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Reflective Practice Research in International Collaboration

Developing Teacher Education in Togetherness

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LIT

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Chapter 8: Ways of Understanding Coincidences

Guro Hansen Helskog[1], Michael Noah Weiss[2] and Christian Stokke[3]

Abstract

In this essay, we take our point of departure in one of the authors' concrete experiences from trying to help a minor refugee to education and a decent life. In rather coincidental ways, educational opportunities opened for the teenager, and opportunities for longstanding international collaboration opened up for her. Using a philosophical reflective practice research approach, this author first narrates some of these experiences. Then the three authors reflect critically upon the narrative, drawing out seven patterns of coincidences that made them all wonder. They have further reflected theoretically upon the coincidences, interpreting them respectively as possible events of *synchronicity, intuition,* and *divine guidance*.

Key words

Internationalization, International Collaboration, Reflective Practice Research, Synchronicity, Intuition, Divine guidance

Introduction

"Where can the Kid get a visa without too much trouble?" This was the question Guro, the first-person voice in the narrative of this essay (see the concrete reflection section), asked herself while the terrified parentless 'Kid' – let us call him that[4] – was waiting to be deported from Europe to the capital of his Muslim-majority birth country[5]. In handcuffs and escorted by two giant policemen, the teenager would be flown out of Europe and left alone in a shabby hotel with a small sum of money that was supposed to get him going. Guro had promised that she would do her best to help him.

Hence, this essay tells the story of how Guro tried to help the Kid to an education and a decent life. To secure true reflectivity, intersubjectivity, and

multi-perspectivity, the narrative in the concrete reflection section has been examined by our team of three authors. It is reflected upon using a philosophical approach in terms of reflective practice research as conceptualized by Anders Lindseth (2015), which again is grounded in phenomenology (see e.g. Husserl, 1950; Heidegger, 1975; Ricoeur, 1984) and hermeneutics (see i.e. Gadamer, 1993). Moreover, our methodology is inspired by the broad field of reflective practice (see, i.e. Bradbury et al., 2009) as well as action research (see e.g. Reason and Bradbury, 2008). The reflective research and essay structure suggested by Lindseth (2015) is to begin with a first-person narration in the form of concrete reflection. Her story involved a series of seemingly coincidental experiences that we in the critical reflection section interpret by drawing out seven patterns of interlinked incidents and events, which made them wonder, some of them happening many years apart. Then follows a theoretical reflection section where we try to understand the patterns of coincidences from three different epistemological perspectives, namely a post-materialist scientific perspective, a humanistic perspective, and a theological perspective. Based on these perspectives, the coincidences are interpreted respectively as possible events of *synchronicity, intuition,* and *divine guidance,* without drawing any absolute conclusions, simply because we cannot know for sure what is at play in Guro's rather mysterious experiences.

Yet, the art of reflective practice research demands of the researcher that he or she is able to draw out the implicit seeds of practical knowledge and wisdom inherent in experience and, to the extent possible, make them explicit for the reader to see. In the process, the seeds might grow into flourishment in the researcher as well as in the readers. With this, Guro begins the concrete reflection upon her experiences, narrated from her first-person perspective.

Concrete reflection: Guro's first-person narrative

One of the last things I promised the Kid before he was deported from Europe was that the two of us would meet somewhere in the world soon. But where? My own children would not let me go to his country, and my own country would not let the Kid stay here, so it needed to be some other place. A quick Google search led me to the eight member countries in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC): Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Afghanistan, Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

Of these, three countries stood out as the easiest to get a visa to, India being one of them. Did I have some contacts that could be helpful now?

My thoughts now led me to the international organization "Initiatives of Change" (IofC)[6], with whom I had collaborated with in Norway a few years earlier. I had been awarded the Gandhi Scholarship in December 2008 from the Norwegian Church and Cultural Ministry for a project where I would try out my newly developed Dialogos approach (see Helskog, 2019) to the practice of philosophizing with students with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds (see Helskog, 2015). One of the teachers at the upper secondary school that I had contacted happened to be the leader of the Norwegian IofC team. In the spring of 2009, the international president of the organization, Kasturba and Mahatma Gandhi's grandson, Rajmohan Gandhi, would visit Norway. Maybe I would like to join them in the programme arranged for Gandhi? Amongst others, Rajmohan Gandhi would visit NUPI (Norwegian Institute of Foreign Policy)[7], as well as a mosque in Oslo. I was both surprised by the coincidence and delighted by the invitation. I had won the Gandhi Scholarship, and Gandhi's grandson was coming to Norway!

Now I was reminded of all this, remembering that the main IofC centre was situated in India[8]. Maybe I could meet the Kid there? I continued my research, finding out that the IofC centre in Asia Plateau was in the small hill station village Panchgani, and that to get there, we both needed to fly to Pune, Maharashtra, and get a taxi to take us on the three-hour drive uphill. My next question was whether Pune had a university and if the university offered teacher education. Having received an internationalization grant[9] for females in academia from the University College[10] where I worked, I intended to combine my professional work with the personal promise I had given the Kid. The answer to both questions was yes: One of India's and the world's highest-ranked universities – Savitribai Phule Pune University (SPPU)[11] – was in Pune, and they offered teacher education under the leadership of Professor Sanjeev Sonawane. To my astonishment, I could read from their website that they had an ongoing project collaboration with Telemark University College, which my own university college had just merged with!

