

APPETIZER

Chili pepper, absolutely.

Chocolate, most definitely.

But together?

You wouldn't think so, but try it. A dash of cayenne on a dark chocolate truffle . . . ambrosia.

Sometimes things that seem opposites actually belong together.

Take Karma and Jesus . . .

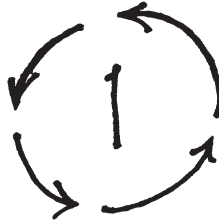
I know. How can these two words stand with integrity in the title on the cover of the same book? It's counter-intuitive, I agree.

I've heard reactions and ridicule from both sides. Those who adhere to the philosophy of Karma see the name *Jesus* attached and roll their eyes. "Another attempt to hobble this clean and clear truth with an arcane religion. No thanks."

From across the abyss, loyal followers of Jesus boil over at the suggestion that their master's simple message and pure life could be so contaminated. I've heard them mutter under their breath the dreaded *H* word—"Heresy!"

Well, chili aficionados and chocolate connoisseurs, Karma adherents and Jesus followers, unite. Let me here suggest a recipe, surprising as it is simple, that compromises neither Karma nor Jesus and in fact enhances our understanding of them both.

Taste and see . . .



KARMA-ISH

“Do things happen for a reason?”

The question stopped me mid-sentence. I had been speaking to a full room, and for the first ten minutes all eyes had been on me. Suddenly every head turned toward the voice.

I shot a glance in the same direction. *Great, a heckler, I thought. I don't need this tonight.*

The man's wispy words hung in the air like a fog. Yet he had spoken clearly enough so that all 150 people present could hear him.

I stepped downstage, glanced at my shoes, then up again and instantly locked eyes with a young man in his early twenties seated seven rows back: my inquisitor.

“Do things happen for a reason?” he asked me again.

Sincere? Confused? Or worse? I studied him and weighed my options. Typically, people listen quietly when I speak publicly, often too quietly—I live in St. Paul and our crowds

are “Minnesota nice.” If they have questions, they come up after the event and we talk one-on-one. This guy didn’t know the rules of engagement.

After a swig from my water bottle, I cleared my throat and started searching for a way to segue back to my talk. “Sure . . .” I conceded. “If you mean is there a reason for our lives. Yeah, I believe there’s a reason, a big story. I believe God is the storyteller and we’re the characters.” *Smug, perhaps, but justified*, I told myself. I panned my notes for a good reentry point before he could call me out for ducking his question with a cliché.

Even as I began speaking again, his question swam like Muzak in the elevator shafts of my brain. *Do things happen for a reason?* He’d hit a nerve.

Of course things happen for a reason. My fingers were still tingling *because* that afternoon I had been outside without warm gloves. Warm gloves mattered *because* the wind-chill that Saturday in February had fallen to 25 degrees below zero. I’d been outside *because* my car battery had died and I needed a jump. My battery had died *because* I’d forgotten to turn off my headlights. I’d forgotten to turn off my headlights *because* . . . *Because* makes way for an explanation—a “why”—a reason.

I’d played this discovery game all my life, since I first stuck green peas up my nose to see if they’d come out my ear and dropped salamanders into jars of scalding water and flushed toothbrushes down the toilet just to see what would happen.

Most of us gain common sense through childish experimentation. It all began in our first weeks on the planet,

when we found that our hands could move as we told them to move. Eventually we could reach and touch and grab and gnaw the fur off a teddy bear. We learned that crashing our head against the side of the crib hurt (we stopped that) and that our screams could muster a response from big soft arms that would bring us comfort (so we did more of that). We learned cause and effect, and we've never stopped learning and turning our knowledge, whenever possible, to our advantage.

Whenever possible. Sometimes learning a cause behind an effect can't bring any advantage. It just brings bad news, period. I'd discovered this the hard way a few days earlier.

My sister's phone call that Tuesday morning woke me early. My father was unconscious and on his way in an ambulance to the hospital. He'd awakened before sunrise with a piercing headache, said a few stumbling words to my mother, and then quickly and quietly fell into a coma.

Forty minutes after I heard the news, I stood awkwardly beside my father's bed in the critical care unit of United Hospital, trying to sort out what it meant, what it would mean, and why it had happened. Things happen for a reason, don't they?

