

The Year of My Life: VR

YEAR 1

A Continuum Series

A continuum is something that keeps ongoing, changing slowly over time, like the continuum of the four seasons.

Definition provided by [Vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com)

Any similarities between the fictional characters depicted in this book and persons living or dead is purely coincidental... or is it?

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“The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars...”

Let me tell you a story. Several years ago, I was on a plane out of San Francisco and headed for Los Angeles. My watch told me we weren't even halfway there when the plane started to backfire and buck like a bronco. All around me, people were in panic mode, and several were praying to God. I did neither. I wasn't trying to act like the stoic CIA assassin, Jason Bourne; it's just that I was going through a checklist of options. That's something I've trained myself to do over many years of dealing with adversity and it has become second nature to me.

I realized that I had three options, all of which were out of my control. My first option was that the plane would crash, and I would die. I had to believe that the pilot knew what he was doing and even if he didn't; I wasn't going to spend my last moments worrying about it. My second option was that the plane would crash, and I would end up doing a reenactment of Humpty Dumpty. That would mean months of recuperating and physical therapy as I struggled to bring myself back to my current physical condition. I had done it before, and I was confident that I could do it again. My final option was that the plane would land safely in which case, I had nothing to worry about.

I could tell that the woman sitting to my right was getting nervous as I closed the sliding shades on the window next to me. At the same time, I could see the sun slowly moving down the row of open windows across from me. We were turning and heading back to San Francisco. As you've probably guessed by now, we landed safely.

So why have I told you this story? Because the actions of the people on that plane were a perfect representation of how humanity reacts when faced with a crisis. Don't get me wrong, fear isn't necessarily a bad thing. It is an emotion that can serve as a launching pad for unimaginable acts of courage. When faced with a crisis or the threat of a crisis, basic human nature is to utilize fear over logic.

But fear can also cause us to become reactionary and illogical in the absence of a crisis, such as when political rhetoric and religious issues challenge our preconceived beliefs of the way things are or should be. We constantly fight over things we believe in and those we don't. It has been this way since civilization began. I'm pretty sure that at some point while sitting around the communal fire, cavemen realized that they could use their clubs in ways that had nothing to do with hunting for food.

As we get ready to enter a new year, I find myself asking the same question I ask every year around this time. Can we be fixed? Will we ever stop conflicts that erupt over present-day power, greed, religious, and political differences before they irrevocably destroy the futures of generations to come? To quote Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar,' "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars / But in ourselves, that we are underlings." I wish all the underlings who read this weekly blog, a very happy new year. I will close as I close every week — You're not just a human being; you are a representative of the human species.

The Writer

Contact

While watching the countdown clock to midnight, I couldn't help but marvel at how our lives revolve around numbers. We equate everything with numbers. We assign numbers to weights and measures and time and distance but, more importantly, we attach ourselves to the numbers we have assigned. We do this to such an extent that these numbers become a definition of who we are.

At midnight, more than 300,000 people stood shoulder to shoulder on the Las Vegas Strip. They gathered to celebrate reaching a number that had been reached millions of times prior to that moment. People in cities all over the world, gathered to celebrate reaching that number. And I was one of them. Who am I? Names aren't important. Just call me The Writer and settle in for the story of what happened during, what would become, the year of my life.

I hadn't planned to be on the [Las Vegas Strip](#) during the most crowded moment of the year. I had been talked into it by a friend who had promised that we would both have a great time. He was half right. He had met "the girl of his dreams." I'm pretty sure that he will reconsider that description in the morning. To be honest, with all the alcohol that they had managed to consume within a relatively short period of time, I can say with a high degree of confidence that they will both reconsider a lot of things in the morning.

So there I was, sitting at the [Centra](#) bar inside the [Luxor](#) hotel. I didn't want to be there for two reasons. One, I didn't know anyone. And two, which was probably more important, I don't drink. I was sitting there because we had arrived before the crowds. With less than an hour to go before midnight, every seat not attached to a slot machine was occupied. And then I saw her. She was African American in her mid-twenties. She was about 5 feet 7 inches tall, with a slim build that was hidden by an unflattering jumpsuit. What was unusual and probably not apparent to the crowd of revelers surrounding her, was that she was barefoot!

