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# Ordered Disorder: Finding Divine Patterns in the Midst of Life's Chaos

by JAY D'AMBROSIO

*Sometimes I go about in pity for myself, and all the while a great wind carries me across the sky.* - Ojibwa saying<sup>1</sup>

I recently had the opportunity to spend Thanksgiving in New York City with family and friends. As a suburbanite, the fast-paced urban culture of a major metropolitan area is always a bit of a shock to the system. We visited Times Square, Rockefeller Center, and even Macy's on Black Friday.

The mass of humanity moving about from place to place seemed like chaos, but as I stepped back, I saw there was an apparent order to things. People of every race, creed, and cultural background interacted and lived side by side. They knew when to walk and when to stop. They entered and exited the subway cars on cue. Literally millions of people, who speak

hundreds of languages, and practice myriad faiths, live their daily lives in a routine that appears to be a form of organized chaos.

Later in the week, my wife wanted to visit Chinatown to do some street shopping, which necessitated another subway jaunt. By simply walking a few city blocks, we were able to reach Grand Central Station, the epicenter of urban travel within New York City. Walking into the Main Concourse, I was struck by the sheer scale of the structure. The vaulted ceiling was immense and at once gave me the impression of being someplace almost sacred, such as St. Patrick’s cathedral or Notre Dame.

People rushed to and fro, rarely bothering to glance up at the majesty above them. There, painted upon the ceiling, in graceful strokes of turquoise and gold, were the constellations of the ancient zodiac. Orion, Cancer, Pisces, and Taurus, and various star-clusters danced across the dome of the concourse.

Gazing at Man’s homage the night sky, I suddenly noticed that something seemed out of place...not quite right. A New York resident recently lamented in a letter-to-the-editor of the New York Times, "The ceiling stars were all put on exactly backward. Their arrangement is a mirror image....This reversal is, of course, as confusing as a map showing New York on the West Coast and San Francisco on the East...."<sup>2</sup>

A serious mistake had been made.

In 1912, the French artist, Paul César Helleu, hired to paint the astrological imagery that now decorates the Main Concourse had apparently made a pretty significant error. The constellations of the night sky were, well...backwards. How horrified he must have been! Imagine trying to explain that to the person who hired you, especially when it happened to be William K. Vanderbilt, one of the most influential and powerful men in America.

### The Complexity of Life

Doesn't life often feel that way? We plan and prepare, control and design, and still something goes wrong. Something ends up backwards. We plan a wonderful family outing, and then someone gets sick. A marathon runner paces his race perfectly, finds himself in a position to win, then slips and falls on the finish line. We invade a nation in order to free its people from the grip of tyranny, only to realize that they don't want us there. You arrange for a lovely, romantic evening for two, and then a bitter argument ensues. We try to bring a little bit of order to the chaos in our lives and the chaos always seems to break loose and we end up with an inverted night sky. What is going on here anyway? Do you ever feel that we might be missing something?

Life can feel random or unpredictable at times. Maybe the appropriate word is "chaotic."

Who can predict what will happen? As the Scottish poet Robert Burns once wrote, "The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry."<sup>3</sup>

Just prior to the 2006 U.S. midterm elections, I happened to read a very interesting opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal written by Peggy Noonan. "The Complexity Crisis," as Noonan frames the current political situation, results from the "huge and crushing number of issues" our leaders are forced to confront every day.

We are asking our politicians, our senators and congressmen, to make judgments, decisions and policy on: stem cell research, SDI, NATO composition, G-8 agreements, the history and state of play of judicial and legislative actions regarding press freedoms, the history of Sunni-Shiites tensions, Kurds, tax rates, federal spending, hurricane prediction and response, the building of a library annex in Missoula, the most recent thinking on when human life begins, including the thinking of the theologians of antiquity on when the soul enters the body,

chemical weaponry, the Supreme Court, U.S.-North Korean relations, bioethics, cloning, public college curriculums, India-Pakistan relations, the enduring Muslim-Hindu conflict, the constitutional implications of McCain-Feingold campaign finance reform, Homeland security, Securities and Exchange Commission authority, energy policy, environmental policy, nuclear proliferation, global warming, the stability of Venezuela's Chavez regime and its implications for U.S. oil prices, the future of Cuba after Castro, progress in gender bias as suggested by comparisons of the number of girls who pursued college-track studies in American public high schools circa 1950 to those on a college-track today, outsourcing, immigration, the comparative efficacy of charter and magnet schools, land use, health care, HMO's, what to do with victims of child abuse, the history of marriage, the nature and origin of homosexuality, V-chips, foreign competition in the making of computer chips, fat levels in potato chips, national policy on the humanities, U.N. reform, and privacy law.

And that was just this week.<sup>4</sup>

Sounds a little like chaos, doesn't it?

If our leaders sometimes powerless in the face of chaos, what hope can there possibly be for us?

