



(Does someone or something control our well-being on Earth?)

I stared at the guy in disbelief. No one had ever said such a thing to me before. Was he winding me up? *“Hold on. Did I hear you right? You are saying I’m protected in some way?”*

“Yes, most definitely. I was watching when you were walking around the hotel grounds yesterday,” he replied. *“You have an aura which appears to surround you; I could see that quite clearly.”*

It was quite an arresting statement, which had come to pass after I had told him about a clutch of alarming incidents, the common denominator being my escape from the jaws of death - at different times in my life - by infinitely small margins. It was strange, but for some reason, as a friend of around twenty-four hours, I trusted this man as if I we had eloped from the cradle together. And perhaps it was a little presumptuous on my part, due to the short time I had known him, but I then went on to ask his opinion on why it was that my existence, to date, seemed to have ploughed forward like a cat with nine lives. That was all the prompt he required to come up with the *aura of protection* theory.

After he had answered my query, we exchanged direct eye contact for a few seconds. I could see that he was not joking; in fact, I could tell without question that he was – to pardon the pun – deadly serious in what he had just said.

My friend for a day was a renowned artist and also the owner of a rather sumptuous hotel-cum-art gallery, where I happened to be staying for a few days, situated by the beach on the North Coast of Kenya. It even had a wonderful restaurant, with a decked terrace that stretched out over the beach, which served exquisite seafood pasta perhaps even better than could be found in Italy. I had arrived the day before and now here we were - on only my second day - chatting over coffee in the living room of the man's lavishly appointed, private dwelling.

His house, like the hotel, doubled as an art gallery, but more than that, it was the artist-hotelier's studio and store: an elegant, two-storey affair, with views to the Indian Ocean and including a vault that held both the man's own art – accumulated over several decades – plus a vast collection of priceless, indigenous artifacts and historical treasures, that he had collected through the years, from different corners of the country. It was an immense repository, combined with a studio-workshop: old objects being cleaned, new ones in process of production, for display, for sale, and for rotation of a small percentage on show at the hotel.

He was of Italian heritage (hence the beachside restaurant). With mafia connections? ... Possibly. It would certainly not be unusual: this coastal town in the tropics was nicknamed *Little Italy* by the locals, there being many Italian, long and short term emigres, owning property and holidaying in the area, some such as Silvio Berlusconi (ex-media magnate, football club owner and premier) and Formula One boss, Bernie Ecclestone, even more famous than my newly acquired artist-friend.

A little older than me and several degrees wiser in terms of African life, my newfound advisor had lived in Kenya for three or four decades and in that time, achieved almost cult status in his younger days as a swashbuckling *Hemingway* type, in later years becoming renowned as a remarkable and gifted artist. The same man has also courted

controversy. For a start, with regard to debate over his artwork, which often depicts beautiful young African women in naked or semi-naked poses. Kenya it appears remains stuck in the depths of French Impressionist days, where the more *adventurous* works also caused raised eyebrows. But perhaps more justifiable controversy came from the fact that he was a European doing an African's job: an authoritative white voice in a black domain. It said (in coded language) that he could not truly represent the art of black Kenya. This was in some ways valid, but it assumed the opposition was grounded in values of equality, rather than unbridled jealousy.

So after that brief summary of the man and his make-up – usually a figure of love, but at times the focus of hate - did I feel he carried the credentials to be making profound declarations about my character? After all it was quite a bold statement pertaining to auras and their shielding qualities, which I apparently wore like the emperor's invisible clothing. And what if he was right? What if I did have some imperceptible halo encircling my body (though seemingly, quite clearly visible to the mind's eye of my new soothsayer-friend)? Where did it spring from and what did it mean?

I rationalized that If what he did say bore any semblance to truth, then the key enquiry moved forward to: '*What, or who, was protecting me?*' This question began to stray into grounds I was reluctant to explore; it had a certain un-earthly ring to it. God-like, some might say! And if that was a factor, then it began to overturn a few pebbles on the beach which I had hitherto preferred to leave to the vagaries of the sand and the waves: undisturbed, or even more to the point, undiscovered by human hands; in particular my own human hands. In short, it all pointed to a pathway that I was reluctant to tread.

To explain my reluctance to probe the godly links, I would have to say that for many years - in fact going back to my early teens - I had shunned religion, and in turn, any thought of there being a god-controlled universe. Up until that time I dutifully attended Sunday school (towards the end perhaps, because of a girl who I thought was the love of my life); at church, I sat on the two-seater organ stool, turning the pages for my organist grandfather (known to me as my father) and at times, even became the unseen

bellows-blower, pumping air at the back of the pipe organ as my grandad belted out the chords up front (What a team we were!). Thus, before I hit my decadent teenage days, I came to know a fair percentage of hymns in the protestant stable ...and have to admit, can still remember the odd verse of those oldies-but-goldies, such as: '*Soldiers of Christ Arise*', or '*The Lord is our Shepherd*' – things like that stay lodged in the brain, to surface again in one's shower-time: forgettable ... yet unforgettable.