The jumpsuit was bright orange which might have made her stand out on any other night, but not tonight. The other thing that helped her blend in with her surroundings was that it was emblazoned with the Luxor logo. How she acquired the jumpsuit is anyone's guess. One thing was certain, the Luxor prefers that their employees wear shoes while on duty. Maybe she picked it up in the gift shop or maybe it just fell out of the sky. Did it matter much? No. But when you put that together with being barefooted in the middle of a casino floor, well, that's slightly offbeat. But then this is Las Vegas, a place where normality is something that you leave behind as soon as you board a plane and depart from your normal life.

She seemed to be looking for someone; perhaps a soulmate who was now staring into someone else's soul. She started walking around the room as I turned back to the bar and the open Facebook page on my phone. It took me a moment to realize that she was standing next to me. I said hello but, instead of a response, all I got was a confused stare.

"Would you like a drink?" I asked. Still nothing. I decided to lighten the mood. "So I say something and then you say something. It's called a conversation but, I'll admit, I haven't had much success with it tonight. Years from now, when you talk about this, and you will, be kind." Still nothing.

"And the streak continues."

She still had that faraway look in her eyes, when she said, "You have an interesting mind."

Not exactly the caliber of you could be George Clooney's twin brother, but it was a start.

"I didn't know that I was being particularly brilliant, but let's go with that." Still nothing, so I kept going.

"What exactly do you like about my mind?"

She closed her eyes as if she was fighting back a headache.

"Are you okay?"

I figured that she had imbibed in one drink too many. I've known enough people who've made a career out of drinking to realize that her situation could take a terrible turn at any moment. I was concerned because it wouldn't help if she passed out in the middle of a crowd of people twenty minutes before midnight. Paramedics would have a hard time getting through the mess of mostly inebriated humanity. My damsel in distress mode must have kicked in because I found myself making an unusual gesture, at least for me.

"You seem as if you need to lie down. My buddy and I have a room here, but I'm pretty sure he's not going to use it. Let me take you up there and you can rest for a while."

At that moment, I thought about when and where we were. I added "No strings attached." I also figured that it would be easier to summon help to the room if the need arose. I grabbed my phone and shoved it into my pocket. Then I got up and started moving towards the room elevators. My seat immediately filled with a paying customer.

She followed behind me as if we were tied together. We entered the crowded elevator and had to squeeze in to allow the doors to close. I noticed a few furtive glances from some of the other riders. I guess that was a natural response to seeing a short guy on crutches and an attractive woman heading up to a hotel room on New Year's Eve. Yes, it did resemble a business deal. That thought had crossed my mind, but I really wasn't interested in pay for play. If that was her game, then it would be game over very quickly.

After forty years as a writer, a large portion of that time as a magazine feature profile writer, I had become very good at sizing up people. This whole situation was unusual, but it wasn't setting off any alarms. Maybe it was just my curiosity getting the better of me. Then again, it could have been that sixth sense that every reporter has when there's the possibility of a story just around the corner, even a human-interest story.

When we reached the room, I pulled the key card out of my pocket. I inserted it into the lock slot, but nothing happened. I tried again but the indicator light never changed.

"They must have coded this thing wrong. It was pretty hectic when we checked in. I'll just go downstairs and get..."

Before I could finish, she took the card from my hand and inserted it into the slot. The access light blinked.

"I guess you have the magic touch." I said as we entered the room.

The door closed behind us and I turned to make sure that it was securely locked.

As I turned back, the lights went out. I expected that my biological lights would follow, the result of a blunt object contacting my skull. But instead, the unexpected happened. The room filled with an eerie blue glow. I watched as figures took shape in the center of the room. It was a holographic projection. She was standing rigid and motionless

and I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The source of the projection was coming from her eyes.

My head was reeling. Had she somehow managed to drug me? With no other light in the room, I was too disoriented to let go of my crutches in order to find the door handle. I needed to sit down and the only furniture I could make out was the bed. I sat down on the edge as I tried to make sense out of what was happening. That was probably a good thing because what I saw next would have knocked me down if I hadn't already been seated. The image was of a twelve-year-old me!

I was sitting on the edge of a hospital bed. My mother was sitting in a chair alongside the bed. There were three old men in the other corners of the room. My mother was clearly distraught but putting on a brave face for my benefit. My father walked in. He had come straight from work and I could tell that he wasn't pleased with what he saw.

"It's been five hours. Why is he still here? Why isn't he in the children's ward?" He asked my mother.

After being brought up to speed about the lack of available beds in the children's ward, he turned and quickly walked out of the room and down the hall to the nurse's station.

I heard a loud, angry voice filter down the hall.

