

Spiritual Awareness

by Todd Maupin

Amir was a ghost, and he was terrible at it. No one had taught him how to be a ghost. There was no orientation, no welcome packet, no handbook. Ghosts started in limbo with only a name, and nothing else. Upon his arrival, Amir realized that somehow he had become a ghost. At the time of that realization, all he knew was that his name was Amir and that he was a ghost.

Amir may not have even been his name in life, but Amir was definitely his name now. He just knew this and could not have explained how, but this was how it was for all ghosts. Names were comparable to a serial number stamped on the bottom of any electronic device. Death's mass-production ghost assembly line was in contrast to how the corresponding living being's time had ended. Similar to the birth of the living, only a very specific set of circumstances leading to a living creature's death could result in the ghost that this being would become. Being a ghost finally granted the complete and total equality that eluded the living. Ghosts all looked the same - as much as they looked like anything - and all started with a clean and blank slate. There was no wealth, no privilege, no socioeconomic standing. Amir's death as a living being had been totally unique and never to be replicated, all resulting in a critical combination of factors that had created Amir, a distinct specimen of a ghost that was not better or worse than any other ghost.

Amir had a vague notion of life and death. He knew that he, if he even had been a "he," was alive once, and now he was not. When he comprehended the notion that he was a ghost, Amir may have been dead for a day, or a million years. He may once have been a farrier, a wombat, an insurance salesman, a gladiator, he may have once been a saber-toothed tiger, a leedsichthys, or even a Kardashian. And even if any other ghost had told him that he once was one of those

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things, Amir would not have understood what any of those things even were. To Amir's credit, the Kardashians are a difficult conceptualization.

Some ghosts seemed to have a purpose. Amir had no idea how long it had taken them to attain this self-security. Not even they knew. In limbo, the spectral plane, or whatever it was, time had no meaning, it did not even exist. How could it even matter when Amir did not know how long he had been alive and how long he had been dead? This did not even matter. He could remain motionless, float around, interact with other ghosts, or whatever else ghosts could do. Over the course of an eternity, he supposed that he could do all of those things. How could any of it matter, and could there be any matter if there was nothing tangible?

For an indeterminate period of time, Amir had just hovered in one spot and watched the other ghosts. Choosing one or a few to emulate was not a simple task. Part of the problem was that many of them also remained motionless and the more active ghosts appeared to be interacting with something that Amir could not see or perceive. Some made movements that appeared threatening, reassuring or just movements that were sudden. Others seemed to be caught in a loop, completing the same esoteric actions over and over.

One day, or night, year, or century, Amir decided he wanted to know what the others were doing. Having observed many other ghosts for ages, Amir had finally selected a ghost to approach. This did not go well.

This ghost was of the threatening movement variety and accordingly did not appreciate being interrupted.

“Hello, what are you doing?” Amir asked. Ghosts do not speak or vocalize, but communicate in some sort of telepathy that is innate to being a ghost. Amir did not know how he knew this, but he did.

“Leave me alone,” were the menacing thoughts that Amir received as a response.

Amir was determined to know more; he would not give up the ghost so soon. He had waited - well, he had waited a while for this. “I just want to understand what you are doing.”

“Go away. I have to concentrate to make them see me.”

“Who? I don't see anyone.” Amir was confused.

The other ghost turned towards Amir, as much as ghosts or anything without a face can turn. It completed a sudden threatening movement *through* Amir. This did not hurt, but it was disorienting. The ghost disappeared from Amir's view.

While largely a failure, the exchange had demonstrated something to Amir. The ghost was concentrating on making others unseen by Amir see him. Apparently, those threatening movements were meant for the object of that vision. Whoever that was.

Amir approached another ghost. This ghost was making sudden movements.

“What are you doing?”

“Shh. I am opening and closing cabinet doors.” This ghost's thoughts were more annoyed than angry.

“What are cabinet doors?” Amir had no idea.

“Every night, I open and close the cabinet doors until someone wakes up and comes down to the kitchen.” The other ghost explained, projecting boredom more than annoyance now.

“But what are cabinet doors?” Amir repeated.

The other ghost sighed and floated away, leaving Amir bewildered once again. He decided to try with one of the ghosts involved in reassuring movements.

“What are you doing?” He asked one of them.

“I am comforting this little boy who just lost his hamster,” this ghost explained. The tone of his thoughts was not sharp or irritated. It projected peace and comfort much like the reassuring actions in which the ghost was occupied.

“What are cabinet doors?” Amir asked, while also not knowing what a hamster or a boy was.

