

Is Serendipity a Contribution from God?

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Serendipity is a fortunate and unexpected discovery. Although serendipity is popularly known as the sudden outcome of a new idea, new solution of a problem, usually it comes as a pleasant surprise. It is not only true of science, it is also true of philosophy, literature and other disciplines where an unexpected novel idea makes a breakthrough. When that occurs we often cry in joy '*Oh God, You are so kind to me*'.

Many scientists, however, do not agree with this view. They think serendipity is associated with luck. That is to say, that kind of discovery or the flash of a novel idea may occur as lucky accidents. In reality, the ego of a scientist or a discoverer plays a role here. Majority of scientists usually do not want to praise God for their discovery because they probably feel that would underplay their role.

However, it is to be admitted that though serendipity involves 'luck' as an important factor, it requires concentration of mind and keen intelligence so that an unexpected solution of a problem or query may be perceived promptly. Though a few successful persons believe that God has undeniably contributed to their success, many scientists discard the role of God. They emphasize the importance of intelligence and super-perception of mind. This latter group forgets one important truth. That is, several philosophers, scientists and

religious persons, although they were brilliant and intelligent, spent their whole life to achieve success through serendipity, but most of them had failed. Why this happens? Why such success is so restricted? Why they could not get a divine spark or flash? Answer to this remains enigmatic.

At this juncture, let me give an example where God's contribution to serendipity has been highlighted. Dr Otto Loewi, a Nobel laureate, was a Professor of pharmacology at the University of Graz in Austria. During the 1920's brain function and neural communication were thought to be dependent only on electrical transmission or impulse. Dr Loewi contradicted this and put forward the view that neural transmission is not limited to only electrical impulse, it also occurs through certain chemical secretion from nerve endings. This hypothesis was rejected by scientists and medical practitioners because his experiments to establish this idea were found insufficient.

Dr Loewi was a strong believer of God. He had various other qualities. He was, for example, a lover of music and a reputed performer. Moreover, he was an acclaimed teacher. He used to spend a lonely life and tried to avoid his colleagues who considered him an abnormal person because of his persistent belief in absurd ideas. He carried experiments for long 17 years without break, desperately looking for God's grace.

In 1921, on Easter Sunday night, he had

a dream in which he envisioned experiments through which a clear proof of his hypothesis had been described. In the dream he could observe how chemicals from neuro-secretion participate in nerve-to-nerve message transmission. Dr Loewi awoke, searched for a piece of paper and quickly wrote in a tiny slip whatever he had seen in the dream and then again fell asleep. In the morning he tried to read the slip with great excitement but was terribly frustrated as he failed to decipher what he scribbled at midnight.

When he could not understand anything from that piece of paper, he cursed himself and cried *'Oh God, you had given me an invaluable gift, but due to my laziness I missed it. Would you kindly return this dream to me again?'* Throughout the day he continued this prayer. At night he arranged writing materials on the table and went to bed hoping that God would consider his appeal. Surprisingly, the dream came back at night, exactly the same dream he saw the night before. This time Dr Loewi did not make any mistake. He wrote everything neatly and rushed to his laboratory to start his experiments. His hard work for several months ultimately enabled him to discover the first chemical neurotransmitter, ie acetylcholine, which has a vital role in transmitting neural message.

Dr Loewi was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1936 for this outstanding discovery. As he described the whole episode behind his discovery during his Nobel Lecture, many scientists and the Press strongly criticized him. They alleged that Dr Loewi behaved not like a Scientist but like a Believer. But he did not care. He stood bravely against all these criticisms and reiterated: *'What I described is truth. Behind this serendipity or*

sudden discovery which came through a dream, I repeat that God has a contribution there'. Obviously, several scientists and the media opposed his view and marked him 'crazy'.

The important point here is that neither the believers nor the non-believers could prove their stand on sudden revelation of a breakthrough. Although serendipity was behind many important discoveries, it surely requires a continuous culture, practice and nurturing of thoughts which sharpen the creative aptitude. New idea or a novel theory and new findings may suddenly flash in the mind of a person, but sometime it is considered to be sheer luck because, among many only one achieves the success. But in such kind of luck, the essential factor is sagacity.

Importance of environment

It is the environment that stimulates creative thinking. It is indeed an essential ingredient for unexpected success in every field of knowledge. Even in the path of religion serendipity has a role to play. However, since success in spiritual life is personal, there is no publicity. Rather such success is kept carefully hidden from public glare. A thinking mind is a creative mind. Such mind is never satisfied with information that makes majority people happy. In sharp contrast to this attitude, a thinking mind likes to transform information into knowledge and knowledge into wisdom. Swami Vivekananda therefore says that a person who reads many books and never thinks merely represents a library; conversely, in his opinion, a person who reads two important pages but thinks about them for an hour is wise as he has taken the path of wisdom.