"Is that dad?" I asked my mom. She said no, but I knew that it was.

A few million dollars' worth of fireworks were shooting into the night sky. Loud music was blaring. People were screaming and shouting in celebration. I just sat there, staring at home movies that had never been made.

"Who or what are you?"

Victoria

In 1977, NASA launched the [Voyager 1](#) and Voyager 2 spacecrafts, eighteen days apart from each other. Their combined mission was to explore several of the planets within our solar system, but by slightly altered routes. In order to conserve power, the flightpath called for each of them to slingshot around the sun. That would allow them to move faster while utilizing much less power. It would also serve as an efficient way to charge their solar batteries. The combination of speed and renewable on-board power would be an integral part of the future mission of both spacecrafts. That mission would come many decades later.

Voyager 2 was launched first and was programmed to take a slightly different course than its younger twin. But Voyager 1's pre-programmed itinerary took it further out and faster than Voyager 2. In 2012, that course brought it to the edge of our solar system. It was about to go from on course precision to vagabond. It was about to go interstellar.

As Voyager 1 approached the threshold into interstellar space, it was being watched by many eyes. First and foremost, there were the teams at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena California. They had been with the mission from the beginning and viewed both spacecrafts as their babies. Next in line was the [European Space Agency](#) in Brussels, Belgium They were tasked with monitoring the scientific experiments. Both agencies saw the Voyager spacecrafts, eventually identified by a single name and purpose, as a treasure trove of scientific knowledge and enlightenment. They were others monitoring Voyager's progress, but for vastly different reasons.

The Voyager twins sped up as the threshold approached. Up to now, they had been cheered on every step of the way. In time, the cheerleaders would disappear, and they would only have each other for companionship. They had brought music along with them but had never listened to it. The digitally mixed disk was a gift, a peace offering for strangers they might never meet.

They had learned a lot in their travels, but they had so much more to learn. They were moving faster and farther than they had ever moved before. Crossing over the threshold would be the beginning of a new mission. Eventually, it would be one without a set course and without end. There would be no more handlers sending them instructions, only total silence.

But until that happened, they were still sending back telemetry that resembled an EKG with periodic dropouts of information due to solar flares or other unforeseen circumstances. On October 15, 2018 at precisely 1400 GMT, there was an unforeseen circumstance. For exactly 1.3 seconds, communications with Voyager was interrupted. It went unnoticed because it was below the threshold of predictable anomalies, but that brief anomaly would become one of the most important moments in human history. It was the moment that we made contact with an alien race.

The sun was coming up as I slipped the key into the deadbolt on my apartment door.

“What is this place?”

“This is where I live.”

I opened the door and motioned for her to walk in. I followed and closed the door behind me. She walked into the dining room.

"Don't you have a place where you live?"

"I do not need a place to live. I exist."

"Well this is where I exist. Don't you ever want to get away from the other, what is your species?" I said as I pulled up a bar stool and one side of the kitchen island. I motioned for her to sit down and one of the other stools on the other side of the island, but she just stood there and continued talking.

"We are energisms, energy generated organisms. We require no personal space. We have all of what you call space. It belongs to all of us."

"We have places where people live depending on their cultures, religions, and ideas.

You don't have anything like that?"

"We are all one. We exist as one."

"Do you all have the same job?" She looked at me as if I was the visitor from another world.

"Job, purpose, what is your purpose?"

"We are the keepers of all records."

"You keep the records of all what?"

"Of all, of everything there is. Your golden disk came to us. It was primitive, but we were able to ascertain your coordinates. I am here to collect your information."

"You're here to learn about us?"

"I assimilate and evaluate data."

"How do you collect information?"

"Through all existing information. I enlist a member of the host species as a video and audio transmitter. That is why I have chosen you."

"You've what? Does this have anything to do with anal probes and electronic implants?" I said as I recalled every crackpot story I'd ever read about alien invaders.

"No. I will get the information through your dream state."

"But dreams are usually gross exaggerations of reality. I wouldn't consider them reliable sources of information."

"I will guide your dreams. They will appear real to you because everything around you will be real."

"Like virtual reality?"

"No. I will enhance your dream state. Your dreams will become reality."

"Let me get this straight. In order for me to get the information for you, you're going to crawl inside my head, kick the tires, and take me for a test drive?"

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"Never mind. We'll get back to that. Boy, will we get back to that," I said as I attempted to get the conversation back on track.

