



Coincidence becomes Mystery!

At exactly three o'clock the phone rang.
"Hi Paul, it's Mario. I am in the hotel lobby. Are you ready to go?" an excited voice said.

"I'll be down in a minute," I replied.

I grabbed my wallet and left my room. In the lobby a broadly smiling Mario awaited me.

"Good to see you again," he said, "I was not sure you would call. After all, why would a gringo businessman hang out with a teenage goof like me instead of the important people in town?" he grinned.

"You cannot believe what a break this is for me," I replied. "Let's get moving! I would like to see the real Salta. Maybe we can take a taxi and you can direct the driver on a tour around town."

"Good idea," Mario replied, enthused. "And afterwards, I will walk you down the center of town and we'll grab a drink and an empanada at Antonio's."

"Sounds good."

We left the hotel and got into one of the waiting taxis around the corner.

Salta is a beautifully preserved colonial town. It has very charming Spanish colonial architecture with white walls and red tiled roofs. Its setting in the Andean foothills with the towering mountains of the Andes guarding the town is breathtaking. We visited the cathedral, the beautiful church of San Francisco and the castle of San Lorenzo. I had never expected such picturesque historic colonial architecture here in the northwest of Argentina.

Mario had not been able to stop talking about his town since we got into the taxi. Like a professional guide he told me about its history and how the Spanish Conquistadors had entered the region, coming down from Peru. They founded the city following the orders of the governor of Peru in 1582. I enjoyed seeing the pride in Mario's eyes as he passionately presented his hometown to me. After a comprehensive taxi tour, Mario directed the driver to stop and we continued on foot.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at the central market place featuring more of the same colonial architecture and covered arched walkways. Around the corner, in front of a butcher, cheese and wine grocery store, Mario turned to me and said, "This is Antonio's. I am going to let you taste the best empanadas, goat cheese and chorizo you ever had in your life!"

I had no idea what empanadas were, but nodded my head anyway.

As soon as we entered we were indulged in a distinct aroma of cheese, meat and wine. In the back of the grocery store were some dark wooden tables and chairs. Along the walls of the long rectangular shop were thick oak shelves loaded with different wines, pates, oils, herbs, cheeses and different meats. Scattered around the dark old wooden floor were stacked wooden crates with more products on display. All kinds of different sausages in varying sizes hung from the ceiling and on the sides of the shelves. Antonio's had a very casual, rural atmosphere. This was one of those places you would never find as a tourist, and I considered myself lucky to have found someone like Mario who would allow me to experience this unique restaurant/cafe/grocery store.

We sat down and Mario ordered some different meats, cheese, empanadas and Argentinean red wine. As soon as the food was ordered, the teenager turned to me, excited but serious, and said, "You cannot believe what happened to me earlier today on my way to your hotel! I passed the church of San Francisco, and in front of the big wooden doors was an old woman begging for money. She was Incan

and dressed completely in the traditional dress. I reached for some coins in my pocket, gave them to her and wanted to continue on my way when she grabbed my arm. When I looked at her and my eyes met hers, the rest of the world disappeared. It felt like I was drowning in her eyes. They were so dark... so deep.... It was like looking into the eyes of God. They were like windows right into the soul of humanity.”

As Mario was telling his story, I found the hairs on my neck standing straight up.

“Then,” Mario continued, “she smiled at me and surrounded my heart with love. It was such a peaceful and serene moment. The rest of the world around us did not seem to exist anymore. Suddenly she pushed something in my hand, stammered in broken Spanish, ‘the gringo,’ and walked away. I opened my hand and found a shriveled piece of paper with a question scribbled on it.”

“What was the question?” I asked anxiously.

“Are human beings being human?”

A shiver ran up my spine. What was all this about? What was going on here?

“As soon as I read the question,” Mario continued, “I turned around and the old woman was gone. It was like she had vaporized into thin air. There was no way for her to walk that fast down the street and around the corner. I am sharing this with you not only because it was so mysterious, but because she said, ‘the gringo.’ ...But there really was no way she could have known I was going to meet you...was there?”

I sat stunned, frozen in my chair. Mario noticed my paralyzed state and a questioning frown appeared on his face. Finally I found my tongue and shared the experience I had had with the old woman upon my arrival at the hotel. Then I pulled the piece of paper I had found under the desk in my room out of my pocket and put it on the table in front of Mario. Speechless, he stared at the scribbles on the paper as he read, “Are human beings being human? Want to find out more? Meet me in Ayacucho on March 21st.”

“How can this be?” he stammered. “What is going on here? Somehow it seems this message is for *you*.”

“For me?” I objected. “I just found this piece of paper under the desk because housekeeping didn’t do a good job, that’s all.”

