



(Does someone or something control our well-being on Earth?)

Part 1: A Shopping Experience!

Now, a week later, whenever a door slams or someone hits a mat against a wall, I jump, thinking ... gunshot! Forty or fifty times a day - or more - I think about my *'shopping experience'* at The Westgate Mall, in Nairobi, Kenya. I wonder when these startled jumps and crazy thoughts will go away. Time heals all they say.

Two loud cracks from a gun ... perhaps ten or twenty metres away. I was crouched behind a small counter, trying to shout into my phone.

"Listen. This is scary! I'm in Nakumatt, Westgate, and there's gunfire all around!"

Another ear-shattering bang! I ditched the phone idea and started to run; bent over, head down, aiming towards the rear of the store; other people, looking bewildered, running alongside me.

I had entered the Westgate basement car park at 11.44 a.m. (I knew the exact time: it was stamped on the card – along with the date, 21.09.2013 - later found in the top pocket of the shirt I had worn on that fateful morning). I smiled at the uniformed male

guard, as he frisked me with his metal detector, thinking *“What a useless exercise”*, then strolled up the ramp to the ground floor, surrounded by artificial rocks and waterfalls, suspended light balls and piped music: all part of the universal shopping experience: it could have been Dubai.

Reaching the ground floor, I checked my watch and made the decision not to go immediately to *ArtCaffe* for lunch, but to do some shopping first at the Nakumatt Supermarket. I spent some minutes in a phone shop just nearby, then entered the supermarket a few minutes before noon, stopping at the phone counter inside the main door, but then not finding exactly what I wanted, proceeding to the rear of the store, to buy some household items.

In the hardware section and scanning the shelves, the lights went down. It must have been 12 o'clock. I didn't think too much about this because power failure occurs quite regularly in Nairobi, and in a large complex like Westgate you just wait for the generator to kick in, then business resumes as usual. This time, as expected, the lights came back fairly quickly, but then after another few minutes everything went dark again. I recall asking one of the staff *“What's up with the lighting?”* and his mumbled reply about faulty generators. After some time, probably about five minutes, the lights came on again and I grabbed a couple of items, moving then to the first floor in search of a new backpack.

I remained for perhaps another five minutes on the floor above, in the far back corner of the store. After checking out the packs, but then deciding they were all a bit expensive, I made my way to the escalator and ground-floor checkout. Walking back, I remember being jostled by 15 or 20 young people, who came dashing up the stairway, some bumping into me as they ran past. At first, I thought it was a school exercise, or maybe a youth group there to buy bags for an overseas trip, but as I rode down the escalator I looked back and saw a number of youngsters crouched down and peering through the glass banister: peering in unison down towards the store's cashier desks.

At ground level, I started to notice that people around me looked a bit confused, perhaps even scared. *“What’s going on?”* I asked a staff member next to me. Then I heard the gunshots!

I moved quickly, to reach the sanctuary of a glass counter, though if at that time I had known what was actually happening, I would have realized my hiding place was, to put it mildly, a bit inadequate. At this point - as described earlier - I phoned home, managing to utter a few words of alarm, still thinking it was a robbery that was taking place. Then, the noise from guns and grenades became too loud.

It was at that point that the gravity of the situation began to dawn and I started to run, in earnest, past the meats and delicatessen counter and on towards the cold store for milk. As I ran, I sensed many scared and confused people, running beside me. A couple of staff were beckoning customers to an escape route, normally the entrance for goods coming from the basement store. Once we reached what seemed to be the sanctuary of the passageway beyond the doorway, the running slowed to a jog, then a quick walking pace, along the corridor and down a flight of steps into the store below.

As I arrived – a newcomer to the deliveries area, now a sanctuary of relative safety – I could see others already embedded between and behind bags of flour and sugar, and other trench-like items. I helped one Indian family with kids – the two adults were in total panic – to construct a protective screen of bags around themselves, then retreated to watch from behind my own ramparts, inwardly just as scared, but trying desperately not to show it. I was beginning to appreciate what it must have been like fighting trench warfare in World War 1!