The ghost stopped. “Cabinet doors? What are you talking about?”

“Another ghost said he was busy opening and closing cabinet doors,” Amir explained, explaining something he did not understand. He was also trying to remember to ask about hamsters and boys next.

“Oh, that was one of the haunting ghosts. I do not do that,” the other ghost seemed suddenly sad. “There are some ghosts here who terrorize the living. They play jokes on them or the worst do terrible terrifying things to the living.”

Amir assumed that cabinet doors were alive. He would figure that out later. “Can the living see us? And how do we see them?” He asked instead.

“Oh, no one has told you anything, have they? This place,” these ghost thoughts could have been an eye roll. “It’s a good thing we’re here for eternity, as long as it takes to figure anything out.” The other ghost’s thoughts were sympathetic.

“How long have you been here?”

“I have always been here, just like you. There is no beginning, no end. I am Carlos.”

“I am Amir. How can you see the living?”

“It’s easy, Amir. All you have to do is concentrate. Anywhere you look, you’ll see them. Look there, for example and concentrate on seeing the living,” Carlos could not exactly point or gesture in any direction so the concept of “there” was not helpful.

Amir just chose a spot and looked at it intently. Boom. He saw the living and it was overwhelming. Everything that had ever lived, was currently living or would live flashed before Amir’s equivalent of ghost eyes. Amir was startled and floated back a few feet.

Carlos laughed. “Intense, right? Okay, now, try again, you have to train yourself. Just choose one living thing and focus on it. All of the rest will fade away, but they will come back if you let up on your concentration.”

Amir’s apprehension must have betrayed him in some thoughts that were relayed to Carlos, who continued, “Don’t worry, if you just blank your mind, they will all disappear. I warn you though, once you have seen the living, it is hard to unsee them. Try it, Amir.”

Amir concentrated and chose the first living thing in his line of sight. It was a man reading a book. The man suddenly grew excited

and called out to someone else. "I finally see it! I figured out how to see hidden image in this Magic Eye book. It's a horse!" The irony was lost on Amir, who let up on his concentration, all of the living disappeared and Amir was with Carlos again.

"Well?" Carlos asked.

"I saw a man reading a book. He seemed pleased with himself because he saw a horse," Amir reported, repeating terms he did not understand.

"That's very good, Amir. A very fine start. Now, see if you can find that same man again," Carlos suggested.

Amir nodded, sort of. It felt like a nod to Amir, at least, but this was probably lost on Carlos. For conviction, Amir added, "Okay."

Amir concentrated again. Visions of the living washed over him, but he concentrated more intensely until he localized the man with the book. Although this time the man did not have the book and he was not a man at all, but a child. However, Amir knew that he was the same person, just younger or older. Amir was not certain how age worked, if people became larger or smaller, and yet he knew this was a different version of the same person. Changed, yes, but not quite a horse of a different color even though the horse book was missing.

Anticipating the next task from Carlos, Amir concentrated again, and found the man even smaller, with less hair. Another shift in focus and Amir was able to locate the man larger and with less hair than he had the first time Amir had seen him with the book. Amir allowed everything to disappear and returned to Carlos.

“I found him, many times. He was bigger and smaller, with more fur on his head and then less fur, but with bigger ears,” Amir stated proudly.

“Excellent. You found older and younger versions of him. The living tend to get larger as they grow older. They are born small, they continue to expand and eventually they might become smaller again before they die,” Carlos explained.

Amir nodded again. This nodding was a stupid habit, he told himself. “What do I do now?” He asked.

“That, my friend, is up to you. Now that you know how to find the living, you can do whatever you want, watch whomever you want. You will find that a lot of humans just sit and watch a screen. They will watch something over and over again until it runs out. They call it binge watching. You can watch the living in this way, find a being you like and just continue watching them, or you can watch as many people as you want for however long you want. You do not even have to watch people at all, you can focus on any living thing: people, animals, plants. Whatever you want.”

“Cabinet doors?” Amir asked.

“Umm, not quite. But you can find living things interacting with cabinet doors if you want. Once you feel comfortable locating living things, you can interact with them. However, I warn you. If you try to affect a certain living thing too much, your ability to see and interact with other different living things will be affected,” Carlos thoughts were grave and foreboding.

“Is that why the haunting and terrorizing ghosts do what they do?” Amir asked.

“Yes, they have interacted too much with the same living things which has lessened their concentration. Seeing anyone else for them has become very difficult,” Carlos noted.

“Would their concentration come back if they did not interact with those same living things?” Amir wondered.