In our present life, nurturing the thought process to achieve creativity is becoming extremely difficult. Where is the time for thinking? You have a smart phone and there you get so many interesting things—email, whatsapp, facebook, message, games, world news, songs, music, movies, incessant talks, etc etc. Hence a good smart phone is a mini world to you. Then comes computer that offers wonderful facilities for communications and an incredible scope for reading various things, getting answers to questions, and when fitted with special softwares, you have unexpected benefits. Another attractive addition is television. We all know what we get from TV. When we come back home from work, we usually sit down before it and relax. Only a fool can discard all these modern facilities for concentrating the mind on something novel, something new, that no one could imagine earlier.

The popular opinion is that why should one waste his time in thinking this way when such high-class machineries are there to update information? Rather one should go on gathering information, update them every moment so that society may consider you to be a '*smart person*'. In this forest of updating information, creativity remains utterly neglected. Hence, the opportunity to have serendipity through the grace of God, as Dr Loewi received it, has been threateningly minimized. Everyday I witness that research scholars are readily going to the computer whenever an answer to a question is needed. They never search the answer from a textbook or research articles. In the computer they usually open Google or Wikipedia and often obtain partial and sometimes wrong answer. The habit of textbook reading is practically withering.

Many, even including teachers, consider it as wastage of time.

In this kind of environment, education may permit earning but not discovery, innovation and new ideas. We have so many IITs, IISERs, Central Universities, reputed teaching and research institutions. But where is invention? The lack of this is most likely because of our so-called 'modern facilities' which stifle the thinking process, clog up creativity and block the door of serendipitous discovery. This is a serious problem and it is high time to raise this issue for discussions at all levels.

I would like to conclude by providing an example of serendipity in religious practice. An American friend told me this story and he also gave me a picture card. On one side it had a beautiful photograph of a rising sun over the ocean and, on the other side, a brief print of this story. There was a simple man, very ordinary, but a great devotee of God. His whole life had been spent with one specific desire, ie to see the God. He knew that God was always with him and very kind to him. Depending on these notions he carried out his life like a saint. When he was old, approaching the end of life, at that time also he was sure that prior to his death one day or other God will appear before him.

One day he had a dream. That was the time when darkness of the night was merging with the red rays of the rising sun at one corner of the ocean. Behind that he could feel the presence of God. He could observe the journey of his life on the sea shore where, over the wet sandy beach, he identified two pairs of footprints. He understood that one is of God and another was his own. He found that in such a long journey of life God walked with him, but suddenly noticed a considerable break where

only one pair of footprint could be seen. He was shocked and uttered ‘*Oh God, the period when one footprint was visible was the most tormented part of my life, I was stuck with miseries and sadness, and then at that time I walked alone. How was it possible? How could you leave me alone during the most bad period of my life?*’ At that moment from the beautiful sky above the ocean a voice came out, it seemed to be the voice of God. ‘*My son, the one pair of footprint that you are observing in your life journey, I know that it was the most torturous time of your life and that was why I took you in my lap and walked through the*

passage of life. This was the reason for which you could find only one pair of footprint’.

When he awoke his heart was filled with satisfaction with the feeling that at least his desire was fulfilled by the God through a dream. He was astonished to discover that this was the reason for which he could easily come over the bad days in this life.

This is also very true of our life. During good days we think that we have earned them and bad days are due to the negligence from God. Our problem is our attitude to life; we are primarily negative in our nature. ■

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(Continued from page 26)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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| <p>1 For an exhaustive analysis of ‘Oriental Despotism’ see Asish Kumar Roy, <i>Communism in Asia : A Study in Strategy and Tactics</i>, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, 1976.</p> <p>2 Ibid.</p> <p>3 Ibid.</p> <p>4 Amiya Kumar Majumdar (ed.), <i>Nivedita Commemorative Volume</i>, Vivekananda Janmasthan, 1968, pp. 5-6.</p> <p>5 Swami Vivekananda, <i>Lectures from Colombo to Almora</i>, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2013, p. 6.</p> <p>6 Ibid., p. 9.</p> <p>7 Ibid., p. 4.</p> <p>8 Ibid., pp. 4-5.</p> <p>9 Ibid., p. 3.</p> | <p>10 <i>Swami Vivekananda Complete Works</i>, Vol. 5, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, 2013, pp. 546-54.</p> <p>11 Ibid., p. 547.</p> <p>12 Ibid., p. 548.</p> <p>13 Ibid., p. 549.</p> <p>14 <i>Lectures from Colombo to Almora</i>, op. cit., pp. 19-20.</p> <p>15 For an excellent exposition of the concept of <i>samadharshana</i> see Nrusingh Charan Panda, ‘The Spiritual Values of Indian Culture’, <i>Bulletin</i> of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, February 2015, pp. 81-82.</p> <p>16 <i>Complete Works</i>, op. cit., p. 127.</p> <p>17 <i>Lectures from Colombo to Almora</i>, op. cit., pp. 22-23.</p> |
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