I contacted both the teacher education department at SPPU in Pune and Initiatives of Change at Asia Plateau in Panchgani, asking to visit them on certain dates in October 2017. Accidentally (or not?), Initiatives of Change would organise a conference for 100 school leaders from all over India during these dates. The conference was held within the programme "Education

Today, Society Tomorrow"[12]. Would I care to give a keynote speech on the practice of compassion and mindfulness in schools? Of course I would!

The Kid had been deported in March, and we met in India in October, seven months later. Meanwhile, I had established a support group. Two of the members worked on teaching the Kid English through a social media platform, while I tried to show him how he could use, for instance, YouTube for all kinds of educational, athletic, relaxational and meditative purposes.

Because the Kid had lost both his mother and father years before, and because his two sisters had been married off to older men, he had no family, so he spent days and nights on his own, including the Muslim Eid celebration. Knowing how important this day is for Muslims, I the Kid shared pictures from our evening meal at a certain time that night in June 2017. "One day," I promised him, "we will celebrate Eid together".

The internationalization grant I had been given was big enough for another journey, and I had long wanted to explore the philosophy for children (P4C) approach of Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp in more depth. I thus decided to go to the source by signing up for the yearly summer seminar of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC) in New Jersey, organized by Lipman's own institution, Montclair State University[13]. Arriving at the Mendham retreat in August, one of the first co-participants I talked to was, a teacher from Mahindra United World College (UWC) outside of Pune, India![14] By the time the week was over, we had made an agreement that I would take the Kid with me and visit him and his students at UWC during our stay in Maharashtra. So, we did and were met by two Norwegian students who showed us around. By the time we left, the idea to let the Kid study in India had emerged.

When coming to SPPU, meeting Dean Sanjeev Sonawane, I was bombarded with names of Norwegian colleagues that I had not yet met, but whom *he* had worked with for a decade already (see Duesund and Aasland, 2023). Moreover, several of the staff could tell that they had been to Norway too, visiting what is now campus Notodden at the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN)! Even though I thought I was well prepared, having had a meeting with the international office in Norway before leaving, I had obviously not really understood how I was about to enter a landscape of ongoing work. To the staff at SPPU I was just a new team member. To *me*, they were a mystery: What were the odds that of all the possible 1.4 billion people and of all the 1043 universities in India, not to mention the more than 1000 colleges in Pune itself, I had managed to bump into the

one institution and the handful of people that already collaborated with my Norwegian colleagues? I was mind-blown.

Arriving at the site of the *Education Today, Society Tomorrow* conference, a woman soon stood out. Having been a refugee as a child herself, the 80-year-old woman was moved by the Kids' story and shared hers with us. After the separation between India and Pakistan, that followed death of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, flows of refugees were travelling both ways: Muslims fled to Pakistan, and Hindus fled from the now Pakistani area into the remaining Indian area. Living on the streets and being a daughter in a family of nine siblings, the young Tanna was not given the opportunity to go to school. This experience was an important background for the founding of the organization, *Each One Teach One*[15], not a bad headline for the online teaching practice with the Kid the previous six months either!

Another beautiful woman soon stood out – Dr. Usha Devi Reddy[16]. She was the CEO of the Meridian schools in Hyderabad[17]. We soon got into a talk that would develop into a long-standing friendship. In our first chat, she told me that the motto of the schools she was leading was "Connecting the mind and the heart". Once again, I was astonished. I immediately showed Dr. Reddy the opening picture of the keynote presentation that I would hold the day after: a colourful drawing of a humanlike figure who plays strings between the mind and the heart!

As noted above, the Asia Plateau was situated in Panchgani. This tiny little village within huge India happened to be where Telemark University College had sent students for practice experience in early childhood education and school since the early 1990s. (Duesund and Aasland, 2023). However, I did not realize this coincidence – that the Indian Initiatives of Change headquarters was situated only a few hundred metres away from this school and the place the students used to live – before an actual school visit there with the rest of the USN team a few years later. Needless to say, driving past the Asia Plateau centre on our way to the hotel next door, I was once again taken aback.

Before leaving the conference in 2017, Dr. Reddy invited me and the Kid to visit her in her home in Hyderabad, and in June the year after, in 2018, we called her and asked if the invitation was still standing. If yes, we would like to accept the invitation. Her response was that "now is a good time", and we flew from Pune to her town the day after. What I had not thought about when I chose the dates for the Kid and me to meet in India again was that these days were also the time of Eid. Knowing that the Kid was Muslim, Usha asked the Kid if he would like to join the Eid prayer. He

ironed his kurta, and off we went. As women and non-Muslims, we were invited to sit outside in the back, yet at a place where we were able to follow the ceremony.

One of the biggest tourist attractions in Hyderabad is the Falaknuma Palace. The Muslim *Nizam* had used the palace as a guest house for the royals visiting Hyderabad, the guests including King George V, Queen Mary, Edward VIII, and Tsar Nicholas II. The palace was now a museum and a luxury hotel, with a nice restaurant. It was the most perfect evening, with the Eid new moon and star constellation[18] shining brightly from a clear sky onto the three of us as we had an Eid meal together on the restaurant balcony. Coincidentally, it took exactly one year between when I promised the Kid that one day we would celebrate Eid together and when we did, in the most beautiful surroundings.