“So then why did you keep it?” Mario questioned while he raised his eyebrows. “And why did the old woman tell me ‘the gringo?’ Certainly all this is more than just coincidence!”

“But why *me*? ...How did she know I was going to stay in that room? How could she get that note there? How did she know you were going to meet with *me*? And what do *I* have to do with this question? Sure, it’s an interesting question, but I certainly don’t have the answer. I don’t even know what ‘human’ stands for. And where or what is Ayacucho? I am leaving here tomorrow morning, and I don’t have the time to stay here until March 21st in order to meet with someone. Maybe she just said ‘the gringo’ so that I could give you my piece of paper and *you* could visit with her at Ayacucho?”

Mario did not seem prepared to accept the task, and asked, “Don’t you know where Ayacucho is?”

“How am I supposed to know? I just arrived here last night! I don’t know the region nor this town!”

Mario smiled in response. “Ayacucho is not in this town nor region. It’s not even in this country!”

“You know where it is?”

“Of course,” he said. “I am a good student and as part of our geography classes we need to know the different cities in Latin America. Ayacucho is a Peruvian town high up on the East Side of the Andes.”

“Peru?”

“Yes. Peru. It is a Spanish colonial town, and its name comes from *Quechua*, the Inca language, and means ‘corner of the dead.’”

“But I can’t go to Peru, and I certainly have no business in a Peruvian town in the Andes known as ‘corner of the dead!’ Neither can I imagine this old woman to have the resources to travel to Peru

and meet me there on the twenty-first. Why would she not meet with whomever she wants to meet with right here in Salta?”

“Maybe she did not write the piece of paper?” Mario tried. “Maybe she was only a messenger...”

“No,” I barked, still objecting to my involvement. “All this just doesn’t have anything to do with me!”



Mario got a triumphant smile on his face.

“What are you laughing at?” I snapped.

“What are you afraid of?” he responded in reply.

“I am not afraid of anything!” I denied. “This just doesn’t make sense.”

“Exactly! It’s mysterious, it’s strange, it’s incomprehensible. It doesn’t make sense, so it is out of our comfort zone! So doesn’t that make it worth exploring? Did you not teach me that the greatest personal growth occurs at times when we push ourselves out of our own comfort zones, and that growth and learning is what life is all about?”

“Uh...yes. But this is impossible!”

“When you say that something is impossible, don’t you limit your own learning opportunities?” Mario replied immediately.

Oh, what a good question! This young boy had certainly taken our conversation on the plane to heart, and currently he was turning the tables on me. “Well, science has proven that certain things are possible and certain things are not possible,” I hedged.

“Have they?” Mario questioned.

“Well, they must be teaching you other things than geography in school! Most certainly your school program includes physics, chemistry and biology,” I answered somewhat cynically.

“Yes, of course,” Mario said, “but it seems to me that the basic philosophy which is dominating our scientific era has created science’s biggest limitation.”

“And that limitation is...?” I asked curiously.

“Well,” he explained, “most scientists start from the premise that something first needs to be proven and understood before they support and accept a certain phenomenon. They act like everything outside of the scientific field—that which has not been studied, clinically repeated and proven—simply does not exist and therefore is impossible.

“But what if there is a piece that scientists still have not discovered? What if there is something science does not understand or only *some* people can do, feel or sense. The fact you can observe something but not explain it, or prove how it works, does not make it any less true. It only means it requires more study. I believe that science would progress much faster, and people like Albert Einstein and other great scientists would not have encountered so much initial opposition to their theories if the scientific world would start from the premise that everything is possible until proven otherwise. This would open up people’s minds and cause society to support research for that which we do not yet understand.”

“That is an interesting observation,” I replied.

“In my mind,” Mario continued, “‘impossible’ does not exist. I believe we should be open to everything in order to evolve to our full potential. Once we say ‘impossible’ we limit our own potential. Certainly the Romans would have thought it impossible to walk on the moon, but we did. From my point of view everything is possible as long as there is enough focus, resources, passion, perseverance and time committed to what we want to achieve or explore.”

“So give me an example of science-limiting attitude,” I challenged.

“Take, for instance, witching. Throughout the centuries and still today, farmers in the Andes have used witching, also called dowsing, to find water. Not all of them can do it, but in each

community there's usually one person, in a lot of cases the healer of the area, who can find water with the use of a forked stick. Those who are good at it can even say how much water there is and how deep you have to dig to find it. I have read that a lot of people around the world have this skill, and that some have even found oil and gas with it. However, science does not understand how dowsing works. They have not proven nor explained this process to find water. As a matter of fact, scientists are at an absolute loss. They have no idea how it is *possible* to find water with such primitive tools. Therefore, they declare dowsing to be superstitious and non-scientific. It's *impossible* because the methodology has not been scientifically proven. If scientists would open up their minds to such phenomena and explore the subject seriously, more funds could become available for researching the topic. Ultimately we could discover how this low-cost method for finding water really functions, and who knows what else would be revealed in the process?!"

