

Synchronicity: Cartography of Coincidence

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SUMMARY:

Carl Gustav Jung, Swiss psychiatrist, Freud's collaborator from whom he parted, is the author of the concept of synchronicity. It is defined as a coincidence of simultaneous facts, occurring without causal connection, but linked together through meaning. Synchronicity is different from simple synchronism because of this meaningful connection, offering those who experience it, new insights about their life. The concept of synchronicity assumes that the universe is governed by a principle of unity that C.G. Jung calls **the unus mundus**. Because of this unity, we are committed, through the unconscious, to a dialog with the universe that surrounds us. The unconscious provokes coincidences that reveal to us who we are and echoes our most intimate questions. Time, space, and consciousness are accomplices in the synchronicity event, giving us thus the strong impression that a greater Meaning than ourselves is calling us, indicating the path to follow, and enlightening us in our decisions. We have all experienced this sort of coincidences, inexplicable through simple chance. This article summarizes the theory of C.G. Jung about the phenomenon of synchronicity and its role on the psychic development and the awareness of Self.

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“Accomplishing one's Personal Legend is the sole and only obligation for humans. All is only a single thing. And when you want something, the entire Universe conspires to help you realize your desire”. The Alchemist from Paulo Coelho. *

“The chances in our life resemble us”. Camouflage from Elsa Triolet. *

Introduction

Questioning

The work of C.G. Jung resembles a dense and deep forest, where it is easy to get lost. This erudite psychoanalyst does not make it easy for the reader who has not done at least some classical studies. His writings, translated from German, are weighed down with historical references and Greek and Latin citations, which he often does not take the time to explain. Yet, we cannot deny the depth of a work that updates the existential questions of the quest for meaning and the relationship with the sacred. It is in fact remarkable that

it succeeds in the context of a modernity that since Darwin has been deprived from resorting to transcendence to explain the origin of life.

I was first intrigued by the peculiar idea that the coincidences in my life could be the bearer of a message addressed to me personally. However, it is mostly the epistemological postulates that such an idea implied, which fueled these reflections. The concept of synchronicity has in fact no meaning without a **unus mundus**, that is, a unified world such as it was conceived by our forbearers and with which we are constantly conversing in a very intimate manner.

Humans today are asking themselves the same questions as they have in ages past, but fewer people are content with scholastic answers and religious dogmas. Is the human existence only the fruit of improbable chances? Is the universe only an immensity without a soul? Is evolution's purpose solely to perpetuate species through natural selection? Do our individual lives carry of a momentum that links them to all the beings and the universe? Does all this serve a purpose? These are the many questions that preoccupy this study of synchronicity. It is now clear that any religious or mystical practice implies such a conception of the world and that it is its original essence.

A subjective phenomenon

The purpose of this article is not polemical. Its objective is simply to communicate several heuristic hypotheses that were useful in the course of these reflections while adopting the point of view of C.G. Jung who says that we are in route toward the discovery of our unconscious.

I ask the reader for some indulgence. When addressing the phenomenon of synchronicity, we have disembarked on an indefinite shore in a country engulfed in fog. It would be incongruous to address the phenomena connected to the unconscious such as synchronicity with the experimental method used in other scientific disciplines or in cognitive-behavioral psychology and neuropsychology. Synchronicity can only be studied by taking a phenomenological approach because nothing it represents can be reproduced in the laboratory. Any attempt to prove the facts according to classical protocols tends to discredit the concept of synchronicity rather than demonstrate its relevance. C. G. Jung learned this at his own expense in his statistical studies on the astrological correspondences.

The story of Gideon and King Midian

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the study of synchronicity is without interest. If, however, we attempt to prove things experimentally, we are following the hazardous steps of Gideon of the Aviezer clan, whose peculiar saga is told in the Book of Judges in the Old Testament. The story of Gideon begins when the people of God were once more diverted from YHVH because they became corrupted by prevailing polytheism. Gideon was milling wheat when God told him that he was chosen to free his people from the yoke of King Midian. Gideon tried to avoid this heavy mission, thinking that he was too

young and came from a family that was not influential enough. Gideon also had some doubt as to the authenticity of his experience and he challenged God to prove his intentions by using what is probably the first application of the pre-experimental⁸ pre-test and post-test protocol in History: “If you want to save Israel by my hand as you said, I will lay down a wool fleece: if there is dew only on the fleece and the ground remains dry, I will know that you want to save Israel by my hand, as you said”. And that is what happened. When Gideon rose the next day, he squeezed the fleece and collected the dew, a cupful of water. Gideon said to God: “Do not be angry with me if I speak once more. Allow me one more test of the fleece: This time, make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew”. That night, God did so: only the fleece remained dry and dew covered the ground”. (Judges 6, 7).

