

conversations with heaven

Introduction

Last fall, Steve Date shared his film *The Letter* with his friend, fellow filmmaker and journalist, Michael Joyce. Michael forwarded to Steve, to pass on to me, a story he had written and published two years earlier involving similar encounters with coincidence, synchronicity, serendipity or whatever you wish to call it. We were deeply moved with Michael's beautiful story *Conversations With Heaven* and are privileged to share it with you. In a recent email to me, Michael wrote "I guess, by sharing this story on your site, Ellen Catherine's balloon continues to touch people, as does Jimmy." They most certainly do.

Conversations with Heaven

By Michael Joyce MD [Email Michael Joyce, MD](#)

November 1st, 2008 @1630 hrs. **'Northeast' Minneapolis, MN:**

Lat. 45° 00'38"N/ Long. 93°16'11"W

I love writing.

I hate deadlines.

I shamelessly subscribe to the rationalization that the muse strikes when and where it wants.

Randomly.

But I endow myself with veto power.

Almost exactly 24 hours ago I was given a deadline. And although there are plenty of stories I want to write, I want the right one, at the right time, for the right reason.

So a sunny day with light breezes like this one means getting the laundry on the line and then on to bigger and better things. Writing is not on the agenda.

But that is about to change.

As I duck under the laden line something catches my eye: a hot pink laminated card – a touch bigger than a credit card – lies on the tepid ground. It is attached to a purple string and a burst red balloon. One side of the card has a typed message. The other side is handwritten. The typed side reads:

"On November 1, 2008 our family sent balloons to heaven for our sweet daughter's eleventh birthday. Ellen Catherine died on December 16, 1997. She was a beautiful and strong baby. Someone who loves Ellen very much wrote this note. Ellen continues to touch many people's lives ... We would love to know where this balloon landed! Each year we receive many responses from kind people. Several went to beautiful Wisconsin, another crossed Lake Michigan and one balloon went to Northern Maine! Please contact us ..."

At the bottom is an address just south of Minneapolis, an email contact, a signature and a smiley face. The flip side, handwritten and with a lot of exclamation points, makes me smile.

A story has landed in my backyard.

November 1st, 2008 @ 0600 hrs. **National Weather Service, Chanhassen, MN**
Lat. 44° 51'03"N/Long. 93° 55'78"W

Roughly 900 weather balloons are launched simultaneously around the world at 1100 and 2300 hours Greenwich Mean Time every day. This allows meteorologists to formulate a cohesive map of global climate. Anytime. Any place.

"Once you let it go, it goes where it is meant to go," says Michelle Margraf, one of fifteen meteorologists at the Twin Cities office. "It's at the mercy of the wind but, even though it's an older technology from the forties, it's still the best way we have to get direct and accurate measurements of temperature, pressure, humidity, and wind speed and direction.

And so every shift, day or night, she fills a weather balloon with helium to roughly four feet tall by two feet wide. She attaches the weather instruments to a 70-foot tether. Once released the balloon will ascend at a rate of about 1,000 feet per minute until it reaches an altitude of 100,000 feet. At that extreme height the balloon is nearly 20 feet tall, can no longer expand, and will pop and descend to earth on a parachute.

The instrument box includes a pre-addressed envelope so anyone finding it can return it for reconditioning.

November 1st, 2008 @ 1345 hrs, **Resurrection Cemetery, Mendota Heights, MN**
Lat. 44° 52'57"N/Long. 93° 08'48"W

Dave and Ronda Rottjakob are surrounded by sunshine, family, and balloons. For the eleventh year in a row they have beautiful weather. Through the years they have learned to pick a treeless knoll. Ronda's buffet awaits them in their suburban home and three generations excitedly free the trapped balloons from the cocoon of the van. The atmosphere is festive and their living children – Abby, age 12, and Max and Louie the 8-year-old twins – know to wait until everyone is ready to release the balloons at once. It seems that for nearly everyone there – grandparents, cousins, friends and neighbors, uncles and aunts – it is the liberation of the balloons they enjoy most. And when they are finally released everyone lingers, necks craned upwards, until the ephemeral floating specks fade into the sky and the unaddressed notes to Baby Ellen float to somewhere.