"I never considered this," I admitted, "but I understand your point of view."

"So you will go?" Mario asked, excited.

"Go where?"

"To Ayacucho!"

"Why? No!" I shouted.

"But you should explore this mystery. You told me in the plane that we should not question the Divine plan, and that we should learn from the growth opportunities which life presents to us. You told me that everything happens for a reason. So you have to go!" he said passionately, almost commandingly.

Mario was using my insights against me! But had I really meant what I had told him? Would I be able to live up to those insights, or did I only have a good understanding of them?

"I will consider it," I eventually answered.

In the meantime the food had arrived and I was enjoying a delightful feast of all different kinds of sausages, cheeses and some excellent Argentinean red wine. An empanada turned out to be a sort

of meat pie turnover or pastry in the shape of a half moon. It is available in a variety of fillings, and we were having both pork and beef empanadas.

“So how was your meeting?” Mario asked, changing the topic.

“Ahh, a bit disappointing.” I explained what had happened, and how it frustrated me when people would waste their money, despite my professional advice, instead of investing it in solutions that had a proven return on investment.

When I was finished, Mario reflected thoughtfully on my words and after a pause asked, “Why does that frustrate you?”

While I had recognized a great coaching opportunity on the plane when I met Mario, this boy was now coaching me!

“Why does that frustrate me? I don’t know,” I admitted. “I guess if I had that kind of money I would make much better use of it.”

“Still,” Mario said, “whether they follow your advice or not should not make a difference to you. They have the right to make their own choices! You have no control over that.”

“Yes, but it’s frustrating because I know what the outcome of their choice is going to be, and it is not going to be what they expect. They asked for my advice, and I gave it to them based on my experience and knowledge of this industry. Yet instead of valuing the information, they are going to do things their way, like thousands have done before them.”

A deep frown appeared on Mario’s forehead in the painstakingly long silence that followed my last words. Just when I started to think that I was done with being put on the spot and wanted to change the subject, Mario said, “Well, maybe that is a learning process they have to go through. We don’t know where somebody else is in their personal growth process. Maybe they need to have an experience where they disregard advice that was given to them, stubbornly follow their own course and burn their fingers in order to learn some important lessons and become wiser people. Couldn’t that be possible? ...Still, I don’t understand why this made you so upset, upset enough to release such negative emotions.”

“It did not release negative emotions in me!” I snapped.

“Oh. Well then, what *is* frustration, according to you?” Mario cleverly asked.

This boy was getting way too good at this, and it just wasn't pleasant to look into the mirror he was presenting! “Well, okay, I guess frustration is a negative emotion,” I conceded, “and I probably should not have let it get to me.”

“That is right. You shouldn't, because it only affected your own mood and energy level in a negative way. It probably did not concern them at all. ...So why exactly did this upset you? ...You still have not answered the question as to why it frustrated you,” Mario tried again, carefully but tenaciously.

He was not giving up, and while I did not enjoy looking into this mirror, now that the subject was on the table I might as well think about it and deal with it for my own good. What Mario was pointing out had been happening throughout my entire life. When people did something wrong, chose not to follow my advice or did not understand what I was trying to explain to them, I would get frustrated. Such emotions always reduced my own energy level and negatively impacted my positive outlook on life. Mario was probably correct that it was not really affecting anybody else but me, and this because I allowed it to. But *why* was it happening?

“I guess I am getting frustrated because I have the underlying expectation when I provide advice that people will value this and follow it. The same occurs when I try to explain something to someone. I expect people to understand what I teach and sometimes they just don't because we are all different.”

Mario certainly had me thinking. He was actually a good coach!

“So can you *make* people understand you or follow your advice?” he asked.

“No...”

“Why not?”

“Well, because I do not control them,” I replied.

“So what do you control?” Mario continued his line of questioning.

I had to think about that one. What Mario was pointing out was that most of my feelings of frustration, and sometimes anger, were the result of my attempt to control others or certain events. And of course that falls outside of our control.

“We only control our own actions and choices,” I said.

“Right!” he smartly confirmed. “And how does faith relate to that?”

I finally caught on. He was using the insight of faith, which I had helped him to discover on the plane the previous day, and had linked it cleverly to my emotions of frustration. “Well, we have to have faith that the reality that presents itself to us is presented to us for a certain reason. It’s like we discussed yesterday,” I smiled, letting him know I had understood.