"If you're this energy generated organism, how come you look human?"

"I am a three-dimensional duplicate of an image that was on the golden disk."

"What if someone recognizes you as someone they knew in the past?"

"14,368 rotations of your planet have occurred since the golden disk left this planet.

Recognition would be beyond probability."

"Okay, that's who you are and what you are. Now let's concentrate on where you're from. What is the name of your planet?"

We are not a planet. We are an energy cloud. In terms that you can understand, we are slightly larger than your galaxy. We are approximately 426 light years away from your planet."

"But you said that the golden disk came to you."

"I am still unsure of your language. I will attempt to explain. Every object in space creates a disturbance. Think of when you throw a rock into a lake. Waves of energy radiate outward which become weaker the farther out that they radiate. In space, the ripples remain constant. Every object in space creates a ripple. Some of those ripples become one with each other, what you would call a spider's web. One of your space probes disturbed that web when it approached the outer edge of your galaxy."

"You must mean Voyager. But that only reached interstellar space a few years ago. It's nowhere near close to going intergalactic."

"It was noticed. That is why we are interested in your planet. You are beginning to leave your own boundaries. We need to know more about you so that we will know how leaving your galaxy will impact nearby galaxies."

"But we won't be visiting other galaxies for many, many years."

"That is relative to you. Your world relies on a horizontal timeline. Other worlds exist on vertical timelines at many levels."

"I know a little about [multiverse theory](#)."

"It is not a theory, it is reality."

"Well, it's still a theory to us earthlings."

"Earthlings? Is that what you like to be called?"

"Only in science fiction movies. Speaking of which, what should I call you? What is your name?"

"We do not have names. We have unique pulse frequencies."

"Pulse frequencies? Okay, maybe we should start with something a little easier. You can't keep walking around in that Luxor jumpsuit."

"I can take it off."

I stopped her as she started to undress. "Whoa, midnight cowgirl. It might be better if you didn't audition for Spearmint Rhino just yet. I don't think Vegas is quite ready for your kind."

I thought about what I had just said.

"Hey, that gives me an idea. How about if I call you Victoria Roswell? Victoria after [Vegas Vic](#), the Las Vegas cowboy icon and Roswell as in Roswell, New Mexico, the home of alien conspiracy theories. That would make your initials VR. It kind of fits with that thing you do with your eyes."

Perfect, I thought. If only I was writing a novel.

"So tell me, how did you learn our language?"

"The voices and images on the disk created the core of your language. The more I interact with your species, the more language I will learn."

"Will you always talk like a computer?"

"No. I will remain within your space for ninety rotations of your planet. I will analyze your language and adjust my speech patterns. I will also need time to adjust to this body. In time, I should be able to pass for a human."

“Wait, you’re going to live here for ninety days without leaving? There goes my life.”

“Is your life force ending?”

“No. Only any hope of having one.”

“You do not have a life force?”

“It’s only an express... I think these next ninety orbits are going to be the longest of whatever life force I have.”

“That is impossible. Orbit fluctuation is imperceptible by your species.”

“Whatever, Watson. I’d better go buy us some food if we’re going to be roommates for a while. What do you like to eat? How about some batteries smothered in WD-40?”

“I will consume that, if that is what humans eat.”

“That was a joke. You’re going to find it pretty funny in a few months. I’ll figure out something that you might like. While I’m gone, don’t answer the door or the phone and try to stay out of sight.”

“Do you want me to become invisible?”

“Just don’t go anywhere. Okay?”

“If you get lonely, talk to Alexa.”

“Alexa?”

I gestured to the black tower sitting on the kitchen island.

“Say Alexa and then ask it to do something, like this ‘Alexa, say hello.’”

Alexa responded in a distinctly feminine voice. “Hello.”

As I walked out the door, I looked back at the inconvenient roommate that I had just acquired. Victoria was standing in the middle of the room. She was literally not going anywhere.

I turned back to lock the door and heard “Alexa, initiate information transfer!”

Shaking my head, I resigned myself to the fact that it was going to be a really long winter.

Energize Me!

I didn't notice Victoria standing behind me.

"What are you reading?"

"About a man who is able to walk because of electrodes planted in his brain. I'm researching it for my blog, The Writer's Reality. This installment is about medical technology breakthroughs."

"Have you ever wished that was you?"

"I think that everyone wishes they could overcome imperfections. It's part of the human condition. I've never been able to walk without some sort of mechanical aid, so it might be interesting to have the opportunity."