### **Patterns in the Chaos**

*It turns out that an eerie type of chaos can lurk just behind a facade of order - and yet, deep inside the chaos lurks an even eerier type of order.* - Douglas Hostadter<sup>5</sup>

In 2005, chaos made national news when Hurricane Katrina and the resulting breach of the levy system devastated New Orleans. While the storm was raging, news crews filmed tree

branches flying by and homes being torn apart. Frightened citizens huddled in the Superdome as the powerful winds ripped at the exterior of the dome and water poured in. If you should find yourself in the unfortunate position of being in the middle of hurricane-force winds, "chaos" might be an apt description.

Back up for a just a moment. I mean really back up...all the way up to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration satellite orbiting thousands of miles above the Earth. Looking down from a satellite's eye view, you'll notice something about the chaos of a hurricane.

A hurricane has a distinctive spiral pattern. From a distance, there is an order to what would otherwise appear chaotic when we are near. We shouldn't lose sight of this fact. It could hold some meaning for the disorder in our lives.

During the 1960s (a chaotic time to say the least) a group of scientists, thinking and researching in new directions, developed an idea known as "chaos theory." Exploring this emerging theory in the 1970s and 80s, a mathematician by the name of Benoit Mandelbrot described a concept he referred to as "fractals." The most compelling finding of Mandelbrot's research was that many things in the natural world that appear chaotic and wild in actuality are organized by a very simple principle.

The essence of Mandelbrot's findings is that patterns can emerge from the chaos.

*The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. - Genesis 1:2<sup>6</sup>*

Could patterns exist in our chaos?

What happens when we experience chaos? Think about it. Once we recover from the initial shock, we evaluate the situation. Just as people in a wild storm seek shelter and something

solid to cling to, we try to determine what is stable and strong in our lives. We often tend to neglect what is real and steady when times are good, don't we? Our family, friends, and even God are on the back burners of our consciousness when we feel invincible. However, when chaos rears its ugly head, we feel battered and broken.

You lose your job. A good friend confesses an affair. Your son is arrested for possession of drugs. An accident claims the life of a loved one. The doctor informs you that your time is limited. Whatever it may be, chaos forces us to reassess our circumstances and the false sense of security we have created for ourselves. Our little heaven on Earth is disrupted.

Before we are tempted to despair, remember the patterns that form in the chaos. If the things we've based our lives and security upon (i.e. money, status, career, sex, etc.) prove to be less than what we thought they were, then the chaos has actually been used to *save* us from living in an illusion. The chaos requires us to turn to what is true and real. If our little paradise isn't taken away, it has the potential to turn into our own private hell.

C.S. Lewis declared that "pain plants the flag of truth within the fortress of the rebel soul."<sup>7</sup> Chaos is frightening because it bears pain. Helleu must have quivered with fear knowing that his "masterpiece" was wrong and that he would soon face the Vanderbilt's wrath.

Another question for us to consider is what *happens to us* in times of chaos. If we hold on to the hurricane imagery as a metaphor for chaos, we might be able to better comprehend this phenomenon. The winds whip and batter our hearts. The things that we cling to in our effort to find the life we so crave are twisted and flung to the far corners of the world. Things that are not nailed down and solid are ripped away by the unlocked fury of the four winds. The old fears that we've desperately tried to push down and forget resurface with a vengeance, like a mighty storm surge.

We are left exposed and hurting...vulnerable.

And yet, in a deeper, almost transcendent way, we *need* the chaos. We truly are wounded creatures. Inside we are aching. If we were only honest with ourselves, we would see that we carry with us the soul-damage that was done to us in our youth. Sure, we smile, laugh, plough through, and put the best face on things so that nobody realizes the truth. The truth is that much of the time we feel only half-alive. We cover our pain with busyness, anger, alcohol, or whatever drug makes us feel good or numb at the moment. The chaos washes away the facade and exposes the truth we've been hiding for so long. It forces us to confront reality and the prospect doing so shakes us to the core!

Helleu must have felt like a child awaiting the stormy wrath of an angry parent. A deep and childlike sort of fear probably surfaced amidst the chaos of masterpiece gone awry. Vanderbilt would surely ruin this French artist, smashing his dreams and his legacy with a crushing rebuke. At least, that is what Helleu must have imagined.

### **Chaos and Renewal**

*Chaos often breeds life, when order breeds habit.* - Henry Brooks Adams<sup>8</sup>

Ancient Norse myths tell of a coming time of chaos called Ragnarok, which will bring an end to the reign of the gods. Times of trouble and disorder tend to challenge the gods we've set up for ourselves in our hearts, don't they? What things do we worship? Sure, many would hold fast that they are people of faith, but worship is evidenced by our investment of *time*.