“We should discover the learning in it,” I continued. “We can control only how we personally will deal with this reality to the best of our knowledge and ability. Once we have done this we should detach ourselves from the outcome and just be open to whatever is presented to us in return. For we only control ourselves; any other perceptions of control are merely an illusion. We don’t control our environment or the people in our companies, family or society. And we should have faith that whatever happens to us is happening for a reason. We should learn and grow from life’s learning opportunities and move forward on our journey.

“You know, Mario,” I said, “this all makes sense from a rational point of view. It is exactly the same thing we talked about yesterday, but it is difficult for me to leave my emotions out of it because I really care about what happens to these people.”

“So when you start loading yourself up with negative emotions,” Mario pursued, “does that change the outcome of their actions?”

“No!”

“Does it make you feel good, increase your energy and put you in a caring mood?”

“No!” I reluctantly admitted again.

“Just as it was difficult for me yesterday to manage my emotion of fear, it probably is not easy for you either to manage the negative emotion of frustration. I understand you care,” Mario said, “but that’s still no reason to allow this to affect you in such a negative manner, because as with me on the plane, it prevents you from seeing the beauty around you and learning the lesson. Once you have done the best you can, according to your knowledge and abilities, there is nothing more you can do, is there? ...So when others decide to continue their course you can only acknowledge and respect their freedom of choice. If this leads to a negative outcome, then empathize with that. That is about all you can do. If your actions do not lead to your targeted results, the only thing you can do is learn from the experience and move on. I believe that when you recognize this, you will be able to detach from the outcome of your efforts and be content in the knowledge that you have contributed your maximum efforts to your cause.”

“But that logic sounds like we are never responsible for the outcome of things,” I protested.

“Well, let’s explore this together.” Mario said, undisturbed in his newly discovered role of coach. “Are you responsible for developing hotels for your hotel chain?”

“Yes,” I answered, curious to see where he was taking this.

“Did you make the decision to spend time with these owners of the hotel in Salta?”

“Yes, but I was told this could potentially be a really good hotel conversion,” I protested.

“But was it your choice to follow through with it, or did anyone force you to it?”

“No, it was my choice and my decision to fly to Salta and spend time with these people. And all for nothing!”

“So who is responsible for allocating time to this and not getting the desired results?”

“I am,” I admitted reluctantly.

“And who is responsible for getting the desired results for the investments in the hotel?” he continued.

“The owners are,” I said understandingly.

“So responsibility is with those to whom it belongs,” he concluded smartly. “But never say ‘all for nothing!’ You did not get the desired business results here in Salta, but the two of us have had some great conversations, and now you have this fascinating mystery to solve! All this would not have happened if you had not decided to come. As you taught me yesterday, we must have faith and understand that there is a reason for everything.”

“I have enjoyed our conversations and you are right: Everything has a reason, and I need to pay better attention to my own teachings. But I am not so sure how happy I should be with this mystery! I’ll have to see where it leads,” I replied.

It had gotten late and the conversation too heavy for that time of the day. Mario and I switched to some lighter topics like the quality of the Argentinean wine and life in the Andes. Then I asked Mario where he had gained such wisdom and maturity at his young age.

He shared with me that our conversation on the plane had refreshed the teachings of his grandmother on his mother’s side with whom he had spent a lot of time the previous winter. She was Incan, still spoke the traditional Quechua language, and was living in a small village up in the Andes not all too far from Salta. She was the medicine woman of her village and, according to Mario, very wise. From the way he talked about her, I could tell he really admired her.

After Mario and I agreed to meet for breakfast before my departure the following day, I returned to my hotel room. It was close to midnight. Upon my arrival I decided to quickly download my e-mail again so I could work on it the next day on the plane. I rapidly skipped through the e-mail subject descriptions to check for anything urgent. One message captured my attention. “Hotel Development, Peru.” I opened it and read as follows: “Paul, can you possibly change your flights and make a stop in Peru for a few days? A small Peruvian hotel

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group called Primus Hotels, with four hotels throughout the country, has expressed interest in our management services. It would be great if you could meet with the owners in Lima, visit all the hotels and start negotiations if you think a relationship with our hotel chain could be beneficial for both companies. Someone from the Primus company will drive you to all the hotels and show you around. Their hotels are in Lima, Ica, Nasca and Ayacucho.” Ayacucho! In disbelief I stared at my computer screen. “Well,” I thought, “whether I like the meaning of the town’s name or not does not seem to matter anymore. Now I *have* to go. It seems like an invisible hand is leading me there!”

And from that moment onwards this mystery gained my full attention. I was actually becoming curious as to the next clue on this all-too-strange journey.