Then they go to the grave:

Ellen Catherine Rottjakob

November 1, 1997 – December 16, 1997

'Forever our Special Angel'

They form a circle and recite the "My Guardian Angel" prayer.

* * * *

According to the data gathered from the weather balloon launched just eight hours before Baby Ellen's balloons were released, the balloon that made its way to my back yard most likely stayed aloft for about one hour before it burst and returned to earth.

Using the so-called 'HYSPLIT' model (the method also used to predict the movement of smoke and hazardous gases) Michelle and fellow meteorologist Tom Hulquist could use the GPS coordinates of the cemetery and my home, as well as the wind speed (10-15 knots that day), to approximate the trajectory of the balloon.

Even with the sophisticated computer modeling they caution their analysis can only represent a 'best guess'. And the same goes for weather forecasting in general. "Basically, we're trying to predict the future," says Michelle. "We actually get people calling us and wanting to know the weather for a wedding a year away. They won't get off the phone until they get their answer ... if we could analyze every particle in the air it would be an exact science. But there is a human element and art to it ... we can't control the weather."

But for Michelle, as passionate as she is about explaining her work, this is not what captures her attention. Rather, when I tell her about the Rottjakob's balloon tradition she stops me and says "You are giving me chills. Of all the days you could call me today is the first anniversary of my sister's baby dying. She was born premature at 23 weeks and only lived three hours."

"Ellen was tiny. She was born at 24-and-a-half weeks and weighed only one pound-five ounces," recalls Ronda. "I was in a car accident when I was about 10 weeks pregnant. I had a placental abruption and was on bed rest for the next three-and-a-half months. But I never miscarried. She was born in the middle of the night on Halloween. They lost all her signs and came swooping in to do an emergency C-section. She lived 45 days."

When Ronda says she has been a pre-school teacher for 6 years it doesn't surprise me. Nor does it surprise me when she says "I always wanted to be a mom." She has a made-for-children demeanor of nurturing, optimism, and adaptability.

Her husband Dave seems an ideal counter-balance with a warm, steady and measured demeanor well suited to his work as a microbiologist. He has come to believe "things happen for a reason and that helps me cope and stay sane."

They are devout Catholics.

"The balloons seem to get found at significant times for our family or the people who find them," says Ronda. There was the time her sister-in-law was having cancer surgery at the Mayo Clinic and a balloon-finder wrote from Rochester that day. Or the note that arrived the very day her grandmother was having hip surgery. Or this note dated May 1, 2008 from Illinois:

"I am a farmer from East Central Illinois ... about 550 miles from where you live. I have a 6-month-old daughter ... sick for almost two weeks. My wife has been getting up with my daughter in the night ... this morning at 4 am my wife said it was my turn. I found myself upset at my wife and my daughter and I was very grumpy ... I was planting corn this morning when I came across something pink that had caught my eye. It was your note (here is the cool part) ... when I got back in the tractor I looked at the time and it was 11:01 and 07 seconds. I didn't think much about it until I cleaned the dirt off of your note. I then realized that baby Ellen's birthday was November 1, (11:01). The balloon was released on November 1, 2007 (11:01 07 seconds). I picked up your note this morning, May 1, six months to the day [after] it was released. After figuring all that out I said to myself "Okay Lord I'm listening" My mood changed instantly. I wasn't so grumpy.... I am so blessed that I have a little girl that wakes me in the middle of the night because she needs me. I can't imagine what a hardship it is to loose [sic] a child ... I am going to hold mine a little tighter tonight. Even though Ellen was on this earth a very short time, God is using her to touch the lives of those who really need it. God Bless Baby Ellen."