This was our second trip to India together. When coming to India for the first time, we arrived right before the Diwali festival, meaning that for some days, everything was closed. This gave us some days just to explore, and we came across the OSHO international community in Pune, ending up having a full day at what turned out to be a quite "westernised" ashram. During the day, we joined in dance meditation, dynamic meditation, and several other meditation classes, and even though we did not have a shared language yet, he understood enough to be able to answer my question of how he was doing. "I feel good, mamma", he said, putting his right hand to his heart. Looking back at our day during our dinner at the ashram, we could not stop laughing. It was the first time I had seen him express joy and happiness.

When we planned our meeting in June the year after, I thus asked if he would like to stay an extra week at a yoga and meditation site while I left for a philosophical practice conference in Mexico. He would really like to, and I started exploring options. To make an already long story short, it all ended with the Kid living in a yoga institute in a remote place in India for one year, completing two of their yoga teacher training certifications (TTC), before starting his bachelor's in a different area of studies in an Indian city. This time, the Kid would stay for another five years, just returning to his birth country for visa renewals.

Now, many years and nine journeys to India later, I am deeply involved in two projects on developing teacher education through internationalization between colleagues at Savitribai Phule Pune University and the University of South-Eastern Norway[19], while the Kid is studying for a master's degree at a university in Europe. Coincidentally, the Kid was the reason

why it all was set in motion. His story is worth a book in itself. For now, the story of how I got involved and became part of the international collaboration in the greater USN-SPPU project team suffices as a starting point for exploring these rather mysteriously connected experiences more thoroughly and in depth.

Critical reflection: What is at play in the narrative?

When Guro shared her experiences with Christian and Michael, who became the co-authors of this essay, they were fascinated. Together, we started wondering and philosophizing about how these experiences could be interpreted. Was it the only legitimate interpretation to say that the respective events only happened by chance? Each one of us suggested and started exploring alternative scientific, philosophical, and theological perspectives that could illuminate these events. We took our point of departure in the hermeneutical question "What is at stake in the narrative?" which is central in the reflective practice research approach suggested by Lindseth (2020).

Obviously, what was at stake in this story was life itself – embodied in the life, the human growth and development of the Kid – and the pressing concern was: How could Guro help this Kid? At first, it seemed impossible. The decisions of the Norwegian state were non-negotiable. Then in the creative process of finding possibilities and openings, one good helper after another showed up, some providing ideas or guidance, others direct practical or economical support, while others again came in not primarily for the sake of the Kid but as a collaborative network of colleagues that would make it possible for her to continue to support the Kid while conducting international research and development work together with them. Hence, the private voluntary efforts to help the Kid to an education and a good future cannot be separated from internationalization efforts and collaboration with people and institutions, privately and professionally. Each incident or experience was contextualized in time and space, developing from a complex, non-explicated series of previous events and incidents, leading to complex networks of consequences and new actions.

The inner drive to help the Kid opened spaces of professional opportunities, one incident leading to the next, creating what in retrospect can be interpreted as patterns of connected and meaningful incidents, as Richard Tarnas describes in his foreword to the anthology *The Playful Universe: Synchronicity and the Nature of Consciousness*:

> "Most of us in the course of life have observed coincidences in which two or more independent events, having no apparent causal connection, nevertheless seem to form a meaningful pattern. On occasion, this patterning can strike one as so extraordinary that it is difficult to believe the coincidence has been produced by chance alone. The events give the distinct impression of having been precisely arranged, invisibly orchestrated." (Tarnas, 2024: iii)

Even though there are not really any definite beginnings and endings in the flow of life, and with the risk of becoming too simplistic, we have extracted seven patterns of coincidences:

Pattern 1: Receiving the Gandhi Scholarship 2008 – encounter with Initiatives of Change and Rajmohan Gandhi 2009 – the stay and presentation at Asia Plateau in Panchgani 2017.

Pattern 2: The promise to help the Kid with education in the spring of 2017 – teaching through Facebook Messenger – Encounter with the founder of the organization, *Each One Teach One.*

Pattern 3: Researching traditions and ways of philosophizing – encounter with the Mahindra United World College teacher at the Mendham retreat – school visit to Mahindra United World College – idea to let the Kid study in India.

Pattern 4: Work in teacher education at the University of South-Eastern Norway – looking for a teacher education institution in India – encounter with the Savitribai Phule Pune University team, who had been collaborating with Guro's new colleagues for several years.

Pattern 5: Sending YouTube meditation videos through Messenger to help the Kid relax and find some peace from fear – spending a day at Osho Ashram in Pune – one year of lodging and yoga teacher training at a yoga institute in India for the Kid.

Pattern 6: The Kid celebrating Eid 2017 alone in a park, the promise that one day we would celebrate Eid together – the invitation to visit Usha Devi Reddy in Hyderabad – the celebration of Eid 2018 together at the castle restaurant under the Eid moon and star constellation.

Pattern 7: Applying for project grants for developing teacher education – receiving, respectively, the JOIN and TeachIN grants, making extensive collaboration on internationalization of teacher education possible – publication of this essay and anthology on international collaboration.

These patterns are, of course, our *interpretations* of how these incidents are meaningfully connected. However, when the incidents happened and when the different actions were taken to help the Kid, it seemed to Guro that everything fell into place in almost "mysterious" ways. Obviously, a lot of efforts were made and work put in, not the least by the Kid, but it was as though a path opened both to the Kid and Guro as they took action. Michael and Christian were equally astonished when listening to Guro's experiences of the interconnectedness between the incidents. Together, they created these conceptualizations.

