

SHEER HAPPENSTANCE REVISITED

Of all the essays and articles I've written since retirement, the one I've gotten the most comments on is *Sheer Happenstance*.

Long before then, I had become fascinated by the voluntary decisions we make and actions we take on the road of life – decisions and actions that result in outcomes and relationships that would never have occurred without those choices, but can make all the difference in the years ahead. In the essay, I used personal experiences to illustrate the impact of what I termed “sheer happenstance” upon the major events in my life.

Readers who commented on the 2009 article invariably reported comparable seminal events in their own lives and those of family members, stemming from what seemed at the time to be pure chance.

The illustrations I used in the piece covered the first six decades of my life, and included:

- The many twists and turns that had to occur before I connected with my first wife, Barbro from Sweden, the mother of my two terrific sons.
- How I ended up going to Princeton, a decision that has proved so meaningful to me over the years, but which was not what I originally intended.
- What steps led me into the Navy and aboard one of its icebreakers based in Seattle, which was where I met Barbro (with a time overlap of only a month or so).
- The unlikely route I took to ending up in law school and becoming an attorney.
- The circuitous path that led me to the law firm of Skadden Arps (tiny at that time, huge later on).

- The coincidences that brought me into contact with my second wife, Barbara from North Carolina, the love of my life.

And, for good measure, I related my mother's story of how she met my father by pure chance – which, from my selfish perspective, was the most important happenstance of all!

As I re-read the article recently, I realized that all these inciting incidents had occurred by 1982 – 33 years ago. And it caused me to ponder whether I'd experienced any such revelations over the last three decades.

The answer was yes, I had. And although none was as significant to my life as the prior ones, three of them (all relating to music) have meant a lot to me in my 18 years of retirement. So here goes.

When I retired from the practice of law in 1996, I wanted to spend a lot more time playing music than I'd been able to devote during the pressure years of lawyering. One problem, though – my jazz-inflected piano style cried out for a supporting cast of rhythm instruments, which was something I didn't have.

One warm night the summer after retirement, Barbara and I were taking a post-dinner stroll on Columbus Avenue near our then home – something we rarely did. We passed by a bakery we'd never gone into – Barbara doesn't eat sweets and exercises food-police discipline over my intake. Much to our surprise, some jazzy live sounds flowed out the front door into the street. Tantalized – what was the bakery doing open this late and what's with the music? – we went in.

There were no other customers at that hour, but two young men were in a corner, creating a classy duet of guitar and bass. They sounded so good that we sat down in some folding chairs set out for the occasion, tapping our feet to the beat.

When they took a break, we went over and spoke to them. Dmitri Kolesnik and Andrei Ryabov were delightful young men from St. Petersburg, Russia, trying to break into the NYC jazz scene. We told them that we sometimes gave parties at which they could entertain, got

their contact info (I don't remember them even having business cards), and said we might give them a call.

Shortly after that, I was listening to some early recordings of Nat King Cole and his trio. Cole was a marvelous jazz pianist before he became a popular crooner. I couldn't match his chops, but this was the kind of sound I wanted to strive for. Nat's piano was accompanied by a guitar and bass, and – light bulb! – I remembered Dmitri and Andrei in the bakery.

Within a year, The Jim Freund Trio, featuring Andrei and Dmitri, made its first album and had a weekly gig at a fine Manhattan venue – the large attractive lounge of midtown's Lombardy Hotel. And there's more to the story, as you'll learn presently.

But if Barbara and I hadn't happened to go for a rare after-dinner stroll that night

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That same year, as Christmas neared, I was walking on a side street near my home – a street I'd seldom found myself on before. About half-way down the block, I saw a sign over a door that I'd never previously noticed – "Hamilton Senior Center." I wasn't even sure what a senior center was – for instance, were the denizens ambulatory or infirm, did people live there or pay visits?

But suddenly a thought hit me – perhaps it was sparked by a holiday wreath inside the door. I had always enjoyed playing the piano for friends and colleagues to sing Christmas carols and seasonal popular songs. Maybe the seniors would enjoy having someone who could do that – assuming the place even had a piano.

So, on the spot, I did something very uncharacteristic for me – I went inside and asked the person in charge if the Center had a piano ("yes") and would they like a pianist to come and help celebrate Christmas ("yes" again). I fixed a date, several people (quite ambulatory and tuneful, it turned out) showed up, and we had a good session.

From that beginning 18 years ago, I now play almost 100 gigs every year (in all seasons, and featuring all kinds of popular songs) at Hamilton and two other Manhattan senior centers – Goddard-Riverside and Jasa. These sessions attract sizeable turnouts of seniors, who eat it up – but so do I; it has become one of my favorite recurring activities. I’ve just completed making a documentary video about the whole senior singalong experience, which I think you’ll enjoy.

But if I had taken my usual route to Broadway that day

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For years now, I’ve been a regular subscriber to the annual program of the 92nd Street Y called “Lyrics and Lyricists.” At each session, a narrator and a half-dozen talented professional singers pay tribute to a certain lyricist or genre or period. I have two season tickets, but Barbara doesn’t care too much for this, so I usually invite a relative or friend to share the evening with me.

On this particular night, the guest was my friend Gene – a woman who knows the words to every good song written during the halcyon years. At one point, a female singer I’d never heard before was singing *The Thrill is Gone*. Her voice was so compelling that I got goose bumps.

When the vocalist finished, I turned to Gene and said, “I love the way that woman sings. I’m dying to accompany her on the piano. You’ve got to help me. Find out her name, get her phone number, call her and make a date for me.”

“What?!” said Gene, incredulously – she’d never heard me speak in that vein before (and nether had I!).

“I want you to act as my intermediary, so she won’t think I’m up to no good. You’re a woman – you can vouch for me.”

Gene gave me a look like I was crazy, and no more was said on the subject. But the next morning precisely at 9 am (I later found out), my friend Gene – having discovered the singer’s name (Annette Sanders) and somehow gotten her phone number – called Annette and put the

proposition to her. And within a matter of days, Annette and I were making beautiful music.

In addition to becoming close friends, Annette and I have since made four albums together. On three of them, by the way, Dmitri from the bakery accompanies us on bass (Andrei having returned to Russia). The three of us have also been entertaining in recent years at the 60th and 65th Princeton Reunions.

But if Annette hadn't sung *The Thrill is Gone* that night, or if Gene hadn't taken over for a comatose Jim

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So, as you can see, much of the joy I'm getting from playing gigs, recording, and senior singalongs can be traced to instances of sheer happenstance.

In my original article, I recognized that despite my emphasis on the role of human choice and chance occurrences, there was another possibility to all this – Longfellow called it “Providence.” Here was my cop-out on this in the original article:

“It's not my intention here to get into a debate over free will versus determination, or whether what seems like sheer happenstance is actually part of someone's larger plan. (Still, I can't resist making the observation that if some superior being is indeed pulling the strings behind all this, he or she does work in some mighty mysterious and complex ways)”

In the article, I made the point that frequently, while you're in the midst of one of these chains-of-events, you don't even know it's happening. You often need the perspective of a distant vantage point. And what I've found – which offers a welcome degree of hope to those going through some bad stuff – is that many of life's most rewarding aspects emerge, almost serendipitously, from mundane moments or even unpleasant surroundings.

So my takeaway was (and still is) that if things are amiss, you may be setting yourself up for one of the significant rewards or decisions of your life.

Your assignment now is to muse over some developments in your life – especially those occurring in recent years that you may not previously have voiced – and see if they don't fit into this mold of sheer happenstance.