was introduced to science through the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (if you don't speak Hungarian, the following approximate pronunciation may be helpful: "Me-high Cheek-sent-me-high").[2] Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as a human state of optimal functioning, a dynamic balance of challenge and skill. In the proper activities and under the proper conditions we become one with our lives, enacting "a complete focusing of attention on the task at hand—thus leaving no room in the mind for irrelevant information." [3] When we are in a state like this, thinking and feeling become integrated, with neither one controlling the other.

I think of flow in terms of the events or circumstances that happen in our lives. We can know we are in flow when events seem to happen in a meaningful way and the external aspects of life seem to fit together with the internal ones. Maybe an experience we want to have becomes possible due to some small opportunity that spontaneously shows up, or we suddenly recognize how the situation we are in serves our purpose. As a result, we naturally know what to do in each circumstance, not getting caught up in our choices.

As Joseph Jaworski explains it, when you decide on a direction for your life, "the people who come to you are the very people you need in relation to your commitment. Doors open, a sense of flow develops, and you find you are acting in a coherent field of people who may not even be aware of one another. You are not acting individually any longer, but out of the unfolding generative order." [4]

This sense of mutual relationship in flow between thinking and feeling extends to our surroundings as well. We enter into a dance with life—whether it is our tennis racket, our musical instrument, our teammates, or our family members—and find that the whole notion of control drops away. Instead of controlling our environment, we find ourselves in a symbiotic exchange, an act of mutual creation. Csikszentmihalyi says, paradoxically, "Thus the flow experience is typically described as involving a sense of control—or, more

precisely, as lacking the sense of worry about losing control that is typical in many situations of normal life.”[5] So flow is not about gaining control or surrendering control; it is about transcending the sense of worry about control.

However, to my knowledge Csikszentmihalyi doesn’t mention the concept of meaningful coincidences or synchronicity as playing a role in the experience of flow. Carl Jung described synchronicity as the alignment between inner and outer experiences, a “falling together in time.” More formally, a synchronicity consists of “events which are related to one another ... meaningfully, without there being any possibility of proving that this relation is a causal one.”[6] In the definition I will use... a synchronicity—or, equivalently, a “meaningful coincidence”—is an experience that was initially not very likely to occur but has become more probable because of its meaningful alignment with our personal (or collective) choices.

I view these two concepts, flow and synchronicity, as mutually dependent. In short, when we align with circumstance, circumstance aligns with us. Csikszentmihalyi’s version of flow tells us how to align with circumstance by getting “into the zone,” and Jung’s version of synchronicity tells us how circumstances align with us when we do that. Together these concepts form my definition of flow.

Is flow about getting into alignment with life? Is it about facing challenges appropriate to our development? Is it about letting go of fears? Is it about treating each moment as precious? It is all of these things. Getting into a state of flow requires adaptability to life at any moment, and this requires inner work, such as openness and a healthy relationship with ourselves. When our mind is focused on some fear of the future, how are we to see the current circumstances clearly enough to notice a hidden opportunity? If we don’t treat each moment as precious, how are we to see the forks in the road that happen at unexpected moments?

When we incorporate both flow and synchronicity into our way of life, we recover a sense of ease, connectedness, and joy even in the midst of high-stakes endeavors. These views are consistent with recent trends in organizational development.[7] Imagine if, at the same time that we strive to close a big deal, we can also be unattached to the outcome because we are confident we will get what we need from the deal. Our openness allows us to come to an agreement that all parties feel good about.

Underneath many of the problems facing us today lie personal choices—choices our ancestors have made to bring us here, and choices we make today. Bigger issues like traffic congestion, fossil-fuel dependency, food distribution, and energy efficiency are related to smaller decisions, such as where we prefer to work or shop, which career path we aim for, and where we send our kids to school or go on vacation. Many of us are not only dissatisfied with the immense global problems we face but also with the quality of our own lives.

I see a way to address these global challenges by connecting their solutions to smaller choices we already want to make in our personal lives. If we go for what we love in life, we bring a creative energy that has the potential to solve problems. If we go for what we love in life, we are more likely to be authentic, which empowers us to speak out for what is right and build healthy relationships. When I say we, I mean each of us reading this book. We are the hearts and souls of major corporations, small businesses, educational institutions, and countless other organizations that have the potential to do even more good in the world than they already do. When we are authentic, we are more likely to contribute openly to the “Pool of Shared Meaning”[8] and make space for others to do so

as well. When we are authentic, we create change within our organizations from the inside, and we can make a broad impact on the world.

Why don't we live life to the fullest? Why don't we strive to have the career that calls to us? Why don't we take our relationships to deeper levels of authenticity? Certainly these are complex questions, but I want to point out one possible answer: we worry that it won't work out.

This is where synchronicity and flow come in. The way I see it, flow is about getting into alignment with our circumstances and understanding that the cosmos is, to an extent that I will carefully define, responding to our choices. Through a process I call "meaningful history selection," the events that come into our lives appear to be influenced by the very choices we make. I find that getting into flow allows me to trust that whatever path I choose, circumstances will arise to help me walk that path. This is not a whitewashing of difficulties but rather a willingness to step into difficulty and face all that life brings.

Many of the decisions we make in life revolve around the desire to feel safe and secure. From the level of national security all the way down to making enough money to send our children to day care, we need to feel a basic level of safety in order to be productive in life. To me, living in flow is a compelling way to tame the fear of the unknown and tango with the uncertainties of life. The more we can come to trust—not "the world" but our dance with the world—the more we can flow with the inevitable losses and disappointments that come while nourishing the constructive connections that are equally plentiful. This is not a naïve belief that the world is good but an empowered belief that we can aim for our highest vision and successfully navigate the territory we will have to cross.

On our journey, we are not left to our own devices. The central premise...is that being in flow leads to a greater chance of experiencing meaningful coincidences. These coincidences lead us further on the path of flow. From this view, the best way to remain safe is to learn to get into flow and dance with life. Positive results are not guaranteed. Bad things happen to good people every day, and nobody escapes mortality. Should we even want to? In the meantime, by living in flow we will live a more vibrant version of ourselves, transcending the need to control life and opening up to its bounty and the beauty of our own soul.

[1] Stephen Gaertner, email message to author, April 13, 2018.

[2] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology of Optimal Experience*; Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology*; Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura, "The concepts of Flow."

[3] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 58.

[4] Jaworski, *Synchronicity*, 185.

[5] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 59.

[6] Jung, *Synchronicity*, 19.

[7] Berger and Johnston, *Simple Habits*; Laloux, *Reinventing Organizations*; Patterson et al., *Crucial Conversations*; Merry, "Synchronicity and Leadership."

[8] Patterson et al., Crucial Conversations, 24.