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The best thing that ever happened to me

Simon Guerrand, the founder of the Guerrand Hermes Foundation for Peace, explains why a car accident in which he was nearly killed was the best thing that ever happened to him ...

It was one of the most important experiences of my Subud life. It happened on Friday the 13th, October 1992, both a bad and a very good day for me.

In the days before the accident occurred, It was as if I had an intimation that something dramatic or life-threatening was going to happen to me. I put my affairs in order, almost, as if preparing to die.

I was living in New York at the time, but Studying in the Divinity School at Harvard, doing a Masters in Theological Studies, and I had been invited to the 165th anniversary of the church at Harvard.

So I decided to drive from New York to Harvard stopping off at a place I owned in Connecticut to stay overnight. But on the way I decided that it was ridiculous to try and stay there.

I passed the exit I would have taken to go to my Connecticut house. I was travelling pretty fast and someone was trying to overtake me. It is a two-lane highway at that point, and suddenly I saw in front of me a car coming the wrong way.

I thought about turning to the right and for some reason – don't ask me why? – I turned off the radio which was carrying a debate at the time between two candidates for Vice-president of the USA.

I debated which way to turn, but neither seemed that it would save me, and there was only one thing to do which was to go straight ahead. I put on the brakes but hit the other car and there was an enormous crash.

Damned Lucky!

I got out of the car, I certainly didn't feel very well, I sat on a little fence by the side of the road, A man came up to me and said, "You are damned lucky to be alive."

And I said, "Yes, but do you want to be my witness?"



Simon Guerrand with Alina Woodhouse (left) and Emilie Pez, teachers at BCU School in Central Kalimantan. (Photo by Elias Dumit)



And he said, "What do you mean will I be your witness? When you have an idiot who comes at you on the wrong side of the road, do you need a witness?"

He continued, "I have done two things. I called the police, they should be here in about seven minutes, and I've called the hospital in Waterbury, I hope you don't mind. Bye Bye."

By that time the shock was wearing off, and I was beginning to feel it was going to be difficult to walk. But my biggest problem was that I insisted when the police arrived, that I should take my briefcase from my car. It had everything I needed in it including my passport and my keys.

The police insisted that nothing should be removed from the car, but I said, "What is going to happen to my car? I am going to hospital. I need my briefcase."

And finally they agreed that I could have my briefcase. That was the greatest negotiating I ever did in my life.

I didn't go and look at the other car but got the impression that an old man was the driver. Then I was taken by ambulance to the hospital. I arrived at the hospital and was taken directly to a series of examinations.

Then a woman approached me and asked, "Were you involved in an accident?"

And I said, "Yes, was it an older man driving?"

And she said, "Yes, that was my husband. He is 75 years old."

That's all she said, there was no other remark. No sorry or anything like that. She told me that he was in a coma, but still alive. No apology, no expression of concern, no 'how are you?', no nothing.

Anyway I had a problem with my heart, so I was taken through one machine, and then another machine, and then they wanted to take me to intensive care.

I saw the lady again with another lady, her daughter. She said to me, "I am very sad."

I asked, "Why are you sad?"

She replied, "Tomorrow my husband was going for an eye operation at 10 a.m."

She had told me before that there was some problem with him, that "sometimes he was not all together"

which I took to mean that he was senile.

She went on and on about how sad she was that he was supposed to have his eye operation tomorrow.

I was incensed because there was no sensitivity to the fact that he had driven on the wrong side of the road and almost killed me. No sense that this man had been so irresponsible to drive in the evening when he was having an eye operation the next day. My mind was going mad. There was no word from her like, "Wasn't that awful?" Nothing. No acknowledgement.

What are you concerned about?

Then something incredible came to me, like a voice which said, "What are you complaining about? You are damned lucky to be alive!" And there was an immediate transformation. I realised I was "damned lucky to be alive". Forget about the woman who couldn't say sorry. It was a miracle I was alive.

And from that moment on, I was on a high, a complete transformation. I had recognised there was a purpose to all this. Whatever happened to me, the only thing that mattered was that I was alive. To have survived a situation where two cars collided like that is a miracle. The car was a complete wreck, it didn't exist anymore.

