

Epilogue: Accounting For This

Studying history aims to loosen the grip of the past . . .
By observing the accidental chain of events that led us here,
we realize how our very thoughts and dreams took shape –
and we begin to think and dream differently.
Yuval Noah Harari , *Homo Deus* (p. 60)

I have been asked, many times, if there is a central theme or fundamental moral attached to the coincidences in this project. I have yet to fully formulate an adequate answer to that question. I definitely do not believe that the universe, this planet, or even the lives of very many people, circulate around me. When I began the project, I thought the work was primarily about my mother. I still consider Evangeline to be the central figure of this project as many of the stories revolve around her life and connect to people and places familiar to her. I think that, for the most part the principle connections, the *Threads*, are in one way or the other involved with her life. Of course, once initial connections are made, subsequent events, persons, and/or places might become the central linchpin in the middle of the vortex. For example, many of the really interesting connections weave their way through Devils Lake, North Dakota Keokuk, Iowa Hartford, Connecticut and/or Long Beach, California. Places might hold the key. Notice that many of the places that provide coherence served as Evangeline's home-base.

Yet, as the research and writing progressed, the spirals that might have started with her, seemed to extend beyond her reach such that maybe the *Threads* are not primarily about her. Often, if I don't enter the scene, the connections fade, at least a little.

There are a number of candidate explanations for the connections posed by these stories. Perhaps ultimate meanings and significance reside within. I note them, here, in unranked order.

Some might see underlying spiritual or extra-sensory accounts as easy explanations. Mysterious forces may be at work. The fact I've stopped believing in most of what others take to be an inevitable after-life does not rule out the possibility of Angels (be they guardians or malevolent creatures) or spirits. While I do not adhere to these approaches and have long ago stopped praying in support of earthly outcomes, I sometimes look at my hands, note the lines that cling genetically to long and deep sets of ancestors across many families and civilizations, and wonder if there is something supportive in, and because, of family histories. While I do not pray to "the ancestors" I sometimes call out toward them in hopes that my voice combines with their echoes. I do not, generally, strongly adhere to this spiritual notion.

Others might take a scientific/mathematical approach and note that large data sets produce accidental co-occurrences that seem notable but are likely without being statistically related. This approach might well account for many of the place-bound *Threads*. As I so often heard from folks in North Dakota: "That's just North Dakota for ya." In other words, places often find inhabitants bumping into and being related to each other, even across expanses of time. Though some of the connections described and experienced here may qualify as "normal coincidences given a big data set," I find a few of the *Threads* beyond the bounds of statistical probabilities. I was motivated to start this project by a couple such events; occurrences so very unlikely that the statistical odds against overwhelmed the likelihood that maths are their ultimate determiners.

An alternative approach, from a scientific perspective informed by quantum theories, suggests that relationships of this nature follow orderly patterns that are beyond our current understandings. Buddhist perspectives toward the universal connection of all things resemble

quantum entanglement: forces and factors we know to be scientifically true cannot be fully explained. This approach fascinates me and may well account for some of the extra-ordinary occurrences. However, very much like many aspects in the quantum world, there are not yet ways to know that these forces are operating, let alone explain how. The approach appeals conceptually, but offers little in the way of pragmatic understanding.

Finally (although not exhausting all the possible explanations), one must recognize that human brains, and language, function(s) to make meaning out of occurrences. Motion becomes action via human interpretations that assign meanings. Attention focuses the brain on occurrences; focused attention often encourages humans to “see things” and “understand events” in ways that may say more about interrelationships in brain functions than among the events themselves. Often the connections were hiding in plain sight.

I am absolutely sure that many of the *Threads* that I’ve uncovered/discovered/noticed during this project are the direct result of my dogged looking for connections and then seeing aspects that cause events to appear connected (when in fact, they may have hardly been so). This project is labeled “creative non-fiction” for a reason. I have not, however, “made up” any of the remarkable events. I used creative non-fiction techniques to write narration and dialogue that I wasn’t present to hear; in many cases, the characters in these stories say things that I wrote in light of situations that I know to be true. It’s possible that my authorship imbues the situations with deeper meaning and connections than did whatever the people actually said. Yet, the basic facts of the connections were never fictional though my discovery of them was often the result of my looking. Again, quantum physics rears its head: the act of looking can collapse quantum dualities such that they literally disappear.

Nevertheless, the work that I've done on the project bolsters my belief that there are more to the stories than mere coincidence. Although I know that things like this happen, I still find some of the overlaps to be more complex than one normally expects among family circumstances. There are many times when one would simply shrug one's shoulders and say "it's a small world." As note, north they often say "Yep, that's North Dakota." While these may be true, I remain convinced that there is more to it than that.

In many cases, research provided answers to questions raised by my attention to the project. For example, I wondered why Noel entered Columbia, earned two degrees, and became an engineer? After all, when he first went to New York, he attended the *Bulova* Jewelry and Watchmaking school. I can only assume that he was following in his brother Lloyd's footsteps. Recall, too, that Lloyd once attended the School of Horology at Bradley.

A digression: I have to wonder about the odds for/against the brother of a man that Evangeline knew in North Dakota ending up studying at a school that I would work at some 40 years later.

Back to the point about Noel: It's likely there was a plan for Noel to, eventually, join Lloyd out west in the jewelry business. Regardless, Noel, instead, became an engineer and the brothers suffered estrangement. Why?

