



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

## THE 7-YEAR SWITCH

Two strangers Christmas shopping amid the crowds in Manhattan, their paths collide in the mad holiday rush and they feel a mutual attraction. Though each is involved in another relationship, boy and girl spend the evening together travelling round New York and talking. But when the night reaches its inevitable end, the two are forced into determining some kind of next step. The smitten boy suggests an exchange of phone numbers, the girl balks and proposes an idea that will allow fate to take control of their future. If they are meant to be together, she tells him, they will find their way back into one another's life. Seven years later, with multiple "almost coincidences" the two romantics nearly, but not quite, meet. If it sounds familiar it's because you have probably seen the 2001 movie - Serendipity. And no prizes for guessing that fate does indeed bring them together...in the end! **Serendipity** is the effect by which one accidentally discovers something fortunate, especially while looking for something else entirely.

I am one of those people who believe that there's no such thing as coincidence. I'm completely sold on the concept of fate and how things seem to happen for a reason. This week I had a meeting scheduled with a lady whom I have known and crossed paths with for a number of years. I thought she might be looking for a job as she is very 'placeable' but instead she came to share her personal mission with me, one which has been developed through the years but increasingly more so because of a period of abuse and darkness from which she has now emerged. From that abusive relationship which eventually resulted in her fleeing and seeking refuge – and all that goes with the most awful of failed marriage territory - she has evolved into a stronger and wiser individual. Questioning her life's role and challenging herself to make sense of her past brought her to the conclusion that she should take her experience and somehow put it to good in order to enhance the lives of others. No longer goal-driven for personal gain she sees a life's purpose which is motivated to give to others, add value and ensure she leaves this world having really contributed. At a time when I am questioning my own values and contribution (one of those little activities reserved for when we have done many of the major things in life and we have time to contemplate and ask now what?) it seemed that that the student was ready to learn and thus serendipitously, the teacher had appeared.

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I find incredible inspiration from people who are able to move beyond the primal motivators of wealth, recognition and the other material trappings we associate with success. It was fate that this lady walked into my office this week and shared her journey with me – on the same week that I was evaluating my life in search of a project close to my heart and for which I have been subliminally preparing.

There is a parallel with the corporate world. As an organisation grows and develops its consciousness does too (or is at least supposed to.) I am often in a position whereby I have to ask business to give money to the less fortunate. This takes many forms but in the end comes down to the same thing - siphoning money from their bottom line to give to the community. Now I know that the narrow-minded corporate argued that they were already giving back in terms of taxes but that was only because they had to. But with public and governmental pressure eventually prevailing, companies in the public radar screen were called on to give more and to be able to report positively to their stakeholders on areas such as ethics, not harming the environment and contributions to charities. First this was called Social Corporate Responsibility – a term I rather liked because it suggested that businesses had a responsibility to RESPONSIBLY respond to social deprivation and thus give back and make good to the communities from which they are benefitting.

But step forward Dr. Spin. Because the same PR and Marketing executives who embraced the phrase CSR are now helping to re-brand it as CSI – Corporate Social Investment. Don't you just love this?. It so smacks of 'if I give P1 I expect P2 back!' Doesn't it just suck? Isn't it just so patronising? If I'm giving the impression that I'm anti the investment word I am but only in its cynical, corporate 'what's in it for me?' sense because the real meaning within the context of social partnership is actually well and good. From the United Nations Millennium Development Goals which advocated self-sufficient economies, environmental compliance and care and socially-conscious companies, the term Corporate Social Investment (CSI) was coined. What this basically means or was intended to mean was that instead of economies and companies throwing money at problems (in the case of economies in the form of endless aid to underdeveloped countries and in the case of corporates giving endless donations to charity, in both instances never seeing the benefit or the return on investment), they would be challenged to help individuals and countries to help themselves.

In other words, instead of throwing money in their direction and walking away, rather addressing the underlying issues and assessing what was required to help needy countries, communities and environments become more empowered and thus become more self-reliant, eventually standing independently, capable of tackling their own issues and problems. The maxim 'give a man a fish and feed him for a day, teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime' sums up CSI perfectly.

Sadly the responsibility for CSI rests in the hands of a few corporates really making a difference whilst most do nothing. What is very frustrating is when companies miss the point completely. Take the example of the upcoming musical *Bye Bye Birdie* in which I am involved. We have been trying like crazy to persuade companies to help by paying for young theatre lovers and musicians – who cannot afford normally to attend such activities and who have not been exposed to typical western stage musicals - to come and see the production. With plans for a national theatre in the early stages of development it is critical that we grow a group of want-to-be actors, musicians and performers NOW, otherwise who will we put on our national stage? Regardless of the sheer enjoyment and development young aspiring performers get from seeing shows of the magnitude of the likes of *Bye Bye Birdie* I still get large Corporate's who say – what do we get out of sponsorship? How will that affect the bottom line?

So the letters may have been changed from CSR to CSI but if there is no corresponding change in the mind the move is little more than an exercise in *symanctics*. And 'serendipity' becomes a mere anagram of 'ye tired spin'!

