

*THE*

**SERENDIPITY**

**MINDSET**

*The Art and Science*  
*of Creating Good Luck*



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*For my dear parents, Ulla and Rainer, whose love, kindness, and resilient optimism have been an inspiration to me throughout my life.*

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# INTRODUCTION

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*I'm always surprised when I see people who have been successful . . . and they're absolutely convinced that it's all because they were so smart. And I'm always saying, well, I worked hard, and I've got some talent, but there are a lot of hardworking, talented people out there. . . . There was this element of chance to it . . . of serendipity . . . [and] you want to see if you can maybe figure out how to sprinkle that stardust on other people.*

BARACK OBAMA, 44TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**W**e all like to feel like we are masters of our own destiny—to feel in control of our future, to know how we will reach our goals and ambitions. In short, we all like to have a plan.

This seemingly innate human desire to map out our future is reflected in almost every aspect of modern life. Organizations, governments, and every one of us all structure our activities around plans, strategies, and targets that we make. We construct routines, rules, and processes—from setting the alarm clock to organizing national elections—to ensure that those plans come to fruition.

But are we really in control of our lives? Or is this just an illusion? Despite all of our planning, modeling, and strategizing, there appears to be another factor at work: the unexpected.

We all recognize that unforeseen events, chance meetings, or seeming coincidences are often not just minor distractions or specks of grit in the machines of our well-oiled lives. The unexpected is often the force that makes the greatest difference to our lives and our futures. It is the critical factor.

Perhaps you found your spouse “by coincidence”? Or came across your new job or apartment “by accident”? Did you meet your future cofounder or investor “by chance”? Or did you “randomly” pick up a

magazine just to find exactly what you needed to know to solve a problem?

How did such moments, big or small, change your life? How could your life have played out had everything just gone according to plan?

Wars are won or lost, companies thrive or collapse, and love is found or lost all on the turn of the unexpected. Whatever our ambitions are in life—finding business success, love, joy, or spiritual meaning—we are prone to coincidental encounters. The most mundane moment, like running into someone in the gym, can change your life.

Even in the rigorous world of scientific research, the power of the unexpected is (almost) always at play. Studies suggest that around 30 to 50 percent of major scientific breakthroughs emerge as the result of accidents or coincidences. One chemical spills into another, cells combine in dirty petri dishes, or there is a chance encounter between experts whose incidental conversation sparks new insights. The greatest opportunities, for individuals and organizations alike, are often a matter of serendipity.<sup>1</sup>

So does most success boil down to blind luck, to success or failure brought simply by chance rather than through our own actions? No; intuitively we sense that this isn't true either. While we recognize that the greatest turning points and transformative opportunities in our lives often seem to occur by chance, some people just seem to have more luck, and subsequently more success and joy, than others.

This isn't just a modern phenomenon, either: The chemist and biologist Louis Pasteur thought that chance favors the prepared mind. The military leader and emperor Napoléon Bonaparte said he would rather have lucky generals than good ones. And the Roman writer and statesman Seneca argued that luck is a matter of preparation meeting opportunity.

Their beliefs all reflect the idea that while chance is a real force in our lives and in the world, there is more to life than blind luck. Indeed, the word “fortune” can refer to both success and luck. Even commonplace phrases such as “You make your own luck” or “He’s a man with an eye for the main chance” all point to the idea that success in life depends on an interaction—a *synthesis*—between pure chance and human effort.

What is really going on here? Are some people able to create the conditions for positive coincidences to happen more often than

others? Are they better able to spot and grasp these moments and turn them into positive outcomes? Can our education and approach to work and life equip us with the most important skill of all—the ability to navigate the unexpected and make our own “smart” luck?

This is a book about the interactions of coincidence, human ambition, and imagination. It is a book about *serendipity*—this unexpected good luck resulting from unplanned moments in which proactive decisions lead to positive outcomes. Serendipity is the hidden force in the world, and it is present all around us, from the smallest day-to-day events, to life-changing, and sometimes world-changing, breakthroughs.

However, only few of us—including many of the people you will meet in this book—have deciphered this code and developed the mindset needed to turn the unexpected into a success and a force for good.

Once we realize that serendipity is not just about a coincidence that happens *to us* but is actually a process of *spotting and connecting the dots* do we start to see bridges where others see gaps.<sup>2</sup> Only then does serendipity start happening all the time in our lives.