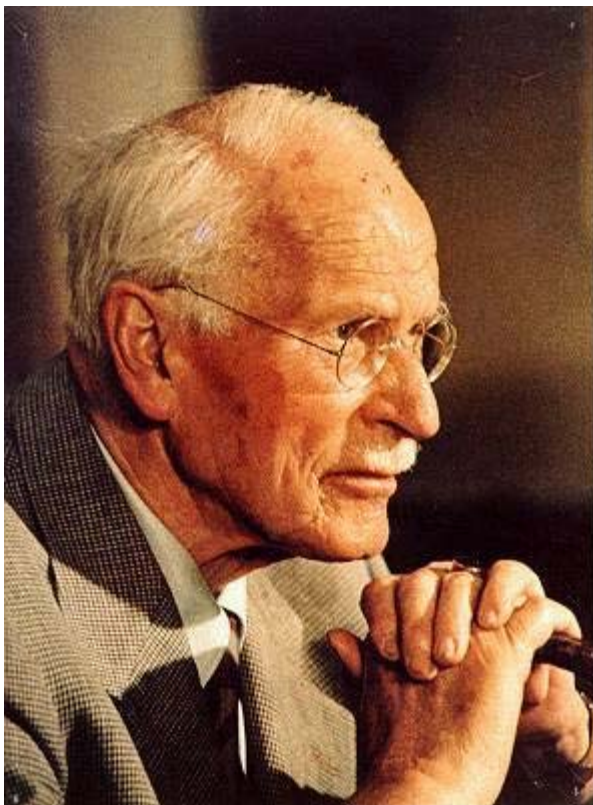
An analogical rather than an analytical approach

If Gideon had published the results of this experiment in a scientific journal, he would have been criticized for not using a negative control to demonstrate his thesis and for the weakness of its validity. Scientists around the world would have laid wool fleece on the ground without achieving the same results. Since the results are not reproducible, the article would have been thrown into oblivion and its young author would have been ridiculed without hope of obtaining any research grants for the rest of his career.

However, it is by leaning on this experience of synchronicity that Gideon found the strength to mobilize his people to lead them toward an improbable victory over Midian and his army. He embodied the hero that his collectivity was hoping for and thus became its savior. In summary, he lived a synchronicity experience, which put him in connection with the collective unconscious of his people. He embodied the archetype of the prophet- hero that they hoped for, not only for their political freedom but also for their reconciliation with the Absolute.

A few words about Carl Gustav Jung

Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist who was born on July 26, 1875 in Kesswil, Thurgau. He was one of Freud's principal collaborators before parting from him because of theoretical divergences. Jung believed that Freud gave a too restrictive meaning to the notion of libido, which, contrary to Freud, he considered a force whose influence went well beyond the sexual sphere.



His prodigious ability to collect and synthesize information from diverse sources led him to be interested in anthropology, alchemy, dreams, mythology and religion, and to bring a new perspective to these domains, especially through his work on what he called the collective unconscious. An influent thinker, he was the author of many books in German and many have now been translated into French and English. The work of C.G. Jung is still very current but it is inadequately known by the general public. This may be a good thing since Freud's ideas were quickly popularized and were as quickly vehemently dismissed.

C.G. Jung died on June 6, 1961. To a journalist who was interviewing him shortly before his death and who was asking if he believed in God, C.G. Jung replied laconically: "I do not believe, I know...".

His student and collaborator, Marie Louise von Franz, has remarkably continued his work by clarifying and developing some fundamental elements of the work of the master.