In the efforts to help the Kid, it was not possible for Guro to plan beforehand. Every step on the way was taken in darkness, so to speak. They implied looking for opportunities and taking action without knowing what the next step would be. Only in retrospect is it possible to see that the steps had been good and that they led to the meeting with people, to opportunities and to insights that could not possibly be anticipated. The actions taken were not driven mainly by rational decision-making but rather embodied responses made possible through what can be labelled *synchronicities,* defined by Carl G. Jung (1973) as meaningful coincidences without any known causal relationship. Each action was taken due to a "hunch", based on what is popularly called a "gut feeling", or more academically called *intuition*, as a response to what each situation opened up for. Looking back, it even seems that there was an undercurrent of embracing *divine guidance* supporting Guro's efforts. In the following, we will explore these three phenomena as embedded in three different epistemologies.

Synchronicity, intuition, and divine guidance

In the following three parts of the essay, the patterns above will be reflected upon through different perspectives. The first perspective is what Christian Stokke calls a postmaterialist empirical approach, where the coincidences are understood in terms of the concept of synchronicity. In the second perspective, Michael Noah Weiss employs a humanistic approach of existential *meaning-making,* where the events are interpreted as intuitions. In the third perspective, Guro Hansen Helskog contemplates the patterns of events in terms of divine guidance, which cannot be fully understood but leaves us standing in the open.

Understanding the patterns as synchronicities

Within a postmaterialist paradigm that unites science and spirituality, the revelations Guro experienced can be understood as *synchronicities* (Woollacott, Lorimer & Schwartz, 2024). Carl Jung first defined synchronicity as "the simultaneous occurrence of two meaningfully but not causally connected events" (1973: 25). These coincidences may be between a subjective mental event and an objective or observable event, but in stronger cases, two or more observable events coincide.

Even though inner turmoil and hard work were involved, Guro many times felt an almost magical interconnectedness between events, where everything fell effortlessly into place. In positive psychology, this is what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls a "state of flow". According to him, it is common among people with a spiritual worldview to experience that when they take one step in alignment with their soul's purpose, the universe responds with ten steps, and this opens to an experience of reality as a magical place where intentions manifest into physical reality. As Joseph Campbell (1968) says in "A Hero with a Thousand Faces", when we "follow our bliss", magic happens.

Philosopher of religion David Ray Griffin (2001) describes this postmaterialist paradigm as "re-enchantment without supernaturalism", where both science and religion give up their respective dogmas of materialism and supernaturalism. This is a scientific paradigm that re-enchants the world, taking spiritual experiences seriously as empirical data. Whereas a humanistic worldview assumes that ultimate meaning cannot be known, the scientific paradigm assumes that it *can* be known through empirical observations and descriptions. Spirituality is not just about people's perceptions of the world but also about observable empirical realities. Already in 1981, Sheldrake (1981) noted this paradigm shift and described a change in how we perceive the world, towards a merging of science and spirituality, rationality and intuition. This is a postmaterialist worldview, which includes an energetic understanding of the universe.

Quantum physicist David Bohm (1996) suggests that consciousness may be the basic building block of the universe, which creates energy and the material world. He theorizes that matter emerges from a unified field of conscious energy that is the source of all Being. In the worldview of Newton and Descartes, only surface reality is visible, where humans and material objects appear to be separate, and events are random. However, there is a deeper level of reality beyond the physical, and it is not possible to under-

stand subatomic systems without taking this level into account. Quantum physicist Nassim Haramein (2015) shows how everything in the universe is connected through protons, and each particle of the universe carries the information of the whole. William Tiller (1997) suggests that energy is the link between the inner world of consciousness and the outer material reality. He explains that intentions and expectations affect physical reality because physical reality is a materialized reflection of consciousness, which means that we co-create the world. Several experimental studies at the HeartMath Institute show how we affect the physical when we align thoughts and emotions, mind and heart. Leading-edge natural science thus supports a post-materialist paradigm where consciousness is prior to matter and provides scientific evidence for the spiritual phenomenon of manifesting intentions into reality.

From this perspective, the patterns of events experienced by Guro are subjectively perceived as "meaningful coincidences" or *synchronicities* – a commonly reported mystical phenomenon first defined by Carl Jung (1973) as an acausal coincidence between inner and outer events. Synchronicities that include a subjective inner event have been difficult to verify, but many synchronicities occur where two or more events that are observable by outsiders occur together, and this is also the case with the events experienced by Guro.

In transpersonal psychology, Bethany Butzer (2021) investigates whether coincidences are merely random or if there is something to the Jungian concept. She suggests that synchronicities say something about the fundamental nature of consciousness and that the most plausible explanation is that consciousness is prior to matter, as suggested by Bohm (1996) and Tiller (1997).

The post-materialist paradigm implies a naturalistic worldview where perceived magic is explained through natural science. This paradigm does not require any supernatural or religious explanations, but it does not rule out a metaphorical understanding of a divine or religious realm. What is called 'consciousness' and 'energy' in the post-materialist worldview may well correspond to what religious people would call 'God'.