Do you spend untold hours at work or on the phone with clients? Do you find yourself constantly thinking about food or fantasy football? Are you obsessed with your figure or do you continually berate yourself about the way you look? Does everything in your life have to be "just so," including your family? We all have hang-ups in one form or another, temples that we have

erected to honor the object of our adoration or fear. These things become our gods.

Why do we do this to ourselves and others? The simple answer is that we are desperately trying to protect ourselves from chaos and the pain that results. If you momentarily step out of the Matrix to reflect upon your life, you'll see that this ultimately is impossible. Chaos always seems to sneak up on us like a storm brewing out at sea to torment unwary sailors. It rocks the boats we've constructed for ourselves, and makes us realize, like the crew of the Titanic, that no ship is unsinkable. We cannot, as Gandalf eloquently pointed out in *The Return of the King*, "master all the tides of the world."<sup>9</sup>

The chaos that is unleashed in our lives tears down our gods with a savagery, and that is what makes it so frightening. Deep down, we know our gods are not strong enough to withstand the wildness of life. The things we cling to for security are revealed to be an illusion. As Jesus explains in the Gospel of Matthew, the true condition of the foundation of our lives will be exposed as being either sand or rock. The wind and rain of chaos can be *cleansing*. They show us the truth we most *need* to see, regardless of whether or not we wish to see it.

Some years ago, I met with a married couple to help mediate an impending relational meltdown. They had been married for several years and had experienced few crises up to this point. Well, everything changed when chaos entered their marital bliss. The pain both spouses had inflicted upon each other seemed devastating. Infidelity, dishonesty, and a general lack of respect had whipped and battered these folks with the ferocity of a tropical storm. This may sound like an odd way to look at a situation such as this, but it turned out to be *important* that chaos stirred this relationship. If this didn't happen, they would have never faced the issues that had always been there. The chaos simply swirled the waters and brought the debris and wounds to the surface, where it could be confronted and healed. You see, without this breaking point, this

couple could have easily cruised through their lives together without really being *together*. As a result, the chaos, when viewed from the proper perspective, actually strengthened this marriage!

Helleu was an artist. Granted, I am speculating, but I believe this is how he had painted his identity. It had become his sense of who he was. The chaos of the unbelievable blunder he had made on the ceiling of one of the busiest travel centers in the world threatened what he perceived as his very meaning in life. It necessitated a deeper look into his soul. What lingering fears and doubts haunted the dark and foreboding recesses of his heart? They began to rise to the surface.

The divine journey toward wholeness must lead us through the darker regions that we have long since tried to repress and forget. The terrors that lurk there still influence our waking hours and occasionally stalk our nightmares. Like Helleu, if we do not stop running from our fears and turn to face them, they will plague us to the end of our days.

Believe it or not, chaos can bring new life into regions of our soul that have long been left for dead. As anyone who has given birth knows, new life comes with pain and writhing, but the hurt reminds you that you bear life.

The sun grows dark,  
The earth sinks into the sea,  
The bright stars  
From heaven vanish;  
Fire rages,  
Heat blazes,  
And high flames play  
'Gainst heaven itself.

Do any gods live then? Is there any earth or heaven? Har answered: The earth rises again from the sea, and is green and fair.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the Norse prophecy of Ragnarok foretells the stormy doom of the gods, but it ends with a fresh vernal breeze. A new world will emerge out of the wreckage of the old order. This concept is mirrored in the Revelation of St. John, when following the unimaginable horror of the battle of Armageddon, a new heaven and a new earth is established. Chaos, like the Great Deluge of old, washes away decay and renews the spirit. It wears the mask of a monster, but ultimately can lead us to what is most real and meaningful.

### **Chaos and Creation**

*Destruction leads to a very rough road, but it also breeds creation.* - Red Hot Chili Peppers<sup>11</sup>

Chaos provides *opportunity*. It allows us to look at reality from a divine perspective. You see, out of chaos comes creation. The poetic creation account in Genesis beautifully portrays the Spirit of God hovering over the void, the swirling deep, just before unleashing the majestic artistry of creative power. The ancient Babylonian Enuma Elish describes Marduk's slaying of Tiamat, the dragon-spirit of salt water and chaos, prior to the establishment of the heavens and the earth.

The children travelling to the North Pole via the Polar Express experienced turmoil firsthand when the train began skidding across a quickly disintegrating ice sheet. The story explains that the turmoil ended up creating a space which allowed the children to rise to heroic deeds and discover the true meaning of Christmas. Chaos creates the challenge needed to call out the hero that is buried deep within.

Where would St. George be without a fire-spewing dragon to slay? Perseus dared the

chaotic hissing and striking of the serpent wreathed head of Medusa, and in turn was revealed to be worthy of his godlike birthright. Frightened and uncertain, Luke Skywalker flew straight into the pandemonium of the Battle of Yavin. The chaos that took place in the shade of the Death Star served as a testing ground that would ultimately unveil the hero within. It proved to the young pilot that he had a deep inner strength, a strength that would prove to be much needed by the fledgling Rebel Alliance.