Then came the sixties and a new, exciting world. I dropped any reference to religion like a rock thrown over the edge of Mount Rushmore and instead homed in on more practical (and realistic) pursuits, which tended to feature either wine, women or song (though to be accurate and truthful, the women part of that trio came much, much later). Since then the pragmatic pursuits have tended to wax and wane, but the decision not to be personally involved in the myth of religion has stayed with me throughout.

But though I could be termed an ardent disbeliever, in some ways I have been fascinated by religion all through my life, and even chose a unit to study, which compared branches of the holy creeds, at university. I liked the pomp and ceremony of the higher Christian church and at one stage - after a mild bout of depression (and brief relapse towards godliness) which involved, in part, staring for some time at an enormous and intricate stained glass window, in a Kenyan cathedral – I assured myself I could work out how the gods reach their billions of followers, based on a theory of exponential outreach ... or forever-branching tributaries, another way of explaining it. Depression, I feel with hindsight, may have begun to evolve into madness! But luckily my protection came to the fore to save me from the asylum.

However, it was in India, where the Hindu faith grabbed me for a while. I liked the thought of 30,000 or 300,000 gods (one Indian friend recently confiding in me - after several whiskies - that the number was in fact closer to three million!). I loved the fact that people I stayed with just sat cross-legged in front of the house-bound icon and did their *pooja*. They didn't need to expend money or time going to the temple, it was all there at home. And the Hindu festivals – they seem to come round at least once every

month – are so invigorating; crazy might be another word! There is a darker side to all this of course, but it is hard to separate the strength of India from the Hindu culture. It is one place where - thank God! - American social norms do not seem to have pummeled the indigenous society into submission and defeat, thanks it would seem, to Hinduism.

Like most people I am always perplexed by the question: *'Who are we and where do we come from?'* I tend to side with the scientific fraternity who devote a lot of energy to explaining the Big-Bang theory. But at the end of the day, even they cannot escape the question: *'Where did the Big-Bang come from?'* ... and most of them seem to say: *'Well, maybe there could be a godly connection out there somewhere.'*

Yet it's not an easy leap from *'Who are we?'* and *'Does something or someone control us?'* to ... *'Is our relatively short time on this Earth in some way pre-planned, and therefore, in essence, beyond our control?'* To extrapolate a little further, it might then be possible for an earthling – me, you, anyone - to be protected from death, in order to live out this pre-planned existence on Planet Earth. But then, how did we fit wars and famine into that theory? It would seem to be an impossible equation.

But perhaps the ultimate question, for my own peace of mind at least, is *'If indeed there is a defensive shield – a protective armour - how long and to what degree might this this protective, person-sized stratosphere stay in place?'* Unless one happens to be the new-age Jesus, not for ever, obviously. But, if I was to have another car crash or a new air disaster, might the next happening be less protected, the result being a broken leg, or a cancerous lung; and the following event even more so, with - as a consequence - two useless legs or non-functional lung and liver. Gradually that protective layer might peel away, until it becomes to a large extent, non-effective. And then?

Then, of course, the circle of life draws to a close!

I began life, like most of us do, wide-eyed and innocent, smooth-skinned and all energy, skipping lightly through to my teens, without knowing or experiencing and serious negatives along the way. That inbuilt protective layer that most of us have, was working well. But then, realities of life began to hit home as I started to test my boundaries and,

more importantly perhaps, my boundaries began to test me: I played truant from school and failed my grades; close family members became more distant leaving me stranded and confused. Inside looking out from my bubble it felt like a desert island and I was rapidly running out of options. Then an exit route suddenly appeared from the blue – my initial dose of personal protection (after those childhood days) – and I was plucked from that island by the good ship Oriana, heading for the *lucky country*: Australia.

Returning to my friend sitting opposite, as we drank our coffee, I began to feel that there could be some truth in what he said. If his observation was correct then I had to admit my aura had done quite a sterling job, by guarding body and soul from numerous acts of demolition by the world around, beginning with those mid-teen years in the UK, through a long series of calamitous events, almost to the present day. Not all could be classed in the acute, near-death category, but those chronic, more lingering type of maladies can often be just as challenging ... or even worse in some respects: loving relationships that fail, separation from children, near bankruptcies and other mis-adventures can be equally damaging in terms of heart palpitations and blood-pressure levels!

I remember once my mind being unbelievably stressed, because of the possibility of bank foreclosure and the looming black cloud of bankruptcy, in many ways equal to any of the near-death experiences that have been thrown my way. But at the very last moment, the bank extended their terms, and someone stepped out of the dark to buy my property. The feeling of relief was there just as much as when the man swam out to save me from drowning off an Australian beach, or I had managed to crawl away from a roll-over car crash in Kenya.

But...

.. was it just luck, or - as my friend had said – that ***Aura of Protection*** performing its role? Maybe on that day, when it does finally fail to protect, is when I will discover the answer I have long searched for.

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