Then, the unexpected changes from being a threat to a constant source of joy, of wonder, of meaning—and of sustained success. In a world that has been running on a fight-or-flight lizard brain, in which fear-mongering, populism, and uncertainty have taken over, the mindsets and contexts that we are used to are simply not working anymore. Developing a serendipity mindset and shaping the related conditions becomes the essential life skill and capability for ourselves, our children, and our organizations.

Imagine a world driven by curiosity, opportunity, and a sense of connection, rather than by fear, scarcity, and jealousy. What would it look like? A world in which enormous challenges like climate change and social inequalities are being tackled by solutions that are bold and up to the task.

In a fast-changing world in which many of the emerging problems are complex and where much of our future will be driven by the unexpected, developing a serendipity mindset becomes an evolutionary necessity as well as an opportunity to identify what is most important to us so that we can develop a true enthusiasm for life.

Serendipity is a popular subject—but we know surprisingly little about what specific, science-based methods we can adopt to create conditions for serendipity in our lives. And we know little about how this plays out in different contexts.

*The Serendipity Mindset* fills this gap. It stands on the shoulders of giants, on science that explains how serendipity can unfold and on anecdotal accounts of how we can nurture serendipity for ourselves and others. Building on those stories and on research in the natural and social sciences, as well as highlighting inspiring examples from around the globe, this book offers a framework and exercises to help you make fortunate surprises more likely to happen in life—and with better outcomes.

This active perspective on serendipity—“smart luck,” if you will—is thus different from the “luck of the draw,” the “plain” or “blind” luck that just happens to us without effort.

If you aim to shape your own future and the future of people around you—even if that future is impossible to predict—then this book is for you. It gives a holistic, science-based insight into how lucky (and unlucky) coincidences can be facilitated, leveraged, and sustained—but never really emulated. It is the first comprehensive science-based methodology and framework on how to develop a serendipity mindset and the related conditions.

**A serendipity mindset is both a philosophy of life that many of the world’s most successful and joyful people have turned to in order to create meaningful lives and a capability that each of us can develop.**

Along with conversations with individuals I call “serendipitors,” this book draws on my decade-long experience as a researcher, business consultant, university lecturer, codirector at the London School of Economics Innovation Lab and at New York University’s Global Economy Program, and my fifteen years of cultivating serendipity in my own life. This is an interest I have pursued as the cofounder of both the Sandbox Network, a community of inspiring young people that is active in over twenty countries, and Leaders on Purpose, a global organization that brings together high-impact executives and policy makers. My advisory work with a broad range of organizations and individuals—from one of China’s largest companies to small community organizations around the world—has given me access to a diverse range of people, and the opportunity to



witness serendipity in a wide range of situations and settings. Living in a variety of places, from Moscow to Mexico City, has imbued in me a deep appreciation for contextual nuances, which this book will explore.

*The Serendipity Mindset* combines my own research with colleagues at the London School of Economics, Harvard University, the World Economic Forum, Strathmore Business School, and The World Bank with the latest studies in neuroscience, psychology, management, the arts, physics, and chemistry. Based on hundreds of academic papers and over two hundred interviews and conversations with a diverse range of people from all corners of the world, it offers inspiring firsthand stories and experiences from individuals in all walks of life—from former-drug-addicts-turned-teachers in the impoverished Cape Flats in Cape Town to the filmmaker in New York to the entrepreneur in Kenya to the waiter in London to the student in Houston to over a dozen of the world’s most successful CEOs.<sup>3</sup> While each of these stories of embracing and leveraging the unexpected is very different, as we will witness, their patterns are very similar.

## A Collision with Fate

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While I can now discuss serendipity from different standpoints, my journey to it and its power began with a personal incident in which juvenile hubris met bad luck.

As an eighteen-year-old in Germany, I crashed my car into several parked cars at a speed of more than 50 mph. Miraculously, I survived, but the cars I hit were severely damaged, as was my own. Until then I had never really believed stories about near-death experiences. But my life really did flash before my eyes in the split second before that collision, when my car was spinning out of control and I felt absolutely powerless, certain that I would die.