When Hurricane Katrina slammed into New Orleans, chaos reigned and many people were placed in a horrible position, such as they could have never imagined. However, this disaster became the potter's clay out of which arose beautiful acts of creation and courage. Average citizens in a show of solidarity stepped forward to help their fellow human beings in a time of crisis. Members of the armed services heroically risked life and limb to rescue strangers who were stranded on rooftops and in flooded buildings. Like September 11th, this tragic instance of chaos in our midst gave people the opportunity to look beyond the credit cards, nail salons, traffic congestion, and daily hassles at work, to something that had real meaning. For however brief an instant, something new was *created* in the souls of those who responded to the cries of those in need, a void was filled with substance.

### **God's Vantage Point**

We all have chaos on some level in our lives. Often it is small and merely a nuisance. Sometimes it makes us cry out in distress. A friend once remarked that life seems a little like the underside of a needlepoint project. Threads seem to form a tangled mess that is unappealing to the eye. However, when we look at the needlepoint from above, we see the beauty of the pattern. What is required is a different vantage point.

So did William K. Vanderbilt explode with rage upon seeing the backward zodiac painted

on the ceiling of Grand Central Station? No. Rather, he used this intrusion of chaos to see beyond what the world saw to a strange and beautiful pattern. The constellations, Vanderbilt contended, were being depicted from the point of view of someone outside space and time, someone that was looking at them from the other side. He confidently declared the ceiling of his transportation Mecca gave the weary traveler a glimpse of the universe from "God's vantage point." Vanderbilt was able to see the design in the hurricane and in doing so, allowed others to see it as well.

Chaos can smooth out our rough edges. Our doubts and insecurities are put to the test, as well as our strength and valor. Through life's challenges and disarray, we are revealed to be who we really are inside. The only question is how will you view your turbulent times? Will you run from it in terror? Will you embrace it as a gift? Either way, we cannot avoid it. Chaos happens. May you, like Helleu, be a witness to the divine purpose and pattern in the midst of your chaos!

### **End Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Hamilton-Holway, Bill. "The Way Back Home: Living a Spiritual Life" Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, <http://www.uucb.org/sermons/2003092101> (accessed December 4, 2007).

<sup>2</sup>TIME Magazine. "Grand Central Heaven" <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,797615,00.html> (accessed November 23, 2007).

<sup>3</sup>The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition. "Proverbs" <http://www.bartleby.com/59/3/bestlaidplan.html> (accessed December 25, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Noonan, Peggy. “The Complexity Crisis” Opinion Journal from the Wall Street Journal, <http://opinionjournal.com/columnists/pnoonan/?id=110008644> (accessed November 15, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>Williams, Bill. *New Trading Dimensions: How to Profit from Chaos in Stocks, Bonds, and Commodities*. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1998), 34.

<sup>6</sup>Gn 1:2

<sup>7</sup>Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 94.

<sup>8</sup>Wikipedia. “The Education of Henry Adams” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Education\\_of\\_Henry\\_Adams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Education_of_Henry_Adams) (accessed December 2, 2007).

<sup>9</sup>Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Return of the King*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 167.

<sup>10</sup>Wikisource. “Prose Edda/Gylfaginning” [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Prose\\_Edda/Gylfaginning](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Prose_Edda/Gylfaginning) (accessed December 26, 2007).

<sup>11</sup>Metrolyrics. “Red Hot Chili Peppers – Californication Lyrics” <http://www.metrolyrics.com/californication-lyrics-red-hot-chili-peppers.html> (accessed December 7, 2007).

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Jay D'Ambrosio is an ancient history teacher at Seneca Valley Middle School. He holds a masters degree in history and a degree in social science education; is certified in critical incident stress management, school crisis response, and conflict mediation; and is a state-certified member of the Student Assistance Program. He serves as curriculum developer with North Way Counseling Services. He is also an elder at North Way Christian Community. Jay was nominated for a Pennsylvania Teacher Excellence Center Award in 2005 and in 2002 was nominated for Disney's American Teacher Awards. USA Today named two of Jay's web sites "Best Bets in Education" in 2000 and 2002. Jay is also a member of the history department advisory board at Slippery Rock University. Jay has written *Rethinking Adolescence: Using Story to Navigate Life's Uncharted Years* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006), *E-Teaching: Creating Web Sites and Student Web Portfolios Using Microsoft PowerPoint* (Linworth Publishing, 2003), *Egyptian Influence upon Early Israelite Literature* (Aeon: Journal of Myth, Science, and Ancient History, 2002), and is a regular contributor to *Mythic Passages Magazine*. You can learn more by visiting Jay's blog at <http://eteaching101.blogspot.com>.

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