The scientific context of the theory of synchronicity

Synchronicity and theory of relativity

In 1905, Einstein formulated the theory of relativity, which was an attempt to explain the invariance of natural laws compared to spatial and temporal referential changes. The theory of relativity would dramatically change the Newtonian conception of the world and it would also inspire C.G. Jung in developing the concept of **synchronicity** in collaboration with his friend Wolfgang Pauli, the Physics Nobel Laureate of 1945. He admitted thinking about it for thirty years before deciding to make it public. It seems that he had this idea after a discussion with Albert Einstein around 1920: "Einstein was the first to give me the idea of a possible relativity of time and space that could be determined by the psyche."¹

C.G. Jung defined synchronicity as follow:

"I therefore use here the general concept of synchronicity in the particular sense of temporal coincidence of two or more events without causal connection and having an identical or analogous meaning; as opposed to "synchronism", which only means the simple simultaneity of events."²

He was then very much aware that synchronicity represented a nebulous theory that was even ridiculous for some scientists. He therefore tried to find as many references as possible to support his thesis by drawing on his encyclopedic knowledge and erudition on Antiquity and primitive civilizations. He had done so previously in a more complete manner and with more success for his theory about the collective unconscious³:

“The problem of synchronicity has been preoccupying me seriously for a long time now, more precisely since the mid-nineteen-twenties, when while studying the phenomena of the collective unconscious, I continuously found connections- series or grouped terms- that I was no longer able to explain by chance. They were in fact “coincidences” whose occurrence presented such a “meaningful” character that in their cases, the improbability of chance could only be explained by an extremely large number.”⁴

C.G. Jung was also interested in telepathic phenomena, which are difficult to attribute to statistical chance alone. He thus inferred that if a telepathic impression can be received by a person many miles away from the transmitter, it cannot be considered an emission involving a localized energy since its dispersion in space and the distance it would have to travel to get to the target would reduce its action. He thought that this type of coincidences in the thought of many people can only be explained by a collective unconscious allowing the transmission of this information. His reflection brought him to widen his own conception of the unconscious as a unified field of consciousness that could, under some conditions, model or determine the events. The remarks of Lao-Tzu, to which he often referred, seemed to echo him: “The Tao does not act and yet, through it everything happens spontaneously”.⁵

Archetypes and collective unconscious

For C.G. Jung, synchronicity events are provoked by what he calls archetypes, which are present in the collective unconscious. Jean-François Vézina, a Jungian psychoanalyst, described the collective unconscious and the archetypes this way:

“Jung elaborated the concept of synchronicity from the notion of collective unconscious which is roughly designated as a **matrix field of possibilities**⁶ inherited from the slow history of experiences of the human race. It is a field that would exert its influence in the same manner as gravity but whose influence would be out of time and space. Via its “attractors”, meaning the archetypes, this field would attract our perceptions and our emotions, and would encourage us to mobilize in some directions. (...) In this matrix field of possibilities, which is the collective unconscious, the archetypes are a little like knots, black holes or attractors connected to the repetition of collective experiences. We do not directly perceive these knots, as we cannot directly perceive black holes. It is therefore impossible to clearly perceive an archetype. Taking a picture of a black hole is not possible either. It is possible to find a black hole in space by observing the modified light in its vicinity. We notice a complex or an archetype in the same way, meaning when the affective light is disturbed.”⁷

We will examine later the conditions that are suitable for synchronicity events and what allows their distinction from simple coincidence or from synchronism. For now, let us note that the affective disturbance is a sign of the mutagenic presence of an archetype during our life and that it is generator of synchronicities.

Events connected by meaning

Synchronicity and causality: two incompatible notions

Our conception of natural laws is based on the principle of **causality**. This principle rests on **statistical probability**⁸. Causality allows the description of reproducible events. However, according to C.G. Jung, its disadvantage is that it does not take into consideration rare or unique events: “(...) it is at least necessary to constantly keep in mind that natural laws only have a statistical value and that statistics cause all rare phenomena to be eliminated.”⁹

The limits of determinism

C.G. Jung was not satisfied with some philosophers' attempts to explain the occurrence of significant coincidences in our daily life. He cited the model of the philosopher Schopenhauer as an example of the type of linear reasoning from which he dissociated himself. Schopenhauer explained the occurrence of significant coincidences by the determinant consequence of an alpha point, a sort of unique cause, which would give rise to innumerable associative chains of causes and effects up until today. From this determinant initial point, the succession of events would join laterally in a regular succession, similar to meridians radiating from a pole, whereas the parallels would establish a relation of simultaneity by provoking at the various points of junction, what we call coincidences. We could also use the example of billiard balls clinking together after the first hit of the cue by provoking infinite interlinked trajectories which would all be predetermined from the beginning by the will of a single player.