"Whatever brought that farmer to that card at that place – *THAT* is the mystery to me, " says Ronda, who calls the letters she gets from balloon finders '[conversations with heaven](#)'. "For me it's about memorializing her. What she is to us and what she can be to others.

"I think we started the balloons because we were sad for many reasons. We have all these nieces and nephews whose first experience with death was a child. And I just felt terribly guilty about that. All these kids were grieving and I felt they were confused by it. You know, you're supposed to grow old, you're supposed to die and go to heaven and be with Jesus and see the people that went before you. I felt that if they had a way to celebrate her life it was probably a good thing."

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"Balloons are magic, sheer magic" says Meg Tuthill without any hesitation. She and her husband Dennis have owned their uptown neighborhood balloon shop for 30 years.

"They're lighter than air and they float. If you've ever jumped off the garage roof flapping your arms and can't figure out why you are not flying then you know what I mean. Think about the color, the size, the shape, they're unpredictable, not permanent, they don't last forever bring that all together and it's absolutely amazing."

I tell her about Baby Ellen's 45 days and the annual balloon release. Meg Tuthill – who, if she was a balloon herself, would most likely be a brightly colored one following a path all its own– doesn't miss a beat. "I'm very judgmental and opinionated until it comes to illness and death. I think we all have certain ways of dealing with things. Whatever you need to do to get through a horrible situation is just fine."

Meg interacts with such unabashed candor it's hard not to want to tell her more. I mention the Illinois farmer with the sick daughter, that Dave feels spiritually connected with Ellen, that the cousin who wrote on my balloon put 'thank you for watching over me!', that Ronda sees Baby Ellen as a 'guardian angel' and one of the twin boys – Louie – thinks an angel is 'kind of like a soul that goes up and won't come back'.

Meg listens thoughtfully and responds quickly:

"It's all magic. Whether it be balloons or people. They come into your life for a moment and leave again. And sometimes you need them for longer and sometimes you don't. If people believe in it that's all that matters. It doesn't matter what you or I think. If that balloon happens to show up on that day and there is something going on, so be it.... I'm a gentile but there's a Yiddish word for this: it's called 'beschert'. Go down the street to the temple and talk to Rabbi Glaser."

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Temple Israel has an imposing façade. Rabbi Glaser has no façade. He is a kind and approachable man as much loved for his music as he is for bringing farm animals into the temple and dressing up as Noah.

"They are giving Baby Ellen eternal life," says Rabbi Glaser upon hearing about the Rottjakob's balloon ceremony. "Every balloon that is found falls into the definition of 'beschert'. It validates Ellen and keeps her alive for them.

"Beschert for many people is about fate and believing that there is a purpose or path set for you," he says. "But I don't believe that anything is preordained and God gave us free will.

"Think about 'Googling'. I think it is a placebo. You get the answers that validate your question. We look for the answers we want because chaos is uncomfortable for us. So beschert is comfort in the face of chaos. Really, uncertainty is the only guarantee."

* * * *

"Maybe God intended it to go that way," says cousin Marie whose handwritten note – with all the exclamation points befitting her 18 years – landed in my yard some 15 miles from the cemetery. "I think Baby Ellen has been an angel and an angel's purpose is to watch over us on earth. I feel she watches over me. I mean, the balloon is going to fall where it falls but there usually is a correlating story. Something special. Maybe Baby Ellen shows herself when we need her most.

"Like the day you called me to say you found 'my' balloon ... I mean 'our' balloon ... I had a really big psychology test that day!"

* * * *

"Sure, we make linkages to make ourselves comfortable," says Dave. " But I think fate is real and there is a plan I can't understand and I'm OK with not understanding why. As a scientist there's a real disconnect there but I'm foremost a person of faith."