While the postmaterialist research orientation seeks to understand synchronicity as empirical phenomenon that can be systematically observed and described, humanistic approaches seek to understand the *meaning* of phenomena. With his famous and extensive approach to humans' search for meaning, Viktor Frankl (2000) was one of the first who put forth an

understanding of spirituality that was not intrinsically interrelated with religion.

Understanding the patterns as intuitions

In his book *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (2000), Frankl asserts that

> "'Spiritual' is used here without any religious connotation, of course, but rather just to indicate that we are dealing with a specifically human phenomenon in contrast to the phenomena that we share with other animals. In other words, the 'spiritual' is what is human in man." (Frankl, 2000: 28)

If one wants to understand Guro's narrative in a meaningful way (and this is what Frankl is after with his approach) and not discount it as a series of accidental incidents, one might come around to taking a more spiritual perspective into account, where intuitive insights and phenomena of synchronicity are rather interpreted as "signs on the way" than mere random events.

When speaking of "signs on the way", the Socratic daimonion can be mentioned (see e.g. Plato, 1997: Crito, 44a; Apology, 31c-d, 33c, 40a; Phaedo, 60e). Literally speaking, *daimonion* means *divine sign*, and Socrates understood it as a spiritual resource "which he valued even higher than his faculty of reason" (Weiss, 2021: 3). Talking to him in critical situations in terms of an inner voice, the daimonion "was some sort of an impersonal, spiritual faculty or agent that offered him intuitively perceived signs, which gave him orientation on his life path." (ibid.) Frankl introduced a conception of conscience quite similar to Socrates' daimonion when it comes to its spiritual, transcendent nature. He argues that all freedom has a "from what" and a "to what". The "from what" of man's freedom is what Frankl calls "his being driven", and the "to what" is what he calls "his being responsible" and "his having conscience". He further argues that these two facets of the human condition can be expressed by an admonition from Maria von Eschenbach:

> "Be the master of your will and the servant of your conscience!" [. . .] But if I am also to be "the servant of my conscience," then I may ask whether this conscience has not to be something higher than he who merely perceives its "voice?" (cited from Frankl, 2000:59)

In other words, Frankl argues, a human being cannot be the servant of his/her conscience unless s/he understands conscience as a phenomenon

transcendent of man. Conscience cannot be considered simply in terms of its psychological facticity but must also be grasped in its transcendent essence:

> "I can be the servant of my conscience only when the dialogue with my conscience is a genuine *dia-logos* rather than a *mono-logos*. This, however, can only be so when my conscience transcends myself, when it is the mediator of something other than myself. [. . .]" (Frankl, 2000: 59)

Frankl further argues that only the transcendent quality of conscience makes it possible to understand man in depth – to understand his "being a person". Seen in this light, the term "person" takes on a new meaning: Through the conscience of the human person, a transhuman agent *per-sonat* – "is sounding through". Hence, Frankl argues: "Only with reference to transcendence, only as some sort of transcendent phenomenon, can conscience really be understood." (Frankl, 2000: 59). In this respect is Hannah Arendt's description of the Socratic dialogue as midwifery, where she also talks about the inner dialogue with conscience in her work *The Life of the Mind* (1978).

By means of this description of conscience, one could interpret the previously presented narration in a way that Guro perceived her daimonion, that is, perceived *divine signs* in terms of the opportunities that opened in the form of the patterns of incidents. These patterns of incidents understood as *signs* are not something objective in nature, but rather they are personal in the actual sense of the word: *as* signs – to use Frankl's words – they were "sounding through" (per-sonat) and responded to by that person (the narrator), which made this a true *dia-logos*[20]. That is, a *dialogue with conscience,* through which meaning (*logos*) could shine through (*dia*). At this point, one might object that this interpretation and understanding of Guro's experiences seem quite irrational. And in fact, Frankl would agree because,

> "Conscience is irrational; it is alogical or, better put, prelogical. [. . .]. What is disclosed to conscience is something that *is*; however, what is revealed to conscience is not anything that is but, rather, something that *ought to be*. What merely ought to be is not real but is something to make real; it is no actuality but mere possibility (although in a higher, ethical sense, such a possibility again represents a necessity). (Frankl, 2000: 40)

He further reflects that insofar as that which has been disclosed to conscience is still to be actualized, the question emerges of how it could be

realized unless it were somehow anticipated in the first place. Such anticipation, however, can only be enacted through *intuition.*

With that, we arrive at the very nature of conscience, which "is essentially intuitive" (Frankl, 2000: 40). In Guro's experiences with the Kid, she anticipated Daimonic signs intuitively, *Dia-logos* – as one could put it. Yet, when Frankl states that what is disclosed to conscience is something that "*ought to be*", he not only points out the intuitive nature of conscience. Rather, he gives an account of what *responsibility* means in light of this conception of conscience, namely, to respond to the signs of one's daimonion in terms of doing what *ought to be* done. And this is what Guro did with regard to the Kid, that is, to turn the possibilities that the concrete situations revealed into actualities to meet her promise towards the Kid. It was in this interplay, this dialogue between the concrete possibilities and Guro's actions in response (*responsibility*), that she could see through (*dia*) to the meaning (*logos*) of this situation. As Frankl (2000: 29) so beautifully expresses it:

> Man is not he who poses the question *What is the meaning of life?* but he who is asked this question, for it is life itself that poses it to him. And man has to answer to life by answering for life; he has to respond by being responsible; in other words, the response is necessarily a response-in-action.