This model is a worthy attempt to explain the significant coincidences in the destiny of an individual, but it rests on the postulate that a unique and primary cause has created the providential coincidence relationships that regularly and successively appear without the help of individual free will. However, eliminating the recourse to a unique and primary cause does not resolve alone, the problem of spontaneous occurrence of the coincidental meaning. In negating a primary cause, Buddhism stumbles upon the same paradox by having recourse to the principle of causality to explain the hazards of karma and successive reincarnations. How in fact can we reconcile the causality of reincarnations while refuting the existence of an integrating Self surviving between two lives?...

Simultaneity and similarity of meaning

C.G. Jung believed that rare events were perceived as curiosities, chances, because they are not the object of a **consensus** on what we **believe** to be real. We reject them as being information without value because they cannot be inscribed in our causal conception of reality. This is why the study of synchronistic coincidences requires the formulation of the principle of **similarity of meaning**, which acts as a “transverse link” between parallel events. To the notion of causality, of the causal link of association of events, C.G. Jung opposes the notion of **transverse link of the order of meaning**: “The principle of synchronicity states that the terms of a significant coincidence or the order of meaning are linked by simultaneity and by meaning.”¹⁰

To the notion of causal determinism, C.G Jung opposed the notion of relativity of time and space placed under the will of the psyche:

“If science has arrived to conclusions leaning toward a unified conception of being including on the one hand the aspects of space and time and on the other hand, of those of causality and synchronicity, this has nothing to do with materialism. **It seems instead that we are discovering here the possibility of eliminating the radical heterogeneity of the observer and the object being observed. If this was the case, the result would be a unity of being that could only be explained by using a new conceptual language** (...) Space, time and causality: by the adjunction of synchronicity, this constitutive triad of the image of the world given by classical physics would be completed to give a tetrad, meaning a quaternary making possible a **holistic** judgments.”¹¹

C.G. Jung illustrates this “quaternary” in the following way:

INDESTRUCTIBLE ENERGY

**CONSTANT RELATION
BY PRODUCTION OF EFFECTS
(causality)**

**NON CONSTANT
RELATION BY
CONTINGENCY OR
MEANING (synchronicity)**

SPACE TIME CONTINUUM

The unus mundus: principle of unity of reality.

The Jungian psychoanalyst François Vézina comments on the epistemological implications of the unus mundus: “synchronicity implies an important change in our conception of the world. It suggests the idea that we are living in a world where everything is connected and further, a world where the events can be connected by meaning, which is a grouping principle without a cause.”¹²

C.G. Jung drew from Chinese Taoism thought to try to explain this unity of the world, influenced in this choice by his friend Richard Wilhelm, author of the wonderful translation of the I-Ching, an immemorial Chinese oracle, whose publication in the West was made possible thanks to many providential synchronicities.

According to Wilhelm, things and living beings are all permeated by a sort of rationality that Taoists call the Tao and that he translates by the word Meaning. C.G Jung used the expression “psychoid aspect”¹³ of things and objects to indicate that he also thought that all that exist is permeated with what he called the Universal Principle. He wrote: “this is the basis of the idea of significant coincidence (synchronicity): it is possible because the same meaning belongs in particular to two instances. Where meaning prevails, there is order”¹⁴.

As in the Taoist conception, C.G. Jung described humanity as a microcosm and the universe as the macrocosm. Both form a Whole and this Whole is the Meaning or Tao. When humans listen to the Meaning, when they are humans of desire, attentive and interested, then circumstances mysteriously occur in their life and give them a sign.