We stayed there for thirty or forty minutes; perhaps fifty people – it was hard to tell when they were all hiding behind their self-made barricades – totally scared and glancing at each other, while hearing repetitive rapid-fire gun noises coming from the stairwell and the floor above. At times there would be a lull in the crackle of guns, causing people to move towards the large truck-delivery doorway, and the freedom that beckoned from a

road to the side of the mall. But then the frightful rat-tat-tat sounds would resume, causing us to all scurry back to our home-made bunkers once again.

But thankfully the time did come when everything did go quiet for a longer period. Then we were given the instructions by staff that everyone was waiting to hear: *“Move, move! ...run, run! ... get out! ...quickly, quickly!!”* That’s when I came to know the Kiswahili word for hurry: ‘Haraka! Haraka!’ ... Hurry! Hurry! And so we all ran: crouched over, three or four abreast; mothers carrying their young ones screaming, down the side of the main building and across the road to the sanctuary of a small treed area, perhaps 100 metres away from the mall. Safety at long last!

Part 2: two years later

I stared at the guy in disbelief. Never had I heard such a thing before. Was he winding me up? *“Hold on. Did I hear you right? You are saying I’m protected in some way?”*

“Yes, most definitely.” he replied. “I was watching you yesterday, when you were walking around the hotel grounds; you have an aura which appears to surround you; I could see that quite clearly.”

It was an arresting statement, which had come to pass after I had told him about a clutch of alarming incidents – most recently at the hands of *Al Shabaab* in *Westgate* - the common denominator being my escape from the jaws of death by infinitely small margins. It was strange, but for some reason, as a friend of around twenty-four hours, I trusted this man as if we had eloped together from the cradle. And perhaps it was a little presumptuous on my part, due to the short time I had known him, but on impulse I went on to ask his opinion. *“Why was it that my existence to date seemed to have prowled forward like a cat with nine lives?”* That was the prompt I think he was looking for, to come up with the *Aura of Protection* theory.

After he had answered my query, we exchanged direct eye contact for a few seconds. It was obvious he was not joking; in fact, I could tell without question that he was – to pardon the pun – deadly serious in what he had just said.

My newfound friend was an artist of some renown, and also the owner of a rather sumptuous hotel-cum-art gallery, where I happened to be staying for a few days, near the edge of *Malindi* on the North Coast of Kenya. His hotel was situated alongside glorious white sands that ran for several kilometres in either direction. I later discovered it took about thirty minutes to walk from there, along the beach, into the centre of town. It also boasted a wonderful Italian restaurant, with decked terrace jutting out over the sand, where they served exquisite seafood pasta, perhaps even better than could be found in Roma or Napoli. I had arrived the day before, and now here we were - on only my second day - chatting over coffee in the living room of the man's lavishly appointed private dwelling, a short drive from the hotel.

His house, like the hotel, doubled as an art gallery, but more than that it was the artist-hotelier's studio and store: an elegant, whitewashed two-storey affair, reminiscent of *Andalucia*, with views across the lawns and beach to the Indian Ocean. The place included a vault that held both the man's own art – accumulated over several decades – plus a vast collection of priceless, indigenous artifacts and historical treasures, that he had gathered together over the years from different corners of the country. It was an immense storehouse, combined with studio-workshop: old objects being cleaned, new ones in process of production, for display, for sale, and for rotation at his nearby hotel.

He was of Italian heritage (hence the beachside restaurant); one of many modern-day Romans who have settled in Malindi. The coastal town is known for this connection - being nicknamed *Little Italy* by locals - with many Italian emigres, holidaying and owning property: coming and going since the 1960s. Over the years Malindi has assumed the guise of a Kenyan-Italian town, with a generous cross-over in aspects such as language and cuisine, plus (on the downside) drugs, crime, and prostitution. A purge of Mafia dons by Interpol did something to reduce Italian numbers, then more recently, the 2008 global economic crisis caused an even greater exit back to the *Azzurri* homeland. Whether my newly acquired friend had such dubious connections was hard to tell; he had been here for many decades, so anything was possible.