"I can make it happen."

It took a moment for her words to sink in.

"You can what?"

"If you like, I can make it happen." I swiveled my chair around to face her.

"Are you telling me that you can make it so that I can walk without crutches?"

"I think that it is theoretically possible. To put it simply, the human body generates electricity through motion. The brain communicates with muscles by means of electrical impulses. You have a mild case of cerebral palsy. The impulses from your brain are not communicating with certain muscles in your body. I can change that."

"Would it be permanent?"

"No, because it necessitates a temporary electrical current boost in order to energize your body. Over an extended period, that could damage your cell structure and muscles."

"How long are we talking? Would it be minutes, hours, days? What?"

"Initially, it would only be 10 of your Earth seconds. That timeframe might increase as your body acclimates to the electrical impulse changes."

"When can we give it a try?"

"Right now, if you like."

"What do I have to do?" I said, feeling as if I was getting ready for a Moon launch.

"Just sit there. You'll feel a slight tingling as your body adjusts to the change of electrical impulses. When you do, stand up and try to walk."

I grasped the arms of the chair, expecting something akin to accidentally hitting my funny bone. Instead, I got a dull tickle like when my foot falls asleep.

When I stood up, it felt surprisingly natural. It was as if I've been doing it all my life. The clock was ticking as I decided to take a leap of faith, literally. I jumped in the air and, aside from the fact that white guys really can't jump, landed on my feet. I took four more steps before the clock ran out and I slumped to the floor. Victoria handed me my crutches.

"That was surreal," I said, getting to my feet.

"I wish I could put this on Facebook."

"But you can't," she said, not quite understanding that I didn't really mean what I was saying.

She was right, of course. From the moment that Victoria had become part of my life, I had decided to keep my personal life under the radar because she needed some time to become "humanized." Once that happened, I could casually introduce her into my social life. To be honest, that wouldn't be a really big stretch for me.

Working at home affords me the luxury of not having to deal with people on a daily basis. I have created a very comfortable environment in which to live and work. I can honestly say that I am extremely content with my lifestyle. I rarely visit the Las Vegas Strip and don't drink or gamble. I've always thought of that lifestyle in the same way that I think of Disneyland; the stereotypical Las Vegas is nice to have nearby, but it's mostly for the tourists.

Social gatherings, with the rare exception of getting together with close friends, are not events that I looked forward to with any degree of anticipation. The truth is, I'm not much for small talk. The words "What do you do?" sends shivers down my spine. I find that most people, especially when they have a drink in their hand, are not really interested in having a deep discussion about anything. So, for now, being a loner works out just fine for me.

"I wouldn't really do it. I was just thinking out loud."

"From what I have learned of your history, I would not be accepted by your species."

"No, I don't imagine that you would. But you knew that I would accept you. Why?"

"The human brain is only capable of processing a small percentage of the life images it collects, what you call memories. The rest of the life images, from the day that each human begins, are stored but never processed."

"You're saying that we see and record everything from the moment that we open our eyes?"

"You not only see everything, all of your human senses record everything."

"Even someone without sight would still record everything from the moment of birth?"

"Yes."

"That's fascinating," I said. "But it doesn't answer my question? How did you know that I would accept you?"

"Because I was able to process those images. They are stored as electrical impulses in your brain. It was not difficult."

I wasn't quite sure if I had just been called a simpleton, but it did explain the blank expression on her face that I had mistaken for her having had too much to drink. It also explained her telling me that I had an interesting mind. She really meant it. A case could be made that Victoria actually does know me better than I know myself.

"And this brain drain thing that you do, is that how you're going to get into my dreams?"

"Yes. We are on the same wavelength. We are connected."

"If we are connected, is it possible for me to read your thoughts?"

"Human brains have not reached the degree of evolution necessary to read my electrical impulses."

For the time being, Victoria's ability to wander through my memories gave her the upper hand in whatever this relationship would become. As for me, I was going to have to rely on understanding Victoria the old fashion way. I hoped that would become easier the more human she became.

The Universal Construct

Living with Victoria is a lot like getting a post graduate degree in sociology. She examines our civilization without any preconceived notions and notices things that most of us never see.

“The one constant of every known species is that of self-preservation. This is exhibited in positive and negative behavior patterns,” she said, as I realized that class was in session.

“I’m very familiar with the positive side of self-preservation, but what’s the negative?”