The Lost Meaning

C.G. Jung considered that Eastern scientific thought had lost this unified model of the world ever since the eighteenth century:

“With the development of natural science in the nineteenth century, the **correspondentia** has disappeared, and the magical universe of foregone times seemed to have been completely engulfed (...).”¹⁵

The words of Hippocrates are a reflection of this conception of the world that has become out-of-fashion. This world can be found today in the practice of “alternative medicine” in a strangely modern mode: “A sole influx, a sole breath reunites everything, tests everything as a whole. Everything is related to the totality (...) nature is one, being and non-being.”¹⁶

This unified conception of the universe was brought to us from Antiquity through Alchemy, subject that C.G. Jung was very much interested in. He cited Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola:

“First, there is within things this unity which makes each unique to its own, and comprises within its consistency and its coherence. Secondly, there is this unity through which a creature is united to another, and therefore, **all the parts of the world constitute a unique world**. The third and most important is that by which **the entire universe is one with its creator**, as an army with its chief.”¹⁷

And when Agrippa talked about the “**spiritus mundi**” or the “**quinta essential**,” as did the alchemists of the Middle Ages, C.G. Jung saw synonyms of the unconscious. Synchronicity, according to C.G. Jung, presupposes a meaning anterior to human consciousness, which transcends it. Through synchronistic coincidence, an event echoing our intimate thoughts can occur, objective facts seem to unite to subjective information, time and space become allies, giving us the striking impression that a Meaning greater than our Self is calling us, indicating the road to follow and helping us make choices suitable for our development. Synchronicity thus proposes to us new, unsuspected, and liberating outcomes.

Distinguishing simple coincidence from synchronicity

Synchronicity is the manner in which the self reveals itself to us. Thus, it comes to free us from the grip of the rationality of self and brings us back to the way of the heart, the path of our individual development, if we know how to recognize the signs and if we have the courage to follow them. Synchronicity is the way the soul of the world guides us in

response to our unconscious. This type of event generally occurs when we are in a period of changes in our life, when the road does not seem clear to us or when we are facing an impasse. We are then in an emotional state whose intensity can lower the defenses of the self and activate what C.G. Jung called “the **efficient numinous forces**”¹⁸ of the archetypes in the unconscious.

Interest, curiosity, fear, and expectation are examples of emotional triggers susceptible to provoking synchronicity. This is often accompanied by a certain abdication of the self. (We say a “certain abdication” because we must always remain critical when faced with opportunities.) At that moment, the unconscious takes over and provokes an event that will connect through meaning to the current personal experience of the individual. This event can take the form of an unexpected meeting, a strange event or even a brief televised message or something else, that seems to be directed precisely to us.

In all cases, it is always the intuitive impression of being in the presence of something deeply meaningful, even a revelation, which prevails in the consciousness for a moment. The key resides here in the attention we wish to give to these signs before the rationality of the self takes over to cover them with the banality of chance. Being confronted with the fact that there is an order without a cause exists is always destabilizing for the self. According to C.G. Jung, “it is solely the inveterate belief in the power of causality that provokes problems of understanding and makes it seem unthinkable that events can occur without a cause.”¹⁹

Indications of synchronicity:²⁰

- **Acausality**, the link between events is made through meaning and cannot be explained otherwise.
- **Strong emotional impact**, giving the impression of being called by the unconscious.
- Corresponds to a transformation of the person; it brings answers and presents a **rich symbolic value**.
- It occurs when the person is in a situation of transitory choice, in between, or facing an impasse impossible to resolve solely by faculties of the self. **It proposes an outcome and reveals the path.**

Conclusion

C.G. Jung proposes an explanatory model of reality placing the human existence at the center of a dialog with the universe through synchronicities. He went even further by supposing that the factual reality is determined by the psyche of the person or that he or she is in harmony with it. Synchronicities punctuate what C.G. Jung calls the process of

individuation. The universe encourages this process because it is inscribed in the largest Meaning. “I understood that the purpose of psychic development is the Self.”²¹

He considered that the realization of the unconscious totality is the purpose of human existence. Does it mean that the purpose or Meaning is to be the conscious creator of our reality? This is what C.G. Jung inferred from an initiatory dream he recounted in his autobiography: (...) “I was traveling on a small road; I crossed a hilly area, the sun was shining and I had before my eyes an immense panoramic view. I then arrived near a small chapel on the side of the road. The door was ajar and I entered. To my great surprise, there was no statue of the Virgin, no crucifix on the altar, but simply a wonderful floral arrangement. Before the altar, on the floor, I saw facing me a yogi sitting in the lotus position, looking deeply reverential. Looking at him more closely, I saw that he had my face; I was stupefied and scared and I woke up thinking:

“Ah! How amazing! Here is the one who meditates on me. He has a dream and this dream is me.” I knew that once he wakes up, I will no longer exist. I had this dream after being sick in 1944. It is a parable: my Self enters meditation as a yogi, and meditates about my earthly form. We could also say: it takes human form to come into the three-dimensional existence, like someone donning a diver’s suit to jump into the ocean. Renouncing to the existence in the hereafter, the Self takes on a religious attitude, as shown also by the chapel in the dream; in its earthly form, he can experience the three-dimensional world and with an increased consciousness, progress toward his realization. (...) in the opinion of “the other side of the self” our unconscious existence is the real existence and our conscious world is a sort of illusion or an apparent reality fabricated for some purpose, like a dream, which also seems to be reality as long as we are in it”.²²

In our existential journey toward the realization of Self, C.G. Jung suggests that we remember the infinite whence we came from and to which we will return, in order to focus more freely on the essential.²³ Among this gathering of seekers of truth, everyone probably agrees with this statement!

Notes

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- (1) Jean-François Vézina, *Les hasards nécessaires, La synchronicité dans les rencontres qui nous transforment*, Les Éditions De L’Homme, p.32.
 - (2) C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity et Paracelsica*, Albin Michel, p.43, 34 (849).
 - (3) The unconscious is said to be collective when its psychic content is common to many individuals, a culture or a group of people, and not specific to an individual as is the case for the personal unconscious.
 - (4) C.G. Jung, *loc. cit.* p. 39, 28 (843)
 - (5) C.G. Jung, *Ibid.* p. 79, Lao-Tsu cited by C.G.Jung in the translation by his friend R. Wilhem.

- (6) The expression “matrix field of possibilities” suggests that reality is modeled by the collective unconscious, which has developed throughout human evolution and contains the sum of the possibilities, experienced up to the present.
- (7) Jean-François Vézina, *loc. cit.*, p.32-33.
- (8) Statistical probability represents the measure of randomness of an event taking into account of the number of chances that it occurs in a specific circumstance. Experimental research tries to understand, explain, and predict events, which is not always possible with synchronicity phenomena. C.G. Jung considers his approach as empirical but he dissociates himself from determinism on which the scientific method is based. The pre-experimental protocols lightheartedly mentioned in the introduction are different than experimental protocols because they allow the unequivocally establishment of a cause and effect relationship since many hypotheses could explain the observed change.
- (9) C.G. Jung, *loc.cit*, p. 76, 90 (905).
- (10) C.G. Jung, *Ibid.*, p. 78, 91(906).
- (11) C.G. Jung, *Ibid*, p.101-102, 135(950).
- (12) Jean-François Vézina, *loc. cit.* p. 103
- (13) We can see that for C.G. Jung, the universe is imbued with a Meaning, penetrating the living kingdom as well and the material objects. For this reason, he evokes the psychoid characteristic of the objects in the synchronicity phenomena.
- (14) C.G. Jung, *loc. cit.*, p. 81
- (15) C.G. Jung, *Ibid*, p. 90, 114 (929)
- (16) C.G. Jung, *Ibid*, p. 82, 99 (914).
- (17) C.G. Jung, *Ibid*, p.83, 102 (917).
- (18) C.G. Jung, *Ibid*, p 75, 87 (902). He describes the archetypes as effective forces because they move us to act without our knowledge.
- (19) C.G. Jung, *Ibid*, p. 107, 142 (957)
- (20) Jean-François Vézina, *loc. cit.*, p. 37-38. One should reiterate that not everything is synchronicity and that it is important to remain critical while keeping an open mind.
- (21) C.G. Jung, *Ma Vie, Souvenirs, Rêves et Pensées*, collection Témoins Gallimard, p.228-229.
- (22) C.G. Jung, *Ibid.*, p.368. C.G. Jung gives us here his spiritual conception of human existence. It is the wisdom of those who have reached the pinnacle of their lives.
- (23) C.G. Jung, *Ibid.*, p.369.

Bibliography

Note: The mandala on the front page was created Mrs. Lyne Guay for the presentation of this text at a public conference held in March 2007 at the Manor of the Rose in Stoneham, Québec, Canada.

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