“Perhaps, but no one knows. The ghost who are in that position tend to take out their frustrations by focusing on the same living things who are the object and cause of the frustration. It is a sad and endless cycle, but this is eternity, I suppose,” Carlos reasoned.

Amir promised himself that he would not succumb to this temptation. He thanked Carlos and floated onward. He was excited about watching the living, and learning from them.

And he did. Amir spent his endless time following the living. He chose them in a method that would have been stream of consciousness, if he had possessed consciousness and could articulate having it. Amir would just zero in on a living thing that interested him and see what they did. Usually the object of his interest was people and as he practiced, he was able to observe also the objects and people of their interest. One person might lead him to another that was more or less interesting, and he would pursue that lead until he felt he had seen and learned all that he could. Then he would just clear his vision and start over much like an Etch-a-Sketch that he saw once and did not comprehend.

Amir's interest and focus on living things and objects was subject to the same spurts and fixations that occur with many small children. For eons that would equate to millions of years, Amir observed dinosaurs. He watched them evolve, dominate, go extinct and even observed their fossils being unearthed. For much briefer stretches, Amir was fascinated by people on trains or fire engines. Without even knowing what these contraptions were, he observed

them awestruck, in a way that an obsessed child would stare. Amir spent other swaths of time engrossed in watching small children. In a non-creepy way, if anything ghosts do could be considered anything but creepy.

While nowhere near as impressive to him as the massive dreadnoughts, Amir was pleased when he finally learned about cabinet doors, by accident. He had accompanied some humans to a building where they ate fancy meatballs, pushed carts around and walked through rooms which they admired. There seemed to be some prize or award at the end for those who solved the maze. People loaded their carts with nondescript boxes that they seemed certain they wanted. It was all perplexing to Amir. He did not understand why duplicate but different rooms that could belong to several houses were all together in one building. However, he learned that some of the shinier rooms had cabinet doors. Even knowing this, Amir still did not grasp why that cabinet doors ghost had flown off the handle at him for interrupting, or why he was so bent on opening and closing them, but at least he now knew what cabinet doors were.

As eternity progressed, Amir witnessed it all. Good and bad, car accidents, childbirth, torrential floods, flowers blooming, earthquakes, barn raisings, political conventions, alien abductions, marathons, murders, rescues. At first, he did not know what any of these things were called, but he discovered a way to learn. Amir unwittingly followed a mouse into a library and after deciding that the people were more interesting, he began to read over their shoulder. Truthfully, he spent quite some time monitoring some very small humans in that same library, learning how to read along with them, before he could read over the shoulders of the larger humans. When he finally was able to read everything, he visited other libraries, discovered other languages and learned all that he wanted to know about everything.

As time both went on for the living and stood still for him, Amir absorbed all of the information that he could about the living. He was with them when they killed each other mercilessly and ate raw meat, when they killed each other mercilessly and ate cooked meat, when they killed each other mercilessly in different parts of the world eating different types of meat or because they wanted the same parts of the world, when they killed each other mercilessly but mostly built things, and even when they tore down the things they had built, spent money, and built more things and killing happened far less often. Eating meat or not did not always coincide with these trends, Amir learned.

Amir developed several methods to observe the living and cycled through these. Sometimes, he would center in on some living thing and then just observe the same location for thousands of years and see what happened there. This was the least fruitful method as sometimes nothing would happen in the entire time that he watched. Better was when he would choose a person, or any living thing, and just follow what transpired in its lifetime and that of its descendants. Usually, he would just watch things unfold as they happened, rather than go forward or backward in time. Yet, sometimes, the cause and effect was so evident that he would revisit decades or centuries earlier before resuming in chronological order.

There were times when Amir witnessed the living reacting to other ghosts. In these instances, Amir would usually move on. It felt like voyeurism - not Amir's normal, yet paranormal respectful observation and scrutiny - to watch other ghosts interacting with the living. Once he became aware that this was occurring, Amir would move on and find other living things to watch.

Amir had decided that he preferred to observe living things in the modern era most of all. Usually people, but sometimes dogs and cats. He was still perplexed about the hierarchy of the living. While humans tended to act as though they were at the top, Amir believed

that dogs probably had the best arrangement, having everything provided for them without even having to work for it. Amir felt that dogs were boring, not as fascinating as their “owners” seemed to think they were, and never willing to answer the eternal question, “who’s a good boy?” Between dogs and people, Amir decided that people were far more interesting, even if dogs probably made better lifestyle choices.

Amir and Carlos continued to cross paths and have paranormal encounters in the limbo. Amir would share what he had seen and they would have a spirited discussion. For his part, Carlos did not offer much information about his activities. He seemed satisfied by providing comfort to those among the living he felt needed this from him.