In the days that followed I asked myself questions. Many questions. “If I had died, who would have come to my funeral?” “Who would have actually cared?” “Was it all worth it?” I realized that I had been neglecting some of the most important parts of life,

like treasuring deep and lasting relationships and being proud of doing something relevant and meaningful.

My narrow escape made me consider what my death would have meant in terms of lost opportunities: the people I would not have met, the ideas and dreams that I would never have explored, the (serendipitous) events and encounters that would have been missed.

The accident and the realizations that came from it set me on a journey to search for what life was really about.

I grew up in Heidelberg, a historic and romantic city in southern Germany that, while beautiful, is a bit sleepy when you are a teenager set on exploring what life is all about.

Ever since I can remember, I had always felt that I did not belong. My family moved several times when I was young, so I was often “the new kid” in school, and on the soccer club I was “the incomer.” The skin problems I suffered back then were the icing on the cake.

My retreat was the coffee shop where I started to work when I was sixteen. It was there that I began to feel I had found my tribe. Working there as a waiter taught me a lot about human behavior and group dynamics, such as how people treat you if they assume that you’re “just a waiter,” and the value of physical work, of working from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. without a real break.

My boss at the coffee shop was an entrepreneur, and it wasn’t long before I was helping him on different projects, from selling imported T-shirts to driving cake deliveries as soon as I turned eighteen. About that time I also started working part-time for a market research company, asking people in Heidelberg’s main street which size of sausages they would prefer to buy, and why. Would they be open to buy salami instead of pastrami if it was cheaper?

I had lots of energy but I was never sure what to do with it. I tried to create excitement wherever possible, and I tested all kinds of boundaries in order to channel my energy. I veered between extremes: spending time with a group of left-wing activists (during my French/German-reggae phase) and going to clubs, while starting to invest my work money in the stock market—my parents having given, with hesitation, the bank authorization to deal with a minor. (To this day, I have deep admiration for my parents, who handled my rebellious streaks with grace and understanding.) I started to spend more time on the telephone in my school’s basement to buy and sell stocks than I did in the classroom.

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I always enjoyed tapping in and out of these very different worlds—I enjoyed them but never really felt at home. Naturally, these various explorations did not help my grades. I was a terrible student—I was in the 5 percent of the class that made the top 95 percent possible. I had to repeat a year and was “offered the opportunity to change schools”—a nice way of saying that I was expelled. The next school I attended fortunately proved to be more understanding about my rebellious streaks.

When I turned eighteen, I got my first car. It was exciting and I transferred my hedonistic and overoptimistic attitude into my driving style. I probably broke the city records in the number of parking tickets one driver can accrue in a week and the number of trash cans someone can knock over on the way to school.

Still, I felt in total control of life, of my destiny.

And then, one day, I pushed too far. The car accident shuttered my confidence and sense of control.

The liberation that I had felt earlier on that sunny day when I was hanging out with two close friends on Heidelberg’s Neckarwiese turned into both shock at what I had done and relief that I had managed to avoid becoming an accident statistic. My friends and I had planned to get some food. We had taken two cars, and I was behind my friend’s car in which he and my other friend were driving. In my adolescent hubris, I tried to overtake the car. I still remember looking over at my friend as I passed him in the opposite lane, and him frantically waving at me and pointing to the traffic island in the middle of the road ahead that I hadn’t seen. It’s a vivid memory: To avoid hitting the island I turned the wheel fast, the car spun around a couple of times, and I crashed into a line of parked cars.

My Volvo’s double-secured doors saved my life. The passenger side was completely destroyed. I later learned that any other angle of collision would probably have killed me. My friend who was a passenger in the other car had initially wanted to ride with me but he’d remembered he had left his jacket in the other car and so changed his mind at quite literally the last second. If he hadn’t, he would have been in that passenger seat.

I remember getting out of the car, amazed that I was still able to walk. My friends and I exchanged a few words of disbelief as we tried

to grasp what had happened. What would we tell the police? My parents?

While we waited for the police to arrive, I sat back in the wrecked car, dizzy and exhausted. The police officer who arrived at the scene and surveyed the wreckage was amazed I was still alive, with no major injuries apart from light whiplash.

I wandered through the city that night in a strange state of bitter-sweetness, not wanting to go home. I had survived, but I couldn't stop thinking about what could have happened. If I had died, would I have made my family's life a living hell? If my friend had ridden with me, would I have killed him? How on earth could this happen? How did I let it happen?

