

# Quantum Connections

**W**e sat in the nursery, surrounded by plush animals and colorful plastic toys. The bedside lamp glowed amber in the growing dusk, and her damp blonde locks left a growing wet patch on my shoulder as my niece snuggled beside me, a bedtime story splayed open across my lap.

I read aloud, turning the pages slowly so she could enjoy the pictures. Like most children, my niece had learned to 'read' the story by memorizing the recited words with the pictures on each page. As I read, she mouthed the words along with me — a quiet, focused whisper carried on milky-sweet breath.

Her three-year-old body struggled to find the right comfort zone against my foreign frame. Daddy normally did the bedtime routine. My brother's tall and lanky frame would have left plenty of space in the tiny armchair for two, but my shorter, stouter frame forced her legs to drape over the armrest in a rubbery contortionist act than only young children can achieve. Bedtime routine tonight felt rather stilted.

We reached the last page of the book, and I closed the back cover. 'The End,' I whispered. She blinked up at me with expectant blue eyes as I set the book down. It seemed not a trace of sleep was crossing those eyelids. A moment of uncertainty crossed my face. We'd finished the book, now what?

Through the open door across the corridor, I could hear my sister-in-law changing my nephew's diaper. 'Psst, Rachel!' I shout-whispered. 'What do I do next?'



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'Tuck her in. Turn on the white noise machine.' I heard her reply.

I stood and lifted my niece to my shoulder, her arms instinctively hugging my neck, legs dangling like two limp noodles. She smelled of strawberries and baby shampoo as I placed her on the bed, brushed a strand of hair from her forehead, and tucked the blanket around her.

I cast my eye around the room and located the tiny speaker that must be the

white noise machine. I flicked the switch on, and a soothing blur of ocean waves lapped at the stillness in the nursery.

Despite the hours of boisterous playtime in the backyard earlier in the day and the now-late hour, she lay wide awake on her pillow staring blankly back at me. I figured there must be something missing in this bedtime routine, but I wasn't sure what.

'Rachel? Now what?' I stage whispered again.

'Does she have her Minnie Mouse?'

I rooted around the pile of plushies on the bed and found a Minnie Mouse in her characteristic polka-dot dress. My niece held her hands out eagerly, nuzzling the soft toy as she pulled in to her face. But still no sleep. How did parents do this every night, for years on end?

'Anything else?'

'Turn the light off, tell her you love her, and shut the door,' came the patient reply.

I kissed her forehead, turned off the bedside lamp, and retreated to the doorway. 'Good night,' I whispered. 'Uncle Joel loves you!'

The hallway light glistened in the whites of her eyes as I pulled the door shut, and I realized in my forty-two years on this planet, that was the first time I'd ever put a child to bed.

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Two decades earlier, and on the other side of the world, another child struggled to fall asleep, for far different reasons. The windows rattled and the walls groaned with distant explosions. Abdallah lay awake crying, gripping his worn teddy bear tightly. His eyes squeezed shut at every thunderous report, and he whimpered beneath the high-pitched whistle of tracer fire. Luminescent ribbons of green flashed through the bedroom window, casting ghostly shadows on the ceiling.

A clatter rose from downstairs, and his mother rushed into the room. The thick folds of her burka billowed like a black sandstorm. She scooped up Abdallah in her arms, whispering fervent prayers of protection as he hugged his arms tightly around her neck. With each bomb report, he clutched tighter. Her veil had slipped backwards, fully revealing her rich black hair. It smelled faintly of rose petals and incense. His teddy bear dangled limply from one hand as he nuzzled his face deep into the crook of her neck, wiping his tears on ten thousand silken strands of a mother's love.

The warm baritone notes of his father's voice rose muffled from the front door — '*Salamata*' and '*Mashallah*' and other goodbye formalities spoken to departing house guests with a restrained hush. A rustle of clothing and the quiet whisper of shoes slipping on over socks. Another round of spoken goodbyes and thank yous, a soft and hurried crunch of gravel and the rusted squeal of the garden gate being pushed closed.