A little older than me, and several degrees wiser in terms of African life, my Kenyan-Italian advisor had achieved almost cult status in his younger days as a swashbuckling *Hemingway* type. In later years he became renowned as a remarkable and gifted artist. The same man had also courted controversy; for a start with regard to debate over his artwork, which often depicted beautiful young African women in naked or semi-naked poses. Kenya it seems, remains stuck in the depths of French Impressionist days, where the more *adventurous* works cause raised eyebrows. But perhaps more justifiable argument came from the fact that he was a European doing an African's job: an authoritative white voice in a black domain, which said (in coded language) that he could not truly represent the art of black Kenya. This was in some ways valid, but it assumed the opposition was grounded in principles of equality, rather than unbridled jealousy.

So, after that brief summary of the man and his make-up – usually a figure of love, but at times the focus of hate - did I feel he carried the credentials to be making profound declarations about my character? After all, it was quite a bold statement pertaining to auras and their shielding qualities, which I apparently wore like the emperor's invisible clothing. And what if he was right? What if I did have some imperceptible halo encircling my body (though seemingly, clearly visible to the mind's eye of my new soothsayer-friend)? Where did it spring from and what did it mean?

I rationalized that if what he said bore any semblance to truth, then the enquiry moved forward to: *'What, or who, was protecting me?'* This question began to stray into grounds I was reluctant to explore. It had a certain un-earthly ring to it: God-like, some might say. And if that *was* true, then it began to overturn some pebbles on the beach which I had hitherto preferred to leave to the vagaries of the sand and waves: undisturbed, or more to the point, *undiscovered* by human hands (and particularly my own human hands). In short, it all pointed to a pathway that I was reluctant to tread.

To explain my disinclination to probe the godly links, I would have to say that for many years - in fact going back to my early teens - I had shunned religion, and in turn, any thought of there being a god-controlled universe. Up until that time I dutifully attended Sunday school, towards the end perhaps motivated by a girl who I thought was the love

of my life, rather than anything to do with *The Almighty*. Then at church – featuring in parallel with the Sunday school – I had sat on the two-seater organ stool, turning the pages for my organist grandfather (known to me as my father) and at times, even becoming the unseen bellows-blower, pumping air at the back of the pipe organ, as my grandad belted out the chords up front: what a team we were!

Thus, before I hit my decadent teenage days, I came to know a fair percentage of hymns in the protestant stable, and admit to remembering the odd verse of those oldies-but-goldies, such as: *'Soldiers of Christ'*, or *'The Lord is my Shepherd'*. Things like that stay lodged in the brain, to resurface at shower-time: forgettable ... yet unforgettable.

Then came the sixties and a new exciting world. I dropped any allegiance to religion like a rock thrown over the edge of Mount Rushmore, and instead homed in on more practical, untheoretical pursuits, which tended to feature wine, women or song (though to be accurate and truthful, the women part of that trio came a little later). Since that time, the pragmatic pursuits have been inclined to wax and wane, but the decision not to be personally involved in the myth of religion has stayed with me throughout.

But though I could be termed an ardent disbeliever, in some ways I have been fascinated by religion all through my life, even choosing a unit which compared branches of the holy creeds at university. Secretly, I have to admit liking the pomp and ceremony at the higher end of the Christian doctrine. At one stage, this collided with a mild bout of depression, and I recall staring at an enormous and intricate stained-glass window in a Kenyan cathedral, convinced I had discovered how God reaches his several billion disciples, based on a theory of exponential outreach; or forever branching tributaries. With the advantage of hindsight, I can see that depression may have begun to evolve into a godly madness! But luckily perhaps, my aura of protection came to the fore, to save me from the asylum.

