

Memory Epiphany

or how I realised I had already happened

by John Craig

We were about an hour out of Ise shrine on our way back from the yearly pilgrimage. Reading one of the plethora of road signs, illuminations, warnings and advertisements that completely litter the eye on Japanese roads, I knew that we were coming up on a seven kilometre traffic jam, caused by an accident. Another vehicular constipation had slowed down our very arrival at the shrine earlier that day. It had been caused by ‘construction work’ on the two lane Ise highway.

Ise always seems like what my old Yucatan buddy Hunbatz referred to as a ‘magnetic centre’. He was talking about Mayan pyramids, saying that each had a specific teaching role for which it was literally encoded in stone. They used copious hieroglyphs and finely engraved imagery. Ise was all about Japan’s cosmic connection to the great sun goddess Amaterasu. It was a place to connect to *heaven*. Thousands of years had prepared the shrine’s builders to encode the massive wooden structures and gardens surrounding with the very palpable *sense* of such a connection. They used rigorous ritual and painstaking craftsmanship to construct every single object that would be in the shrine or around it. Everything was imbued with prayers, patience, beauty and depth of commitment there. On top of that both the inner and outer shrines both stood next to a plot of huge, empty land that was as big as the shrine itself. Its purpose is revolutionary..to rebuild all of it every 20 years!

My wife of forty six years, Sonia, sat next to me occasionally checking her phone but otherwise keeping her eye on the road too. She knew that although I am a pretty good driver, at the age of sixty nine it pays to have two sets of eyes on the road. She stayed awake so we would stay alive. Sometimes though, her desire to give me driving instructions from the front seat, not the back, led to violent outbursts of anger that she should be so presumptuous.

“I am the fucking driver! Get it??”

Or words to that effect. Otherwise our journeys to and from the shrine had tended to be peaceful and reflective of what we had experienced during both Shinto ceremonies at each of the inner and outer shrines. Ancient court music had been played on koto strings and flutes, accompanied by drums and another arcane instrument I do not even know the name of. Robed priestesses had slowly glided across the polished wooden floor of the inner sanctum as we sat straight up on our knees. The head priest’s sonorous intonations were preceded by a resonant clapping of his hands. His white robes stretching out behind his erect back he read out my name along with others who sat on my left, far fewer these days seated in the kneeling *seiza* position. Even a generation ago that would have been considered sacrilegious. People are literally losing their spines..and not just in Japan.

Something always seems to disrupt our everyday ‘reality’ after such ceremony. One example was that I got a clear message on a previous pilgrimage to ‘go to Jerusalem’. That was the last place I would have chosen to visit back in 2008, not being a fan of Zionist politics at all. Legends of Japanese being one of the lost twelve tribes have persisted in Japan to this day and yes, both traditions have an ark that was carried in and out of the holy of holies. Pure coincidence of course..

But a few short months later there I was in Jerusalem with Sonia, at *that* wall, the wailing one. And right behind it lay the ruins of where the Ark of the Covenant had been closely guarded. I fell in love with Jerusalem immediately. We both did. And yet neither of us would ever have even entertained the idea of going had it not been for Shinto ceremony at Ise. Decades of such bizarre Shinto synchronicities leave no doubt whatsoever in my heart that Ise *Grand Shrine* is aptly named..

But what was about to happen in that traffic jam topped them all..

“Shit, there it is!” Japanese drivers in their perfect politeness switch on flashing hazard lights when slowing down to a crawl suddenly. My slight hope that the accident would have been cleared in the interim after reading that electronic sign had now vanished. We slowed to a halt..and for the next 45 minutes we all moved at less than walking speed.

“*Ongaku kakete kureru*” I asked Sonia to give us some sounds to ease the boredom.

We rarely switched on the music deck in the car but here we were now stuck for seven kilometers walking at snail pace in our cars. I instantly recognized the cool electronic beat of that music we had often heard during yoga sessions fifteen years earlier. And I was there *now* as my body kept a close watch on the car crawling in front.

She was younger and slimmer and full of the beauty and magnetic power that had drawn me to her in the first place, on that street in Vancouver back in 1975. What had seemed at the time like a perfectly ordinary yoga session now was imbued with such poignant fondness for what we had that a lump in my throat held back a deep *something*.

Sun salutation together. But now I saw the two of us through a different, future lens. The lens of memory is that most mysterious operation of consciousness. It may also be a lens that disperses time like a crystal refracts light. But who projects through it, and how exactly? In remote viewing we call it bi-location, being in two places or *two memories* simultaneously: in my car aged 69 and in the yoga studio aged 54. So, why not then into my future? Retro-causation anybody?

Why had I not appreciated her this much *then*? How could I have missed the significance of the most important individual of my life? Supposing the intervening years had not led us together to this pilgrimage, this road, this damned awful traffic jam with hours still left to drive after an already full day? What if I, or she had already died?

And then it hit me. I *had* already died. And from that place hovering above time and space I was reviewing that brief spurt down on earth with a peaceful heart and a deep sense of gratitude. That I had experienced such mundane moments, unrecognized as love at the time, when I could just as easily have missed all of that in a different version of my sojourn was an epiphany wedded to a miracle. My sixty eight year old wife sat checking Facebook next to me completely unaware (or maybe not!) of the seasoned love that now flowed from me to her, stripped of all mortality. Thank God we are still here and that memory comes as much from the future as the past.

But in fact we are long gone now. *We* are simply memories within the memory of a story whose beginning to end has all already happened, is over and done and is poignantly remembered.

As the traffic jam started to ease I knew with a certainty that nothing can buy, barter or magically coax into reality that my life as I experience it now is merely a memory flashing on the screen of a perfect mystery. All of our fights and struggles as a couple, all of our triumphs and despairs had been part of that memory just as my tired body now pulling into the right lane at last, is itself a memory of somebody who I am just beginning to recognize may not even need a body. Really..

“We should be home in about two hours.” Sonia nodded and said, “ You’re getting more patient in your old age I see. Can you stop at Nishiyama market on the way in? ”