He further states that while we respond to life "in action", we are responding in the "here and now" – in the concreteness of a person and the concreteness of the situation in which he is involved. Thus, he argues, our responsibility is always responsibility *ad personam* and *ad situationem.*

The question – *What does life expect from us?* – in the concrete situations in which we are constantly immersed, fundamentally shifts the focus on our existence. In a certain way, it was also the question that Guro asked herself, and by asking it, she became aware of the opportunities that she had as a person (*ad personam*) in the given situations (*ad situationem*). Interestingly, only by following the meanings that revealed themselves in the given situations could the previously described patterns of incidents unfold. In other words, the opportunities that showed up in each of these situations did not only make sense to Guro. Rather, they appeared to be meaningful, and the "meaningfulness" made her choose them, so to speak. They spoke to her, so to speak. With Guro's experience as an example, the question "What does life expect from us?" essentially asks us whether there is meaning in our existence or not. How can we know that – and can we ever know that at all? With regards to the history of the philosophy of science,

with all its concepts, theories, and dilemmas, the answer to that question tends towards a "no", that is, we cannot *know* whether life has meaning or not. In this regard, however, Frankl points out an important difference between knowledge and faith that appears to have a profound impact on human existence. What is "unknowable", he argues (2000: 146), need not be unbelievable. In fact, where knowledge gives up, the torch is passed on to faith. It is true that it is not possible to find out intellectually whether there is an ultimate meaning behind everything. But if we cannot answer the question intellectually, we may well do so existentially. Where an intellectual cognition fails, an existential decision is due:

> Vis-à-vis the fact that it is equally conceivable that everything is absolutely meaningful and that the scales are equally high, we must throw the weight of our own being into one of the scales. And precisely therein, I see the function to carry out my belief. In contrast to what people are prone to assume, namely, believing is not at all some sort of thinking minus the reality of that which is thought, believing is rather some sort of thinking plus something, namely, the existentiality of him or her who does the thinking. (Frankl, 2000: 146)

The existentiality that Frankl addresses here appears to be a turning point to argue for a spiritual understanding of Guro's narrative that is not reliant upon empirical data and analysis. For it was how the narrator *experienced* this situation – her experienced existence – that suggested a different view than a scientific-rationalistic one – a different understanding to *sense* the *meaning of the experiences.* However, when 'going down this rabbit hole' that opens up when taking on such a spiritual perspective, it is not only intuition that comes into the spotlight. Also, questions about the spiritual dimension as such become pressing.

While we have now contemplated the meaning of the incidents from the perspective of the intuitive, conscience-driven, and responsible action of Guro, we will now expand the perspective to also reflect upon Guro's experiences from a religious perspective. With the help of Marcus J. Borg, amongst others, we will reflect upon the question of whether there was some sort of *divine guidance* involved in the patterns of interlinked experiences of Guro.

Understanding the patterns as divine guidance

All religions in the world that have endured the test of time unambiguously affirm that there is a "stupendous, magnificent, wondrous 'More' in the world", Marcus J. Borg (1989: 37) argues, borrowing the notion

"More" from William James's book "The Varieties of Religious Experience" (1902). He describes this "More" as a "nonmaterial layer or level" and "extra dimension" of reality. The "More" has been named in various ways, as the Dao, Allah, Brahman, Atman, God, Spirit, the Sacred or Yahweh. He further argues that data of religious experience is highly suggestive of the reality of this "More", especially in its dramatic forms of visionary and mystical experiences. People across cultures, traditions and continents throughout history have had experiences that to them are overwhelming signs of this sacred "More". Hence, the experiential base of religion is very strong, Borg argues. He suggests that God "speaks" to us

> sometimes dramatically in visions, less dramatically in some of our dreams, in internal "proddings" or "leadings", through people. (. . .) We sometimes have a sense – I sometimes have a sense – of being *addressed*. (Borg, 1989: 63–64)

Especially the "internal prodding" and "leadings through people" were part of Guro's experiences. The term "prodded" is not directly found in the Bible; however, the concept of being urged, encouraged, or stirred into action is prevalent throughout the Scriptures. The idea of prodding can be understood as a form of divine or human encouragement to fulfil God's will or to act in accordance with His commandments[21]. Borg refers to contemporary author Frederick Buechner: "Listen to what happens to you because it is through what happens to you that God speaks" (p. 73). If we accept this as a possibility, the many coincidences involved in Guro's effort to help the Kid can be seen as a continuously ongoing conversation with and guidance by "the More".

In his book *Openness Mind, Open Heart*, Thomas Keating (2006) asserts that in the contemplative life, one lives in a world in which God can do everything. To move into that realm is the greatest adventure, he argues. It is to be open to the Infinite and hence to infinite possibilities:

> Our private, self-made world comes to an end, a new world appears within and around us, and the impossible becomes an everyday experience in which one lives in an abiding state of union with God. (Keating, 2006: 11–12)

In such openness, which is like an ongoing prayer in which one constantly lives in and with the mystery, the inspiration of the Spirit is given directly to our spirit without the intermediary of our own reflections or acts of will, Keating (2006: 17) further argues. In such a state, one lives with presence and attentiveness rather than understanding. The Spirit speaks to our conscience through scriptures and events in daily life, making daily life a con-

stant revelation of God. Indeed, presence and attentiveness were pivotal in Guro's experiences in the sense that she otherwise might not have sensed that the opportunities that showed up were the right causes of action. If she had acted purely from a rational and pragmatic mindset, she might have made choices that would have led to very different outcomes. Yet this is something that is more easily seen when the story can be told in retrospect.