People came to visit me in hospital, both Subud members and the man who was my professor and head of the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Harvard.

I should have been broken in every part of my body but the only part of me that was broken was my ribs from the impact of my chest with the steering wheel. It was quite painful, I couldn't laugh, I couldn't get up from my bed. I had pain in my right ankle which had been twisted, but short of that, I was OK. I started to feel that there was something truly extraordinary in the fact that I was still on earth.

After a week the hospital was telling me that there was nothing more they could do for me. "Your bones will have to heal on their own and it will take six weeks to 3 months. So basically you have to go home." I couldn't walk, I couldn't move but I had to go home.

Fortunately, some Subud friends referred me to somebody who was prepared to care for me.

So I found a wonderful man, a Subud brother called Jack Sterling who looked after me extremely well, and was also somebody I could talk to.

You said you would do this, and you haven't done it. Don't you think it is high time to get on with it?

Of all the things I wanted to do in my life, I had always said since I was very young, that one day I must have a Foundation. And finally it became very clear that the message I had been given in this accident was, "You said you would do this, and you haven't done it. Don't you think it is high time to get on with it?"

I stayed at my house in the country with Jack. I could hardly walk, I had to be pushed everywhere, I couldn't laugh. It took quite a long time for the bones to mend. Going to bed was very difficult. Jack had to hold my hands and I had to lower myself so slowly onto the bed, and once I was in bed I could not move from one side to the other. And all the while this process was going on, this inner prompting about the Foundation

The World Had Another Look

Each day I felt so happy to be alive. It was like the world had another look. Flowers were beautiful. The house was marvellous. Before I had taken everything for granted. Now I was finally thanking God for creating such a beautiful world.

The only thing that was very difficult was that I had no focus. If I was looking at TV, after 30 minutes I couldn't take it anymore. Two minutes of reading was the most I could do. It took me two months to get back to a normal way of being able to concentrate on one thing for an hour.

Eventually I went back to Harvard. I started to take classes again, I had to do my exams. All the while Jack helped me to understand that all my life I had been phenomenally privileged.

When I was young and started working, I didn't have much money, but after that I did, more than enough, much more than normal. I realized, "Yes I am very lucky that every day I can decide to do this or that. I'm very free, I don't have to go to a job 9 to 5. I can take a holiday when I feel like taking a holiday. I don't have to think twice about these things. I don't have to count my pennies."

The accident showed me that I had to do what I had promised to do. It showed me I was very privileged and should be thankful all the time. It showed me that I had to do more with my resources than just to take care of myself.

That accident was the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't think anything else could have done it for me. It took that dramatic shock, that brush with death, to make me realize that I needed to change direction in life.

I changed my way of my life completely. I became more and more involved in my own businesses and less

in the family business. (Hermes, the French fashion accessories house). I began to really find myself and in 1996 with Sharif Horthy, I set up the Guerrand Hermes Foundation for Peace,

In future issues we intend to bring stories about the work of the Guerrand Hermes Foundation for Peace in areas including inter-religious understanding, human-centred education and sustainable livelihood. ◆

What is Subud?

It is likely that this issue of Subud Voice will reach many people who have not seen it before.



For the past 24 years, *Subud Voice* has been a magazine only available to subscribers who have been members of the spiritual movement known as Subud.

Now, with this issue, the magazine becomes available to everyone, Subud members and the general public.

We are making it available to the world because we think that there are things in Subud which will be of interest to even those who are not Subud. These include enterprises, social welfare projects, cultural events and experiences all deriving from a spiritual perspective.

As Muhammad Subuh (1901-1987), the founder of Subud once remarked "Subud has every kind of thing in it".

Because there will probably be some new readers who are unfamiliar with Subud, it seems a good idea to provide a few words of explanation about the movement.

Subud is a spiritual movement which originated in Indonesia in the 1920s and spread to the West in 1957, first to England and then all around the world. ►



Bapak Muhammad Subuh, the founder of Subud, with his wife, Ibu Siti Sumari, and John Godolphin Bennett who supported the arrival of Subud in England in 1957 and its subsequent spread around the world