The old proverb that "death is life's greatest motivator" started to make a lot of sense to me. When you face death, you don't worry about how much money you have in the bank, how many cars you have in the garage, how great last night's clubbing experience was. This all becomes meaningless and you try to understand what's really important, what life really is about.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience like this in your life. Or another inflection point, incremental or radical, that changed your perspective. Perhaps a toxic relationship that you needed to break out from, an illness, or a job you wanted to leave?

The accident helped me start to turn my life around, and it gave me a sense of direction. I applied to dozens of universities (given my miserable school record, out of more than forty applications only four universities accepted me). I started to channel my energy into my studies, my relationships, and my work. I went on to cofound several communities and organizations focused on enabling people to live meaningful lives.

These ventures were themselves often the result of serendipitous encounters. The more active I became, the more I started seeing the patterns in my and other people's lives, and later in my research.

When I started out with my PhD research at the London School of Economics in 2009, I assumed it would be relatively separate from the cultivating of serendipitous experiences in my personal life. The research focused on how individuals and organizations can grow and increase their social impact and meaning, which appeared quite unconnected to serendipity at first. But to my surprise and delight, the concept popped up over and over again. Many of the most

successful and joyful people I interviewed for my research appeared intuitively to cultivate a force field—a “serendipity field”—that allowed them to have more positive life outcomes than others who started under similar conditions.

Connecting the dots—in this case, in hindsight—made me realize that a way to combine these streams and passions would be to write this book: a book that encompasses what I deeply believe in as a life philosophy and a more realistic model of how life really unfolds.

Today, nothing makes me happier than to see the spark that comes from two ideas or people who unexpectedly click—the joy of serendipity. I have experienced it as a beautiful way to support someone as they unleash their real potential, of exploring what’s possible in a world in which we could adopt many different personas and live many different lives. This is what cultivating serendipity is all about—supporting people in their journey of discovering and exploring who they are and who they can become.

*The Serendipity Mindset* is about recognizing that we can open ourselves to the unexpected. And it is about being prepared and free from the preconceptions that can stop us being the victims or beneficiaries of luck (bad or good). We can nurture it, shape it, and make it a tool for life. In the science of serendipity, luck can be caught, coached, and created.<sup>4</sup> This means that we can direct our learning, skills, education, and training programs toward influencing and mastering that process.

In part this involves removing barriers to serendipity, in our own thinking process and in our lives and workplaces. We all know instinctively about these practical barriers and how they kill enthusiasm: senseless meetings, email overload, pointless memos to be written or read. But it is just as much about developing a mindset that allows us to use our skills and available resources to turn unexpected discoveries into outcomes with real value.

This is not about developing a particular competence but about nourishing a constantly evolving capability. It is about shifting from being a passive recipient to becoming an active agent of our own smart luck, about setting ourselves up to make unexpected change an opportunity for success, and finding meaning and joy. The next step is to develop the conditions—in our families, our communities, our organizations—that allow serendipity to be nurtured and used to

create opportunities and value. This allows us to grow and harness our serendipity field—all the dots that can potentially be connected.

This book guides you through the process of deciphering, creating, and cultivating serendipity, step by step. It also tackles the elephant in the room: If serendipity is inherently random, how can we influence it?

Thus . . .

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In this day and age, being successful and joyful is not about trying to plan everything. In a world where we often cannot predict what will happen tomorrow, the best we can do is to embrace unexpected conditions and make the most out of the randomness of life.

*The Serendipity Mindset* is about what we can control: namely, how to cultivate serendipity for ourselves and others. This powerful mechanism for unleashing human potential demonstrates not only that (smart) luck favors the prepared but also that there are ways in which we can accelerate, nurture, and harness the positive coincidences in our lives.

We can never abolish the importance of randomness, chance, and coincidence in life or in business, but this book will help you transform those things from being uncontrollable forces into tools you can leverage for personal or greater good. Then you will start to see and create serendipity everywhere.

Naturally, we are all busy, and few of us have the time to change our lives completely all at once—which is why the book is peppered with examples of small, immediate adjustments that will directly make a difference in your day-to-day experiences, allowing you to live a more meaningful, joyful, inspiring, and successful life.

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