Another metaphor that is relevant in order to understand the coincidences Guro experienced from a religious perspective is the metaphor of the "heart". The word "heart" appears well over a thousand times in the Bible, most often as a comprehensive metaphor for the inner self as a whole. The metaphor refers to a level of the self that is deeper than the intellect and the world of ideas – a level below our thinking, feeling, and willing, Borg argues (2003: 26). As a spiritual conception of the total self, our "heart" affects our sight, our thoughts, our feelings, and our will. However, our hearts can be open, soft and "meat-like", or closed, shut, hard and "stone-like". When our hearts are closed and stonelike, we live within a shell. Blindness and limited vision, lack of understanding, bondage, ungratefulness, insensitivity to wonder and awe, self-preoccupation, lack of compassion, and blindness to injustice are among the characteristics of a "closed heart". In severe form, hard hearts are associated with violence, brutality, arrogance, and greed (Borg, 1989, pp. 149–154). However, Borg suggests that the closed heart is the natural result of the process of growing up, creating the need for a process of inner transformation, which is the essence and at the heart (sic!) of all world religions. This inner transformation implies opening the heart. When our hearts are closed, we do not see. The world looks ordinary, isolated as we are in our own worlds. In the Christian understanding, our hearts are understood as being opened through the transformative process of "being born again". A similar process of heart-opening is described by respondents in research on spiritual awakenings outside of religious contexts (Stokke and Rodriguez, 2021, 2023). When our heart is open, we live a life centred in God (or Allah, Jahve, Dao, or Atman) and see and hear more clearly. We come alive to wonder, experiencing the world as extraordinary. The seven patterns of coincidences interpreted from the narrated story of Guro were indeed experienced as extraordinary. They would probably not have been experienced as such if Guro were "stone-hearted" and closed in her own world. Then she might not have bothered to try to help the Kid either.

The primary quality of a life centred in God is, according to Borg (1989: 122), *compassion,* and in Aramaic and Hebrew the word "compassion" is

associated with being "womblike", life-giving, nourishing, and embracing. When Guro acted upon her instant care for the terrified parentless Kid before he was deported from Norway, she obviously acted out of compassion, and it might metaphorically and from the perspective of Borg be argued that she acted from an open, meat-like heart. However, when she continued to support him with the help of others, other qualities also came into play. Consistent hard work was one of them. Moreover, the equivalent of compassion in personal life is work for justice in political life. Obviously, a driving force in Guro's efforts to help the Kid was the pain of seeing him being subjected to unjust global policies. As Borg (1989: 162) puts it: An open heart, compassion, ethical impulse, and justice go together: 'An open heart feels the suffering and pain of the world and responds to it".

Taylor (2007) speaks about the "closed heart" in a slightly different way, namely as the "buffered self". While the dominant understanding in ancient and medieval times was that the human being is fundamentally *porous* and *relational*, modernity created splits and separations between the inner and the outer, between humans and nature, between humans and the cosmic order, and between humans and God. It implied a shift towards the idea that religion should be understood through reason alone, Taylor (2007) argues. The consequence is what he calls a move from, respectively, "enchantment" towards "disenchantment", and from a "porous" towards a "buffered" self. The disenchantment and buffering implied the development of the closed mindset of an inner self that is separate and distanced from others and from the world, i.e., who lives with a closed heart, to use the expression of Borg (1989). From this perspective, it seems that Guro acted from an open heart and with a porous self, perceiving an enchanted world.

Here, it is also relevant to draw Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (2004) into the picture. He (2004) speaks about three spheres of dialogical "I-Thou" relations, corresponding to three types of otherness: dialogue with man, dialogue with nature, and dialogue with spirit. Dialogue with man is, according to him, characterized by *exchange in language*, broadly speaking. Dialogue with nature is characterized by *transmitting below language*, while dialogue with spirit is characterized as *receiving above language*. If we truly enter into a dialogical relationship with another human being, a landscape, a flower, or a horse, or with God, Atman, or Allah, we apprehend it not as a *thing* with certain attributes to be separated, analysed, and conceptualized under universal principles, but as a whole, singular being that is *related* to the I, Buber (2004) argues. Understood in the perspective of Buber, the coincidences Guro experienced might also be seen as a dia-

logue with other humans and spirits involving both exchange in language and receiving above language.

Final comments

This essay started with Guro's concrete narration and reflection upon how she has tried to help a minor refugee whom she met in 2016 to get an education and a decent life. Her experiences involved a series of coincidental experiences that, in the critical reflection section, were interpreted as seven patterns of interlinked incidents and events, some of them happening many years apart. Then followed a theoretical reflection section where we tried to understand the patterns of coincidences from three different epistemological perspectives.