"For me it's become a celebration," says Ronda. "We have a party. I used to make angel food cake, angel hair pasta, and even some sort of angel berry punch or something like that. But it's joyous ... you know I used to collect angels growing up. Back then an angel was like an animated caricature. Now it's Ellen's face. I see her in heaven as a very small child who can communicate. It's not sad ... she is with me like an invisible blanket, a protector."

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November 1st, the day Ellen Catherine Rottjakob was born, is known to Christians as 'All Saints Day'. But in Mexico, in particular, it is dedicated to deceased infants and children and is better known as 'Dia de los Angelitos' or 'Day of the Little Angels.'

It is a pagan tradition of celebration that enraged the conquistadores who found it to be reprehensible by virtue of not being somber enough. Cemeteries throughout the country take on a festive air. Graves are cleaned and brightly decorated. Colorful altars of 'ofrendas' ('offerings') hold food, candied skulls, candles to guide spirits back to their families, and pillows and blankets for them to rest upon after the long journey from heaven. Bright colors and dancing are commonplace and gifts for the deceased are expected. In the case of children it is best to bring toys.

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Reportage

I have always been intrigued by the cliché ‘things happen for a reason’ and my reflexive rebuttal has usually been: ‘do things happen for a reason or do we *need* there to be a reason?’

The rarity of a story landing in my back yard not only gave me occasion to explore this but also a wealth of symbolism, some interesting science unknown to me, and a conundrum that unifies us all; that is, how do we make sense of death – especially that of a child?

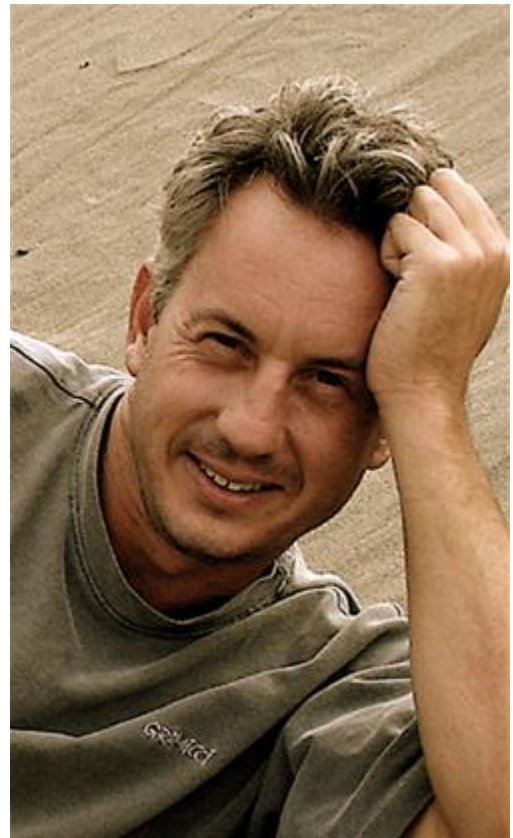
This story was going to center on balloons. But, like a balloon, the story drifted on currents I could not have anticipated. Angels showed up. Unforeseen connections led to ‘beschert’. The sources dictated the story and, if you were to ask me the focus of the piece, I guess I would have to say it is how a single balloon and the people connected to it exemplify beschert.

The challenge was to take a piece that followed such currents and give it some structure and readability. To show the connections but not force them. The reporting was enjoyable. My passport was a balloon. This interested people and they were quite receptive and warm. This single balloon touched a great many people. Hope this story does it justice.

About Michael Joyce.

Michael did his medical training at the Mayo Clinic, produced award-winning documentaries for public radio in northern California for 15 years, and now specializes in medical media consultation and producing provocative documentary films which bridge medicine and the humanities.

His passion is sculpting stories that reveal the nuance and poignancy of the human condition.





Son & Father: Jimmy Gauntt & Casey Gauntt



Dad (Ryan) snaps picture of son (Wyatt James Kirby) sitting by sand trap at Santa Luz golf course watching "Balloonies..."