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THE UNIVERSE OPENS ITS MOUTH

by Terry Black

...and delivers one *hell* of a belch! No, seriously, sometimes the Universe (or God, Allah, Buddha, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, whatever), sometimes the Universe opens its mouth, and seems to speak directly to me. Proof positive of 1) a miracle, 2) a coincidence, or 3) delusions of grandeur, you decide.

ITEM 1: Lisa and I are at the Drumming Circle in Aliso Beach (whenever there's a full moon, free parking after 5:00 PM), you bring drums of all types, bass or bongos or – in Lisa's case – a Native American hand drum, with stretched buffalo hide over a ring of polished maple. And you beat the hell out of it for two or three hours, BAM BAM BOOM, no talent required. (I know because they let *me* do it.) One shirtless bald guy had an empty Sparklett's water bottle and a wooden spoon, BAP BAP-ing away, and he fit right in.

Cops were there in abundance, on edge since Uvalde, but I could have told them not to worry. Mass shooters are simmering with repressed anger; drum-circlers repress nothing,

pounding their little hearts out, in a once-a-month display of wild, percussive abandon. Under the high-wattage glow of a radiant moon, casting its milky benediction over this loudest of rituals.

Maybe there's a message here, I'm thinking. To Lisa the night is fraught with significance – *fraught*, I tell you – but to me, God-or-whatever's message remains cryptic.

ITEM 2: I'm recalling when we attended this year's Pageant of the Masters in Laguna Beach, where grown men and women don costumes and pose on custom-built stages, reproducing some of the art world's finest masterpieces.

This year's theme was *Wonderful World*, featuring a cavalcade of global sights and sounds, captured on canvas and now, years later, on a stage rendered flat by the use of light and shadow. One thrilling sequence captures journalist Nelly Bly, trying to break the record set by Phileas Fogg in the Jules Verne classic, *Around the World in Eighty Days*. (Modern astronauts circle the Earth in ninety minutes, but never mind that.) Action portraits capture Bly's epic journey, on ships, trains and horseback, trying to best her fictional rival – an epic adventure from the man who *invented* the epic adventure.

Again, fraught with significance. But of what, exactly?

ITEM 3: We attend Tapestry's Sunday service, where today's story for kids is *The Fall of Freddie the Leaf* by Leo Buscaglia, the tale of an autumn leaf who turns the most colorful in its final days before dying. *Oh swell*, I'm thinking, but the Reverend Kent Doss puts his own spin in that, course-correcting toward optimism.

“We don't know when we'll die, only that we will,” he says, something like that, I can't remember his exact words. “But that's all the more reason to make our lives meaningful.”

Because as bright and colorful as we become, with the benefit of advancing years, so do the opportunities increase to share our gifts, to serve others, to contribute to the world that shaped us – in the hope that we, in some small way, can shape it in return.

Maybe it's by flailing at bongos under a full moon. Maybe by traveling around the world in however-many days. Or maybe (for me) it's my writing, my stories, the still-in-the-works sequel to *Dead Heat* or my outrageous romance novels. Or by helping Brittany, my honorary stepdaughter, trying to be a nurse and raise three kids on a budget, not easy in today's economy.

Yeah, maybe. I wonder if that's really it, the message the Universe has. I'm still wondering when I return to my car, and find *a bright yellow leaf* stuck against the windshield, as if plucked from today's Freddie the Leaf story. Seeming to say, "Look at me! Do you see what I must symbolize?"

A bit obvious, God, if you ask me. Lisa says it's no coincidence, that my life's purpose has been affirmed by the appearance of a friggin' leaf on the windshield. Personally, I'm not sure. So I'm posing the question to you, Gentle Reader: Was it a miracle or not?

Take the rest of your life to decide.