# A Burger and Change

# By Joe Cassavaugh

He liked to think. He liked to think about things. The thing he liked to think about most was thinking. Consciousness. Some of his friends would tell him that he was “trapped in his head” too much of the time. His response was always the same: “Aren’t we all trapped inside our own heads? Just self-fulfilling prophecy machines.” Most of his friends didn’t really understand what he meant by that, but he knew, and that’s all that mattered to him. I was just beginning to understand it myself, and sometimes I think that’s why things ended the way they did between us.

Consciousness was a subject that smarter people often referred to as “a hard problem”, right up there with God and Free Will. He did most of his thinking while doing other things. In the shower, driving somewhere or even waiting in line for a burger. This being Wednesday, and around 11:30, meant it was a Five Guys Burger that he was waiting on. It was his usual stop after going to Dr. No’s to pick up his weekly graphic novel or two. He didn’t pick up a new one today, so instead of thinking about Astro City, Thanos, Adam Warlock, or what any of the other myriad four-color heroes were up to, he drifted back to his favorite topic.

As usual, he was getting nowhere on the subject, and just as he had switched his thoughts from Hofstadter’s Repetitive Sphinx, to Smullyan’s Lazy Marble, he was asked by the young lady behind the counter what his order was. Her name was Diane and he responded with the exact same specifications he always gave: “One little bacon burger with barbeque sauce and extra tomatoes, please. Oh, and a small fry and regular drink too.” The total came to the usual $11.27 as their prices hadn’t changed in the past 14 months. He pulled out a $20 bill and paid. He put $1.73 in the tip charge (so Diane could see it) and pocketed the remaining $7. He always made sure the counter person saw that he put in a tip. He wrongly believed that this would always guarantee him better service.

He took his receipt and noted he was #27. He thought that was a good omen because 27 has always been one of his favorite numbers. Mine too actually. There are 27 cubelets in a 3x3x3 Rubik’s Cube (if you count the invisible center), and he really didn’t need any other reason than that. Just then, he noted the time. It was 11:27. He chuckled to himself because it was November 27th and he had just paid $11:27. That was a trifecta of synchronicity that he couldn’t help but notice. Although he never cracked the mystery of consciousness, he had settled on a world-view that helped explain the way-too-much synchronicity that seemed to follow him his entire life. It wasn’t a perfect metaphor, but he liked to tell people: “The best explanation for random coincidences happening to me as often as they do is this: I’m a fictional character co-created in God’s mind.” Sometimes he would add: “Synchronicity is like electricity, you don’t have to understand how it works in order to put it to good use.” I think it was the third time I heard him say that to someone, that I really began to hate him.

He picked a seat where he could see the exit. He noticed a young boy, sitting by the rear window, playing a board game with Red and Blue marbles. His thoughts drifted to the Red and Blue pills in the Matrix movies and then back to consciousness in general. He bounced between Moore’s Glass of Water, Dennet’s Intentional Agents and Minsky’s Society of Mind. He even pondered some of the more fringe theories, such as Kazinski’s Consciousness Unleashed and Dr. Green’s Magic Mirror.

Then his thoughts drifted back to a conversation he had with his father in college about losing weight. He was 146 lbs. through high school and college. He hadn’t ballooned up to his current 250 lbs. yet. That occurred when he started to sit down and program for a living. It was 10 lbs. a year off and on, until he settled in the 220-250 range during his 3rd marriage. Although grossly overweight now, he was quite thin back in his college days and had very little empathy for his father who was trying to loss weight.

He remembered two things from that visit. The first was a joke about Willie Nelson that he suckered his father into. His father had become a country & western fan recently, and he casually mentioned to his father – “Sorry to hear that Willie Nelson got killed a few days ago”. His father said “What???”, then he said “Yeah, he was run over by a semi-truck”. “Jesus” his father said, and then he hit him with – “Yeah, that’s what he gets for playing “On the Road Again””. The second thing was his dad telling him “You’re ridiculous” over a suggestion he made about losing weight. He told his dad – “You won’t lose weight until you can cook up a steak and then throw it in the trash”. His father basically thought that was an exceptionally crazy/stupid idea. I thought it might have been his one brilliant original idea, certainly better than his thoughts on synchronicity.

While these thoughts went through his head, he filled his cup with Coke Zero from the new machines. He also grabbed some ketchup in the cups and a bunch of salt packets. Once again, he chuckled as he returned to his seat and noticed that he had 2 little cups of ketchup and exactly 7 salt packets. 27 again. He thought to himself, “Thank you, universe, but you’ve already got my attention”.

As he waited for his burger his thoughts swirled round and round, creating a vortex of symbols dancing within his tiny grey matter. He got thinking about what it truly meant to be a self-fulfilling prophecy machine and the infinite regress inherent in choosing anything. How can you choose to do anything if at first you have to choose to choose? For at least two minutes he seemed caught in a very tight, sphinx like, strange loop. Then the universe knocked on his door one last time.

He snapped out of his trance just as two marbles hit his right sneaker. He picked up the two marbles and handed them to the little boy who had popped over to his table to retrieve them. The boy said “Sorry”, and he told the boy that it was an accident and that there was nothing to be sorry for. The boy turned around, smiled and replied: “My mom always tells me there are no accidents.” Just then, the guy behind the counter shouted “Number 27”, and he went to retrieve his burger.

He unwrapped the burger. As he took his first byte, he glanced over at his Coke Zero and noticed that it was almost half-empty. He took a second bite of the burger and it was the best bite he had ever tasted. The absolute best. How did I know? I know because of what I did next. I surprised him by taking my own next bite of that burger. Sure enough, it was a perfect burger. The burger was now about half-way eaten, and I wrapped the rest of it up, along with the fries, walked over to the dumpster and threw it away.

As I walked to the exit, I left the half-full Coke Zero on the edge of the table where he had been sitting and thought to myself that it would serve as a fitting tribute to the guy who liked to think so much. I never saw him again. Not once. Because that’s the day I solved the infinite regress problem. That’s when I knew that free will was a choice. And that’s the day I chose, to choose, to have…free will.