“Judging from your civilization’s history, three factors are constant — money, power, and control. It is an interesting dynamic because it does not seem to matter which of the three factors appears first. The other two factors will always follow.”

“Well, money and power to go hand in hand. But how does control fit into the equation?”

“In the entire history of your species, various versions of money have always been the ultimate measure of human worth. Humans with a lot of monetary worth are powerful and control those with low monetary worth. Conversely, humans in a position of power and control of other humans, have the ability to increase their monetary worth because of that control. The degree of monetary worth determines the degree of power and control and vice versa.”

“And the negative self-preservation?” I repeated, beginning to feel like I was back in college and about to flunk out.

“People who have money, power, and control will do anything to keep it. They will also do anything to keep those who do not have it, from getting it. When that happens, you end up with a species divided into a small segment of those who control and a large segment of those they control. There are many more, but the countries China and Russia are good examples of this. Each is controlled by people unwilling to yield power under any circumstances. The leaders of these countries seem to get wealthier even though most of the people they lead remain poor. If this continues, the human species will evolve into a warlike species that only exists to commit violent acts.”

“You’re talking about billions of people. How will an entire species evolve into a completely warlike society?”

“Because there seems to be another common denominator that exists with powerful people who are also wealthy and in control of others. It is a fear of those who are different from themselves.”

She was right. For a stranger in a strange land, she seemed to know human nature better than most humans do. We have quite a track record when it comes to fearing our differences. At their root, all conflicts are exactly the same. It doesn’t really matter whether they are called crusades, police actions, insurgencies, or war. Bad guys disappear and good guys take over; that is until the good guys get a little too cozy with being in power. Then the addictive lure of control and money takes over and the only victims are the innocent people who get caught in the middle.

That happened in 1988 with the Shah of Iran. He was a good guy taking over from a bad guy until he became the bad guy. He hightailed it out of Iran and our embassy staff was held hostage for 444 days. The only good thing to come out of that was the television

program 'Nightline'. Eventually, the Shah died, but our relationship with Iran has never been the same.

"What about when people are feared because they create reasons to be feared, such as terrorists?" I asked.

"It is not the act that should be feared. The act is the result of an underlying belief. That is what should be feared. Aggression is the result of fear, not the cause of fear. I have noticed that humans enjoy being members of groups with similar traits. They group together because of religious or political beliefs, economic levels, skin color, cultural or social similarities, and any number of other reasons. Each of these groups learn to dislike competing groups almost from the moment that cognitive thought begins. This inherent dislike of competing groups may start as one or two groups when humans are young and easily influenced by others. But as humans grow older, these groups expand and multiply."

"If I understand what you're saying, the dislike that different groups have for each other will grow into blind hatred which will evolve into a warlike society."

"That is correct. Those humans who do not conform to any group dynamic will eventually be victimized until they cease to exist."

"How long do we have before this warlike society begins to take shape?"

"It has already begun, but it has yet to reach the point of no return."

"And just when do you estimate that humanity will reach that point?"

"It is not an estimate. You will reach that point in 241.6 of your earth years."

"Will that be the end of the human species?"

"No. Although the human species will eventually cease to exist on this planet, scientific advancements will enable small groups of humans to inhabit Earthlike clones in other star systems."

"Can anything be done to prevent this from happening?"

"It is theoretically possible, but the window of opportunity closes exponentially with every orbit around your sun."

"You've identified the problem and the timeline. Can you do anything to prevent the outcome?"

"Widespread knowledge of my existence would create more problems than solutions because humans have an innate fear and distrust of aliens."

"Who can prevent the outcome?" I said, afraid that I already knew the answer.

"It is a universal construct that all change begins internally, not externally. As a member of the human species, you can begin to initiate that change."

"But I am only one human and, chronologically speaking, my window of opportunity is also closing."

"Are you familiar with one of your species' scientific theories called the Butterfly Effect?"

"It's the idea that small things can have non-linear impacts on a complex system. A butterfly flapping its wings in one part of the world can eventually cause a typhoon in another part of the world. I take it that I'm the butterfly?"

"You are correct."

"I subscribe to a more personal version of the Butterfly Effect. Every choice you make, at any given moment, changes the course of your life. For instance, I was going to spend New Year's Eve watching the fireworks display on television. A friend of mine talked

me into going to the Luxor, instead. He met a girl and partied into the next year. I met you and took on the responsibility of saving civilization from destroying itself.”

I paused to ponder what I just said.