The immediate reason showed plainly on the X-rays. A blood vessel in the right hemisphere had ruptured, flooding my father's brain tissue. The attending physician spoke kindly but plainly. "This kind of hemorrhage usually leads to a loss of quality of life. Treatment options are limited by Howard's other health concerns. Taking him off the blood thinner prescribed for his heart would help slow the hemorrhage but raise the risk of a heart attack."

"Did the blood thinner cause the hemorrhage?" my sister DeAnn asked directly.

The doctor studied her clipboard, then looked up and spoke eye to eye with DeAnn. “We never say ‘cause’ in a case like this. His condition came from a complicated inter-relationship of conditions and events, which no one can piece together in a perfect fixed order. Small hemorrhages for someone Howard’s age are common. And he needed the blood thinner as a hedge against heart disease. . . . And I’m sure the cardiologist explained the potential side effects . . . one of which is . . . complicating this kind of stroke. So we’re always playing one danger off another. There is no one cause for an injury like this.” She seemed resigned to ambiguity. I was not, and my heckler’s question rubbed raw this wound of confusion.

Then just as I was regaining my rhetorical groove, he struck again.

“Does God forgive?” he asked.

The audience laughed. I smiled. The young man seemed earnest. A wave of confidence and relief flooded me. This felt like home-field advantage. I could deal with this question. I looked him in the eye again and began. “Well, I believe God forgives. That is foundational to our faith. I have experienced it. I think a lot of people around you here tonight would say they’ve experienced God’s forgiveness.” He nodded but didn’t seem fully satisfied.

I moved on. A few minutes later he fired off another round. “Doesn’t the Sublime One, the Buddha, suggest that there are many paths toward God?”

No laughter this time; I could see people squirming. A murmuring wave rolled across the room. “Sure,” I said, without seeing exactly where I should head. “Many paths *toward* God, but only one leads *to* God.” I looked around to see how my wordplay had impressed the spectators.

Evidently they weren't as awed as I had been myself. I shrugged, stepped back behind the podium, and continued my agenda.

Finally, at a particularly salient moment toward the end of my talk, the young man pulled out his trump card. "Why did Jesus die?"

I looked at him for the time it takes to pull in two or three deep breaths. *God help me*, I thought. "These are good questions, good in a place like this," I acknowledged, as much to the audience as to the young man. "But this probably isn't the best context for our personal conversation. Come up afterward and we can talk."

I finished, and the room emptied out, except for a few stragglers who hung in the wings hoping to eavesdrop on the pending encounter. To my surprise, the young man took the offer, walked toward me, introduced himself as Andrew, and sat in the front row. I sorted my papers, quickly greeted a few people, then pulled a chair around and sat facing him.

Andrew began his story. He'd grown up attending a Christian church. In high school he started using drugs. The drugs became an addiction. He eventually found freedom in a rehab program anchored in some form of New Age philosophy. His mother had brought him to hear me speak that evening, hoping he might reconnect with his spiritual roots.

Andrew talked freely. I listened, groping for some common language we could use to truly communicate.

"Just bad Karma, I guess—" Andrew added near the end of a thought I hadn't completely followed.

"What's that?" I cut in.

“Bad Karma,” he said. “The stuff that happened to me must have been bad Karma.”

“You believe in Karma?”

He looked quizzically at me. “Of course.”

Karma. I sifted my memory bank for a quick cross-reference. And who should come to mind? Not Buddha meditating under a lotus tree, or Krishna lecturing Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, or Gandhi spinning yarn for his cotton smocks, or George Harrison holding a fistful of daisies, or Eckhart Tolle living in the “now,” or the Dalai Lama smiling passively. No, when I first thought of *Karma*, Earl came to mind. Ah, the power of pop culture!

I don’t watch much television, but when boredom overwhelmed me one Thursday night, I started flipping channels. The Twins baseball game was rained out, so I landed on a rerun of NBC’s *My Name Is Earl* and laughed my way through an hour of Karmic evangelism. Backstory: Earl Hickey wins \$100,000 on a scratch-off lottery ticket and dances in the street to celebrate. Then *wham!* Three seconds later he’s sprawled on the pavement with tire tracks across his back and his ticket sailing off in the wind.

While recovering in the hospital, Earl reflects on his misery: a wife who cheated on him, money problems, dead-end jobs that usually ended with Earl punching his boss.

Then late one night Earl hears country singer Trace Adkins on Carson Daly’s television show explain his philosophy. Adkins says he believes in Karma: that good comes when we do good; bad comes when we do bad. We can determine what happens in our lives by directing our choices. Adkins calls it “simple cause and effect: You get back whatever you give out.”

