

Spectating: What if everything really does happen for a reason?

SPECTATING: Becoming Witnesses of Life

by Martin J. "Marty" McMorrow

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BECOMING WITNESSES OF LIFE

MARTIN MCMORROW

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Martin J. “Marty” McMorrow

(Between the fall of 1977 and the spring of 2017)

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First Edition

This work is a reflection of everyone who has influenced me to this point in life, especially my mother and father, Reed Bechtel, Roger Poppen, Deb and Christopher McMorrow, Nate Azrin, and B.F. Skinner. It is so clear that I am pieces of everybody else.

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The Way It's Been

It appears that most of us grow up in a fairly uniform fashion. If we think about that progression at all, we may casually recognize and accept that we came into the world as a product of our genealogy, instincts, biological predispositions, and neurologic wiring that affect everything from the color of our eyes to the manner in which we are said to make seemingly complex decisions.

Yet for so many of us, once we start gathering life experiences from the social and physical environments in which we find ourselves and expressing thoughts, opinions, and preferences that are typically consistent with those experiences, our attention to these powerful, pervasive, and illusive drivers seems to matter less and less. Partially because we spend so little time considering *any* biological, neurological, or environmental determinants of our behavior, the obvious things that we do not control gradually compel even less of our attention and become increasingly difficult for most of us to understand.

Rather than looking more closely at the multitude of factors that make us whoever and whatever we are, most of us quickly begin to believe, communicate, and act as though *we* are *in command* of what we think, feel, and do regardless of whose child we were, where we grew up, what our elders taught us, and the complex environments in which we interact. Before long, it becomes commonplace for us to assume that we are to be *in control* of ourselves, our social stature, our jobs, our culture, and the world around us. Others expect it of us and largely as a result we rapidly and ritualistically begin to expect it of ourselves. For so many of us, inquiry regarding the origin of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, as well as the nature of our *being*, fades away. Disconcerting as that may seem, I suppose it should come as no surprise. We get so busy living.

Many misconceptions about the nature of our world and ourselves are drilled into our slowly-developing brains over and over again from a very early age. Due to this narrow funnel of experience that behaviorists generally refer to as our "learning history," there is very little room for us to think, feel, or behave much

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differently from everyone else, particularly when it comes to interpreting our senses of freedom and self-direction. How could there be? Unless we are philosophers, psychologists, scientists, or theologians, we rarely have occasion to hear much about anything different. As a result, many of us continue to believe that America is the land of the free, that we can exercise our free will, wanting, and personal choice whenever it is called for, and that we are the autonomous masters of our own destiny. We may conclude that we can wish upon stars, pray for the things we desire, have powerful intentions, stick pins in little dolls, and use our good judgment to make all sorts of amazing things happen in our lives.

If some people act nicely, perform well, or excel; most believe that those people deserve our honor, credit, or praise. Conversely, if others act badly, perform miserably, or fail; many conclude that *those* people warrant our blame, scorn, or punishment. For the vast majority of us, that's just the way it's been and somehow continues to be in the "free" world. Nobody planned this and it is not part of some grand scheme. It is the result of centuries upon centuries of interacting and learning from each other, regardless of the veracity of the information that has been passed on. The pattern

continues because at some level, it works to keep most everyone and everything in line and because so few question it. Put more simply, it continues because it is reinforced.

In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, B.F. Skinner noted that with regard to almost everything *other* than human behavior, science has helped generate remarkable progress that has influenced mankind in noticeable ways. For example, scientific advances in the fields of biology, chemistry, and physiology have given rise to standards of practice in many areas of modern medicine that have significantly extended human life spans. Similarly, geometry, mathematics, and physics have improved our capacity to produce items of interest that are widely viewed as being better than what existed before and of some benefit to our standards of living, including electricity, photography, and communications. However, Skinner pointed out that with respect to our understanding of what we think, feel, and do, science has made relatively little contribution. Although there has been some spotty progress in the forty-plus years since the book's publication, in 1971 Skinner suggested that, in most respects, humans had not moved much beyond the ancient Greeks in terms putting what we

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know about human behavior to any practical use for mankind.

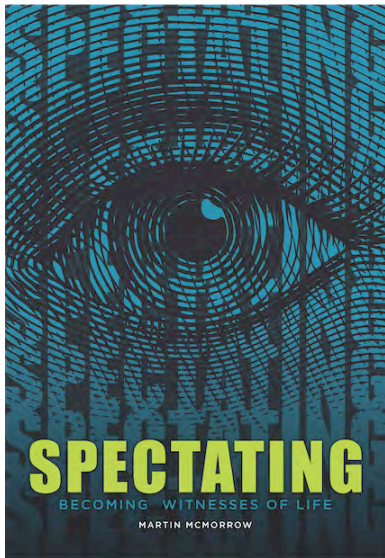
Besides the observation that there appears to be little room or reward for thinking differently about our autonomy, inner mastery, and freedom to think, feel, and do whatever we wish in a world that generally embraces such views; I am continually impressed by how little time people spend pondering the elusive questions about our lives. How can we experience such lack of control in some situations, yet extol our individual power in so many others? Good, bad, or otherwise, why has my life course turned out like it has? Is there anything that could have it turn out differently? Why do I think, feel, and do the things I think, feel, and do? Why have I been troubled so often? What happens when we die? What does it mean to exist in the first place? Or, as one of my inquisitive friends often asks, “What is this life all about, like really?”

How is it that by early adulthood most of us are finished asking the hard questions about our behavior and the nature of our being, yet actually have so little in terms of solid or substantiated answers about any of it? We may notice that we seem to be cruising through our years “mindlessly” or “mindfully” taking up our precious time with doing our jobs, making our money,

raising our children, getting our exercise, mowing our lawns, watching reality television, and taking our vacations as if we did these things to avoid having to deal with other things that could either concern or fascinate us the most.

When pressed, the largest percentage of us would say that we believe in God, everlasting life after death, heaven, and all the other promissory concepts we have been told about along the way. But have we ever taken the time to ask *why* we believe these things? Why not? Wouldn't it become obvious that many of the answers are incredibly self-serving? How can we fail to be intrigued by the questions? Have we missed something? Are there other ways of viewing things? Have we overlooked anything more factual, important, or potentially exciting?

I believe science, Skinner, and my experience tell us so.



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