However, it was in India where the Hindu faith grabbed me for a while. I liked the thought of 30,000 or 300,000 gods (one Indian friend recently confiding in me - after several whiskies - that the number was in fact closer to three million!). I loved the fact that people I stayed with just sat cross-legged in front of the house-bound icon and did

their *pooja*. They didn't need to expend time or money going to the temple, it was all there at home. And those Hindu festivals – they seem to come round at least once every month – are so invigorating; crazy might be another word! There is a darker side to all this of course, but it is hard to separate the strength of India from the Hindu culture. It is one place where, thank God, American social norms do not seem to have pummeled the indigenous society into submission and defeat, thanks it would seem, to Hinduism.

Like most people I am always perplexed by the over-arching question: *'Who are we and where do we come from?'* I tend to side with the scientific fraternity who devote a lot of energy to explaining the Big-Bang theory. But at the end of the day, even they cannot escape the question: *'Where did the Big-Bang come from?'* ... and most of them seem to say: *'Well, maybe there could be a godly connection out there somewhere.'*

Yet it's not an easy leap from *'Who are we?'* and *'Does something or someone control us?'* to ... *'Is our relatively short time on this Earth in some way pre-planned, and therefore, in essence, beyond our control?'* To extrapolate a little further, it might then be possible for an earthling – me, you, anyone - to be protected from death, in order to live out this pre-planned existence on Planet Earth. But then, how do we fit wars and famine into that theory? It would seem to be an impossible equation.

However, the ultimate question (for my own peace of mind at least) goes something like: *'If indeed there is a defensive shield – a protective armour, one might call it - how long and to what degree might this protective, person-sized stratosphere stay in place?'*

Unless one happens to be the new-age Jesus, not for ever, obviously. But, if I was to have another car crash or a new air disaster, might the next happening be less protected, the result being a broken leg, or a cancerous lung; and the following event even more so, with - as a consequence - two useless legs or non-functional lung and liver. Gradually that protective layer might peel away, until it becomes to a large extent, non-effective. And then?

Then, of course, the circle of life draws to a close!

I began life, like most of us do, wide-eyed and innocent, smooth-skinned and all energy, skipping lightly through to my teens, without knowing or experiencing any debilitating negatives along the way. That inbuilt protective layer that most of us have, was working well. But then, realities of life began to hit home, as I started to test my boundaries and more importantly perhaps, my boundaries began to test me. I played truant from school and failed my grades; close family members became more distant, leaving me stranded and confused. Inside looking out from my bubble it felt like a desert island, and I was rapidly running out of options for escape. Then an exit route appeared from the blue – my initial dose of personal protection (after those childhood days) – and I was plucked from that island by the good ship Oriana, heading for the *lucky country*. Australia.

Returning to my friend sitting opposite, as we drank our coffee I began to feel that there could be some truth in what he had said. If his observation was correct, then I had to admit my aura had done quite a sterling job, by guarding body and soul from numerous acts of demolition by the world around, beginning with those mid-teen years in the UK, through a long series of calamitous events, almost to the present day. Not all could be classed in the acute near-death category, but those chronic more lingering types of maladies can often be just as challenging ... or even worse in some respects: loving relationships that fail, separation from children, near bankruptcy and other misadventures, each equally damaging in terms of heart palpitations and blood-pressure levels!

I remember once my mind being unbelievably stressed, because of the possibility of bank foreclosure and the looming black cloud of bankruptcy, in many ways equal to any of the near-death experiences that have been thrown my way. But at the very last moment, the bank extended terms, and someone stepped out of the dark, to buy my property. The feeling of relief was there, just as much as when a man had saved me from drowning, or when I had crawled away from a roll-over car crash.

But ... (there's always a but) ...

Was it just luck, or - as my worldly-wise friend hypothesized – was it my *Aura of Protection* performing its god-like role?

Maybe on that day, when the supposed aura finally fails to protect, I will come face-to-face with the moment of discovery, to find the answer I have long been searching for.

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