This proves to be an Aha! moment for Earl. He compares Trace Adkins' life of fame, wealth, and the companionship of beautiful women with his trailer-court-trash world of petty crime and perpetual turmoil. Then and there Earl converts. He becomes a devotee to the law of Karma.

Earl acts on his convictions. He grabs a notepad and pen and begins to list all the nasty things he's ever done: stealing a car from a one-legged girl right after telling her he loved her, holding a garage sale while house-sitting for neighbors, peeing in the back of a cop car, fixing a high school football game . . .

Earl then sets out to redeem himself and repair his Karma. His strategy: Do a good deed to counter every bad one. It seems to work. The very day Earl starts his "new life," he finds his lost lottery ticket!

What happened as Earl worked his list provided a stream of ingenious story lines for the quirky, sometimes profound, comedy. The show also served up a primer of the pop version of Karma touted by the likes of Oprah, Marianne Williamson, Gary Zukav, Deepak Chopra, and Rhonda Byrne. Byrne's wildly popular book *The Secret* renames Karma "the law of attraction," calling it the singular most important principle in the world. This brand of Karma-lite comes complete with a side dish of American optimism, a faddish method to cowboy your way to success, and a promise that you can create your own destiny.

I looked at Andrew and tried to picture him playing Earl. I wondered too if he'd ever considered the darker side of his proposition or experienced the deep sadness—even despair—that sometimes emanates from the doctrine of Karma as it's expressed in the ancient religions of the East.

"So what does Karma mean to you?" I asked.

“Do good, good comes back,” he said. “Screw up, trouble comes back.”

“Does it work?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I stole stuff to support my habit; I landed in court. I quit using; I landed a job. I started speaking with kindness; I have friends. I give away things; I get what I need. What goes around comes around. Things happen for a reason, and it seems like Karma runs the world.”

“And by controlling Karma you control your own part of the world,” I suggested.

Andrew shrugged but didn’t respond.

I sat back and stared at the ceiling for a moment. I had to admit, Andrew’s—and Earl’s—shorthand version of the ancient, very intricate philosophy of Karma seemed to make simple, intuitive sense. I schedule my days, eat meals, save and spend money, and communicate with friends and family, assuming that outcomes flow predictably from my actions. I teach my children that good deeds pay for themselves. I’ve even caught myself imagining that the pint of blood I donate will buy me an extra day tacked on to the end of my life. At a gut level, I presume the universe will pay dividends on my investments and levy excise taxes on my conspicuous consumption. Was it coincidence when I cut in front of a senior citizen on the turnpike and five miles later blew a head gasket?

A list of Karma-ish proverbs I’ve used in everyday conversations rattled up to the surface of my mind:

- “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.”
- “What goes around comes around.”

- “We reap what we sow.”
- “Waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Did I buy this? I may have forgotten most of the algebra I learned in school, but I still feel dissonance when two sides of my equations don't balance. When life flows too easily, I get suspicious and uneasy, half expecting trouble to follow. When things turn inexplicably miserable, I complain to the heavens for a reprieve, or at least a reasonable explanation: “Tell me what caused my father's stroke.”

Perhaps this innate human passion for fairness and reason, as well as causes matching effects, makes Karma one of the oldest and easiest ideas in the world to believe, and why through its many and sometimes impossibly sophisticated forms it has popped up so many times throughout human history.

I looked at Andrew and saw in him an American digest of three thousand years of human speculation about how the world works.

“Is it that simple—Karma runs the world?” I asked.

“You have a better theory?” Andrew folded his arms and leaned back in the chair.

“Maybe I could agree if I could actually control life perfectly with my choices, as you say. Then it might be the best news ever. But Karma seems like physics done in space—great in theory, but then gravity sets in.”

“It's working for me,” he said flatly.

“I can only speak for myself,” I said, thinking again of my father lying on a bed with tubes running in and out of his body. “Perfectly figuring out all the reasons for things seems hard enough, let alone trying to engineer those

reasons. In my experience it always seems easier to screw up than to make things work just right.”

He shrugged. “I can’t think that way. For the first time I’ve got hope that I can make something of myself.”

“A good life is a hard thing to hold together,” I said.

Andrew ran his fingers through his hair as if to fend off my skepticism. Then he leaned forward. “So, why did Jesus die?”