Content to observe, Amir had avoided interacting with the living. Often, he returned to his old haunts and savored watching the events unfold before him and buoyancy of the living in reacting to what befell them. Despite knowing what was going to happen to them, Amir was enthralled by watching. He witnessed empires rise and fall, the plates of the Earth shift and form new continents, the construction of massive monuments and their subsequent razing to the ground. Amir probably knew more about life and the living than any other ghost.

Carlos nor any other ghost ever asked, but even if they had, Amir would not have been able to explain why he finally did what he did. Due to time not having any meaning in the spectral plane, there was not even a finality to ascribe any sense of when to what Amir did. As for the how, how did ghosts do anything? They just did it. The what and the where were the crucial aspects of Amir's involvement with the living, and even these were not easily isolated. If anyone would have noticed and asked, Amir would not have been able to answer.

The first time, at least for Amir, if not for the living, when Amir interacted with the living was in March 1836. Amir inadvertently made himself visible to a Mexican soldier advancing on the Alamo. The soldier blinked and then Amir was gone. The second time was in 1503. Amir was peering so intently at Lisa Gherardini that he made himself visible to her for an extended period of time. He continued to marvel at her smug composure in studying him which was in turn immortalized. The third or perhaps the fourth episode happened just outside a book depository in 1963. Amir had been lingering around the depository and reading books as the living perused them. The sounds of a motorcade outside caught his attention and his excitement betrayed him as he materialized as an apparition outside on a grassy knoll. He was regretfully certain that someone must have spotted him but he reasoned hopefully that his appearance would be soon forgotten due to the other activity in the vicinity at that time.

Naturally, or supernaturally, Amir had already learned about these events and decided that his involvement had not affected the widely known outcome to a troublesome extent. He felt both relieved and confused. The interaction of ghosts with the living certainly affected the actions of the living. If ghosts and the spectral limbo were not subject to the laws of time, did this mean that everything that ghosts did was predestined, or that what they did was incapable of changing time? Amir contemplated asking Carlos for his opinion, but Amir decided that, by now, relatively speaking, he knew more about the living than Carlos ever had, would or will. This seemed to Amir that he alone was carrying a huge responsibility. That Carlos would not understand was not a comforting thought, and Carlos only ever seemed to have comforting thoughts. Amir decided that he would proceed with his experiment without consulting Carlos, the cabinet doors ghost, or anyone else.

Amir started small and was pleased to realize that he could change the outcome of known events by interacting with the living.

He returned to the scene of an automobile accident he had witnessed eons earlier and rather than just watching, he concentrated his focus enough to empower the mother to lift the car and rescue her child pinned inside. Amir observed others in the area until one of them read a newspaper the following day in which the mother's miraculous adrenaline had been reported. Admittedly, Amir had not read that newspaper over anyone's shoulder eons earlier but he certainly had not intervened at that time either. He concluded that this did mean that he, a ghost, could indeed change living history.

Given all that Amir knew about the world of the living, his possibilities to improve their lives were endless. He made a mental list of the human driven tragedies he could correct and preempt: the Seoul nuclear attack, the Wichita power plant disaster, the Mexico City implosion, the deadly Tokyo Convention Center siege, the Ottoman Empire colonial massacres, the Battle of Sao Paulo, Nazi Germany, the World Trade Center, Oklahoma City bombing, Chernobyl, the Titanic, the Apollo 19 cannibalism tragedy, the Hindenburg, the Bubonic Plague, the devastating Mumbai flood, the Spanish Flu, wars, extinctions, assassinations, and so on.

And Amir proceeded in improving living history by interfering with the living's follies and averting the deadly events their errors had caused. As Carlos had warned, this intense level of interaction with the living neutralized Amir's ability to affect others of the living. Fortunately, this affliction subsided over time, and all Amir had was time, in a spectral plane where time had no meaning. Thus, Amir, just waited, and waited. Maybe it took three minutes, or billions of years, before he could move on to his next intervention, but it was all the same to Amir, and to the world of the living.

Amir's eternity of learning had taught him all that he needed to know, except the one fact he could never know, only experience when it happened. This was the instance in which the what and

where of what Amir did had repercussions upon him. Amir was in the midst of preventing the deadly rampage of arson that destroyed Los Angeles in 2046. And he succeeded, precluding the deadly episode and in the course of changing history, he saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Among those former victims who would have died but were given another chance at life was a nameless raccoon who would have become a very altruistic and magnanimous ghost known only as Amir.

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