



How Randomness Rules Our Lives, by Leonard Mlodinow

I remember, as a teenager, watching the yellow flame of the Sabbath candles dancing randomly above the white paraffin cylinders that fueled them. I was too young to think candlelight romantic, but still I found it magical-because of the flickering images created by the fire. They shifted and morphed, grew and waned, all without apparent cause or plan. Surely, I believed, there must be rhyme and reason underlying the flame, some pattern that scientists could predict and explain with their mathematical equations.Â

"Life isn't like that," my father told me. "Sometimes things happen that cannot be foreseen." He told me of the time when, in Buchenwald, the Nazi concentration camp in which he was imprisoned and starving, he stole a loaf of bread from the bakery. The baker had the Gestapo gather everyone who might have committed the crime and line the suspects up. "Who stole the bread?" the baker asked. When no one answered, he told the guards to shoot the suspects one by one until either they were all dead or someone confessed. My father stepped forward to spare the others. He did not try to paint himself in a heroic light but told me that he did it because he expected to be shot either way. Instead of having him killed, though, the baker gave my father a plum job, as his assistant. "A chance event," my father said. "It had nothing to do with you, but had it happened differently, you would never have been born." It struck me then that I have Hitler to thank for my existence, for the Germans had killed my father's wife and two young children, erasing his prior life. And so were it not for the war, my father would never have emigrated to New York, never have met my mother, also a refugee, and never have produced me and my two brothers. Â Â

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My father rarely spoke of the war. I didn't realize it then, but years later it dawned on me that whenever he shared his ordeals, it was not so much because he wanted me to know of his experiences but rather because he wanted to impart a larger lesson about life. War is an extreme circumstance, but the role of chance in our lives is not predicated on extremes. The outline of our lives, like the candle's flame, is continuously coaxed in new directions by a variety of random events that, along with our responses to them, determine our fate.Â

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--Leonard Mlodinow, in *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules Our Lives*