Research turned up clues. Before they were married, Noel's new girlfriend, and eventual wife, Dorothy was a recently divorced librarian, working in the library at the *Bulova* school to which Noel "escaped" after Evangeline turned down his wedding proposal. Dorothy's (often called "Doro") father was a patent-holding engineer. I suspect that Dorothy strongly influenced Noel to give up watchmaking/jewelry in favor of engineering. This suspicion is further bolstered

by stories that Noel's niece, Nancy Hill, related and that her brother Ron Ravneberg had intimated when we were together for Noel's services. According to Nancy and Ron, Lloyd and Noel had almost no contact after Noel met Dorothy. There weren't any family visits; the brothers were alienated from each other. This outcome may have been the result of Lloyd's unhappiness over Dorothy's influence against the brothers being in the jewelry business together.

In some instances, discovered connections that surprised me support the assertion that attention and meaning-making often provide simple explanations for aspects that, at first blush, appear to be mysterious connections. For example, in late 2017, I made a trip to Waterloo/Cedar Falls, Iowa to attend memorial services for Yvonne Ceilley. Yvonne was my cousin, Dr. Ed Ceilley's, wife. We had visited their home whenever we made our summer trips to the Midwest; I stayed with them during my cross-country trip in 1971. After moving to Peoria, I visited Ed and Yvonne when making trips to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota; Cedar Falls is about half-way between Peoria and Rochester. After Ed passed away, I continued visiting Yvonne, including as the first stop on my sabbatical research trip for this project.

While there for Yvonne's funeral services, I stayed in a hotel in downtown Waterloo. I had prepared for the trip by noting a couple of questions for research while in Waterloo/Cedar Falls. Particularly, I wondered about the location of Roger's Navy recruiting office when we lived in Waterloo in the late 50s. Early Saturday morning, before the services, I stopped in at the main library; a building just down the street, three blocks from my hotel. With the help of research librarians, I searched telephone directories from the late 1950s. What I learned seemed particularly serendipitous. I was standing in the very location I was looking for: The current downtown/main library used to be the Federal Building. My dad's office was right next to my

feet as the research area in the library was on the same second floor as had been the Navy recruiting office in the old Federal Building.

Now, had I looked hard enough, I would have discovered that I had that address in some of Dad's old papers. A few weeks after my Iowa visit, I noticed the address; a simple Google Earth search would have shown me that the offices were in the current library. Further, I could have called and asked cousin Carol Norton: she grew up in Cedar Falls and enlisted as a Navy nurse in the late 50s (Dad recruited and signed her up). Certainly, she would have remembered and enlightened me. Her brothers Bernie and Roger would probably also remember the location. So, my "in the field" discovery was surprising, but somewhat mundane. At the same time, going physically to the library and discovering, while there, that Dad's office had been right down the hall struck me in a way that learning the facts from a Google maps search would not have.

In other cases, what appeared to be blind chance uncovered *Threads* that are simply hard to believe, let alone easy to explain. For example, the incident recounted in Chapter One involving Bill Boyd and Florance Pung's obituaries is far beyond my ability to explain. I was shown a re-publication of Flo's death notice the very day that I was looking for Bill's obit in a paper that I have never before checked for death notices. Thereafter, Florence's obituary "returned to its rightful publication date."

Even if we grant that some obituaries are re-printed annually as a memorial to the deceased, that Flo's appeared the same day I was looking for Bill's, that she died the same week as Bill but a year earlier, and that she lived mere blocks from the Boyd home I had often visited, combined with her brother's connection to my mother: nothing short of remarkable.

I'm in possession of a photograph that I cannot yet explain; in fact, I don't believe that I will ever be able to explain it. While going through my mother's photographs, I came across an image taken roughly at the turn of the 20th century. The picture is a posed portrait featuring my grandfather Cyrus Edward Bechtel's brother, Walter. The image was taken at the *Geneill Gallery* on Fourth Street in Sioux City, Iowa, M. W. Starks, proprietor. Of course, Sioux City, Iowa is the area where the Lamoureux family was based after entering the country from Canada. I have no idea why great-uncle Walter Bechtel, from North Dakota, was in Sioux City—Lamoureux country. Similar portraits of Cy and Cy and Walter, together, were taken in this period, in North Dakota. Sure, people traveled around in those days. Some, I suppose, between Devils Lake and Sioux City. I learned that folks in the Lamoureux family had passed through North Dakota on the way from Canada to Iowa and Nebraska. But I've yet to find a clear indication that the Bechtels spent time in Iowa, other than that single image of grand-uncle Walter. And even if they did travel to Iowa, a portrait gallery image shot in Sioux City?

Additionally, while researching the oddities surrounding the names of the two Pembina County, North Dakota townships, LaMoure and Beaulieu, I came across information about the namesake of LaMoure Township, and later the city and county of LaMoure (well south in the state from the LaMoure Township) in North Dakota. Judson LaMoure, born in 1839 in Felighsburg, Quebec Canada, was one of the earliest members of the North Dakota State Legislature. Felighsburg is just 100 miles south of Chambly, Boucherville, Quebec; Chambly, Boucherville is the place where Roger Lamoureux's forbearers first lived after emigrating from France. The Lamoureuxs in Iowa were very likely connected to the LaMoures from North Dakota in some way.

Putting exact translations aside (there are none for these proper names), the surname Beaulieu translates from French to English as, roughly, *beautiful place* and LaMoure to *love*. And of course, the feminine proper name Evangeline comes from the French *Évangeline* and the Greek *evangelion* meaning “*good news*.”

As sure as I am that the universe does not revolve around me, I am equally sure that my parents, Roger and Evangeline, and my birth mother Claudette, made my life a beautiful place by sharing with me the good news of unconditional love. These *Threads* (and those I have yet to or may never discover) provided the fabric into and out of which that love was woven.

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