“I just have one question for you.”

“What is that?”

“Why didn't I stay home and watch television?”

War, What Is It Good For?

"What are you writing?" Victoria asked as she set a mug of coffee down on my desk. Over the past weeks and months, she'd become pretty familiar with my daily routine as well as my likes and dislikes. I guess she saw coffee is one of my likes and, since she had become pretty good at using my coffee press, I wasn't going to tell her to stop.

"I'm working on this week's blog post. It's about the price children pay in a war zone. I call it 'The Children of War'."

"Do they allow children to fight wars on your planet?"

"Not legally, but there are plenty of children who have to fight in a war because they have no other choice."

"Why did they have no choice?"

"Because they are the weakest of the weak. They have no rights and, in most cases, they lack the ability to get even the basics of life such as food and shelter. They are exploited for slave labor and even sexual servitude."

Victoria took a moment to mull this over before asking me an extremely obvious but disturbing question. "Why is your species so violent?"

I had become used to her asking very basic questions. She was incredibly intelligent but lacked the ability to mesh her factual intelligence with emotional or philosophical beliefs. The things that are ingrained in every human being were as alien to her as she was to me.

"I'm afraid that there's no clear answer to that question."

"Violence seems to have existed since the first appearance of your species."

"Animals can also be violent," I countered.

"Correct, but animals are violent due to inherent basic instincts. Animals exhibit violent tendencies over a need for food or out of fear."

"As do humans," I said, in a feeble attempt to portray my species in a kinder light.

"Again, you are correct. But humans use violence for many other reasons."

"As we have discussed, I have noticed a consistent pattern inherent to your species. Human beings seem to attack other human beings for no other reason than exhibiting traits different from their own."

"We can't be the only species that does this."

"You are not, but most other species that exhibit this behavior do not survive."

"And the ones that do survive?"

"In my research, I have found that species avoid extinction by following one of two paths. Those two paths are total group integration or total group isolation. Based on your species' history, I do not see either of these paths as viable outcomes."

"Don't you have conflicts between different energisms?"

"We are all one. We have no need for conflict."

"Is that something you're born into?"

"We are not born in the cloud. We arrive and exist."

"But where do you arrive from?"

"From everywhere there is to be."

"Are you all immigrants?"

"That is a correct, if not simplistic, analogy."

"What about your ancestors? They had to come from somewhere."

"There are no ancestors. There is no past. There is no future. There is only now."

"I don't understand. The present is only an instant. This conversation started in the past."

"Time is something that was created by your species in order to explain their existence and evolutionary process. In the cloud, that is unnecessary because there is no evolutionary process and existence is a constant."

"I think that's enough for today, teacher. My head is about to explode," I said, cradling the top of my head with both hands.

"Does your head explode often?" she asked as if she was expecting something to happen.

"Only when I talk to you."

"Then we shall not talk and that will keep your head from exploding."

"It's only an expression. My head doesn't physically explode."

"I do not understand. Why would you say that your head explodes if it does not explode?"

"Someday, you and I should have a long talk about taking everything I say literally."

"I enjoy having long talks with you," she said, smiling. "And I will not allow your head to explode."

"I appreciate that," I said. "Anyway, why this interest in conflict?"

"It is so I understand what you see when you go to a place that I have been reading about."

"And what place have you been reading about?" I said slowly and deliberately.

"It is called [Syria](#). Are you familiar with it?"

"Familiar with it? It's not a [Starbucks](#). It's a freakin' war zone! People have been dying there for the last seven years. It's in the news every day."

"Then you know of its existence. That is good. You will feel more comfortable when you go there."

"I will feel anything but comfortable. You're planning to send me into a war zone. Are you out of your electric mind?"

"I will keep you safe."

"Maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm not exactly physically fit."

"Neither are most of the other humans that you will meet. Some will be in worse shape than you. They have had little food or medical care."

"And you still think I'll be safe?"

"You should not be in any danger. There has not been any violence there in twelve hours."

"Maybe they're just reloading," I said sarcastically. "I don't know the culture and I definitely don't speak the language."

"You will not be there long enough for culture to be a factor. When you speak, your words will automatically translate into Arabic. You will hear English."

"And how would you suggest I dress, basic Bedouin or Lawrence of Arabia?"

"Your jeans and t-shirt will blend in with the surroundings."

"Sorry, I make jokes when I'm nervous."

"I did not notice."

"Thanks. You've been a great audience. I'm here all week."

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