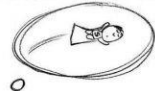


HAPPINESS IS



...knowing that in a parallel universe, most likely, you're a superhero.

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David Jones is predicting a Happy New Year – because there is no alternative.

At the bottom of our garden stands a brick BBQ, built by me. It will not win any design prizes. The side walls are bulging outwards, firstly because I didn't have a spirit level and had never heard of a plumb line

and, secondly, because I was unaware the bricks in the sidewalls had to interlock with the bricks at the back.

In short, you could say it has all the hallmarks of a brickwork bodge-up built by a retired newspaper editor.

On the other hand, I could say, at least it does the job, which is probably more than you could say about a newspaper designed by a bricklayer.

The sight of my BBQ, looking even more forlorn on a wet, miserable December day than it does in the summer, got me thinking. What if I had embarked on a different career, maybe as a bricklayer, plumber or electrician, which would have been a wise move as it turns out because everyone needs a bricklayer, plumber or electrician at some stage. Newspaper editors are not much in demand.

Let me go further still into the realms of speculation. Suppose I had begun a new career, not just in this universe but in another universe. This idea is not as crackpot as it sounds.

No less an authority than theoretical physicist Prof Stephen Hawking, who died in 2018, has floated the idea that parallel universes, or multiverses, exist well beyond our own - places with completely unknown galaxies, stars and planets. The theory is that in a parallel universe some, but not all, the choices you made in this life are played out in an alternate reality.

Stephen Hawking's final research paper, submitted just 10 days before he died, suggests that our universe may be one of many similar to our own.

The same idea forms the core of Philip Pullman's best-selling trilogy, His Dark Materials, relating the story of two children who wander through parallel universes. In one of the books, there are two Oxfords, each in a different universe, with each Oxford similar but not quite the same.

Having trouble getting your head around it all? In a parallel universe, I would still exist, you would still exist, but we may all be living in a place called Sheppey, which is not next to the Thames Estuary but somewhere in the Midlands. Maybe there would be two Sheppey's,

one saturated with new housing developments and the other a haven of rural tranquillity.

We may have indeed all chosen different careers. I might have been a zoo-keeper, while one of our members, a retired civil engineer, could have been a chart-topping singer.

The possibilities are endless, Ken Pugh, the leader of our Wine Appreciation Group, might have been the leading campaigner in the temperance movement on that alternative Sheppey. Somehow, I doubt it. Jeremy Corbyn might have been a Tory prime minister. Now that really does make it impossible to suspend disbelief, even for a moment.

It all sounds like fun. But is it really? In a parallel universe we may not have married the same partner, had the same children, or grandchildren. We might have gone through life doing a job we hated – apologies to those members who may have done the same in this universe – or even been born in a different country.

By now, you may well be asking “What has all this got to do with the New Year?”

This is my take on it all.

I think we can all agree that, by and large, 2020 was pretty awful and, let’s be honest, a whole year out of our lives which, frankly, few of us can afford to lose as time marches on. Lockdowns, cancelled holidays, isolated from loved ones, birthdays and anniversaries missed, general all-round stress caused by the seismic interruption to what we like to call “normality,” and the constant strain of what I like to call “Covid-dodging,”

As we get set to enter 2021, a date which appropriately enough has an oddly futuristic ring to it, we must ask ourselves whether we would want to be born in any other universe and live our lives in an alternate reality.

Prof Hawking may well be right about his parallel universe theory, as he has been about so many other scientific conundrums, but I’m content to be in this universe, warts and all, with the family I have and my life in general. I’m sure most, if not all, of our members feel the same way. We can all look back and wish had done some things differently, but hindsight is a wonderful thing. Yes, it’s been a depressing year in many ways, but I am happy just to be here and looking forward to better things on the horizon.

So, roll on 2021, We’re ready to deal with anything you can chuck at us. Hopefully, you will be a little easier on us than your predecessor but the signs are looking good,

It may be just a tad premature to say this, but I'm putting my money on a fabulous 2021 containing most of life's delights that were mostly absent from 2020, especially a vaccine !

So, please join me in a toast (virtually that is) to a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year. In this universe, of course. Right now, it's the only one we've got.