In the essay "Reflective practice research and kaleidoscopic epistemology", two of us authors, Guro and Michael (2023), reflect upon how the reflective practitioner-researcher takes his or her point of departure in singular-particular, concrete, and unique experiences that are, as we have seen exemplified in this essay, contextualized and related to other human beings and incidents. An experience can always be studied from numerous perspectives. It also contains numerous aspects and relationships that can be studied separately and together. This was the background for our choice of the metaphor "kaleidoscopic". Human experience is not static. It is dynamic, and our understanding of things can change if we take a new perspective, select a different dimension of the experience as a focus point, or understand the experience on the basis of different epistemologies. In this essay, we have experimented with three different ways of interpreting and understanding the experiences. The post-materialist approach invited us to study the narrations as "data" and "facts", indicating that Guro's experiences of coincidences were incidents of *synchronicities*. The humanistic approach invited us to go deeper into the experiences, interpreting the possible existential meaning of them as driven by Guro's *intuition,* by drawing spiritual but not religious worldviews into the picture. Finally, the third theological approach included perspectives from religious traditions, understanding the coincidences as *divine guidance*. However, regardless of approach, all we can say is that the coincidences happened, that we can apply different perspectives and ways of understanding them, but that it is impossible to conclude in an absolute way how the coincidences came about and how they are related to each other. As such, we went all the way to the

limit of language – the place where the mysterious depth of the experiences has opened up to us, leaving us in awe and wonder.

The boundary between what can be named in words and what cannot is the place where the relationship between cataphatic *knowing* (from the Gr. *Katafemi,* meaning 'to be able to express, confirm') and apophatic *not-knowing* (from the Gr. *apofemi*, meaning 'to not be able to say, to negate') comes to the fore (see Innerdal and Rise, 2016). Is it possible to research that which is unknowable, that which is beyond what can be expressed in language? This is a question Finn Thorbjørn Hansen has reflected upon in recent publications (2022, 2023; Thorsted and Hansen, 2022), including in his contribution to the present anthology. The two concepts, the cataphatic and the apophatic, relate to phenomena that cannot be grasped via cognitive, rational, methodical, and scientific approaches and language. If we are to reach these depths of existence, we need to go via poetry, art, and deep philosophical wonder, Hansen (2025) argues. However, to write about such experiences always falls short, simply because language does not suffice.

We leave it to the reader to decide whether the coincidences reflected upon in this essay either imply synchronicities, intuitions, or divine guidance, or none or all of them. We have reached the limits of language and human understanding itself and are left *standing in the open* (Hansen, 2010). The chains of incidents remain a mystery, and we can only wonder, also, about what will happen next in the story of the life of the Kid.

Notes

[1] Guro Hansen Helskog holds a position as professor of pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. She developed the Dialogos approach to philosophical practice from 2004 on and has published several books and research articles both in Norwegian and English, amongst them *Philosophising the Dialogos Way towards Wisdom in Education. Between Critical Thinking and Spiritual Contemplation* (Routledge 2019). Together with Michael Noah Wise, she is co-hosting the *ResponsAbility Podcast.*

[2] Michael Noah Weiss is a professor at the Department of Pedagogy at the University of South-Eastern Norway. He has a PhD in philosophy of science, and his main field of research is pedagogical-philosophical practice. He is host of the ResponsAbility Podcast together with Guro Hansen Helskog and vice-chair of the Trilogos Foundation.

[3] Christian Stokke is an associate professor at the Department of Culture, Religion and Social Studies at the University of Southeastern Norway. He holds a PhD in Social Anthropology, and his research interests include multiculturalism, intercultural understanding, religion, and spirituality. He has published several articles on contemporary spirituality and its relationship to science, religion, and philosophy. Christian also teaches in the Norwegian teacher education programmes and supervises master's and PhD students in the areas of human rights, multiculturalism, cultural studies, spirituality, and education.

[4] "The Kid", who is now an adult, has read and approved the essay and also our calling him "the Kid".
[5] We have chosen not to name the country or city in order to protect "the Kid".
[6] See Home |IofC International
[7] See Afghanistan, India and Pakistan: Can suspicious neighbours move towards cooperation? |NUPI
[8] See IofC Global Centres |IofC International
[9] Norges Forskningsråds programme BALANSE-Kjønnsbalanse i toppstillinger og forskningsledelse; prosjekt 245261 Women in Research; Individual and Organizational Learning for improved Gender Balance (KLOK): 2015–2017.
[10] After the merger, the name of the institution first changed to University College of South-Eastern Norway, before getting a university status and changing name again: University of South-Eastern Norway (usn.no)
[11] See Savitribai Phule Pune University, One of the Premier Universities in India – Official Website. (unipune.ac.in)
[12] edNet Forum: Education Today, Society Tomorrow (ETST): Charter for Compassion
[13] See IAPC Summer Seminar – Institute for The Advancement of Philosophy for Children – Montclair State University
[14] See UWC India – UWC Mahindra College
[15] Home Page – Each One Teach One Foundation (eotoindia.org)
[16] Dr. Usha Devi Reddy has read the essay and approved that we acknowledge her by using her full name.
[17] See http://meridianschool.in
[18] A Scientific Overview of Eid Moon Sightings – Dr Phil Sutton (wordpress.com)
[19] The two projects were respectively NOTED 2017 – four year/10039 Quality in teacher education – joining forces through internationalization (JOIN) and UTFORSK 2020. UTF-2020/10045 – Teacher Education for Sustainable Futures in India and Norway (TeachIN), both led by Associate Professor Åsmund Aamaas.
[20] In Helskog (2021), Guro reflects upon how coincidence and synchronicity were involved in how she in 2004 chose Dialogos as the name of her approach to philosophical practice.
[21] See Topical Bible: Prodded

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