'Shh, Abdallah,' his mother comforted, turning his face by the chin with her fingers and placing a gentle kiss on his forehead. 'See there?' she pointed out the window at the bombs exploding in the blackness of night above a flickering orange glow which backlit the distant

horizon. 'They're just like stars. Shooting stars like we used to watch at Bubbe's house in the countryside.'

A shadow filled the square of light spilling through the doorway as Abdallah's father grasped the doorjamb. 'The Americans have finally come for Saddam,' he announced quietly, firmly. 'I'll pack our bags. We'll be safe with your parents in Salahaddin. For now.' His father's voice had wavered on those last two words, uncertain and tentative. The shadow moved on, but Abdallah thought he could still hear the rasp of his father's breathing and make out a set of whitened knuckles gripping the doorjamb. The quiet thud of a fist repeatedly hitting the wall was soft and muted, seemingly more distant than the explosions outside. Was his father crying? After a moment, the shadow flitted briefly back across the light and disappeared down the hallway empty-handed, yet hunched over as if carrying a heavy weight.

'Are we going to visit Bubbe again now?' Abdallah asked.

'Soon. Papa will drive us there tomorrow morning.'

'Is Papa sad to visit Bubbe?'

'No, *habibi*.' She offered no more explanation. She grasped Abdallah's toddler frame to her hip, quietly staring through the darkened window panes, her face a shifting and unreadable mirage of light and shadow.

'Will we see more shooting stars?'

She nodded, turning to look into his face. 'Yes, *azizi*. Real ones. Soft and silent. Not these bright and noisy ones.'

Abdallah was quiet for a moment, wondering about the difference. 'Should I make a wish now, Mama?' Abdallah asked. 'A wish on these shooting stars?'

'Yes, my dear,' his mother replied. He thought he felt a catch in her voice, like the sound of a door closing shut. 'We should all make a wish tonight.'

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Two bedtimes. On two different continents. Separated by two decades of time. And yet, somehow, I inhabit both worlds. When I first met Abdallah in mid-2021, we sat in a café in Baghdad with two cups of sweet *cha* steaming on the table between us, and he shared his stories of growing up in war-torn Iraq. He recalled standing in the streets the morning the US-led coalition of tanks rolled in for Operation Iraqi Freedom. War propaganda flyers airdropped from overhead littered the streets in ticker-tape fashion, and Abdallah remembers picking one up and waving it in the air as the tanks rolled by. A friendly soldier waved from a passing tank hatch and tossed him a piece of candy. A smile spread across his face even in the retelling. It was the first time he remembers meeting a foreigner, and it set him on a lifetime trajectory of seeking more encounters like it. Now, as a young adult, he participates in a local forum for international travelers in Baghdad, promoting cross-cultural connections — the very means by which we met.

Two months after meeting Abdallah in Baghdad, I found myself back in the US — seemingly for good — and reading bedtime stories to my niece. Despite growing up in the States, life there felt foreign. I hadn't lived in America for nearly 2 decades, and now I was suddenly whiplashed to a time and place that I had only known before social media or smart phones. My last permanent residency in the US was closer on a timeline to the fall of the Berlin Wall than the recent fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban. The last time I used Kansas as my home address, the US hadn't even invaded Iraq yet.

It's no wonder then why bedtime with my niece felt like a kind of awkward nostalgia — it was a snapshot moment of an alternate life I'd never lived. Somewhere in a parallel universe, there exists a version of me that resides permanently in the United States and plays the full-time role of uncle, brother and son. That version of me reads bedtime stories, plays Lego like a boss, maybe holds a 9-to-5, shops for health insurance, and spends hard-earned vacation time with family in St. Louis or southern California.

And in that same alternate universe, maybe Abdallah doesn't wake to sound of bombs falling. Perhaps his family never finds safe haven away from Baghdad during the war years. Perhaps there is no friendly soldier to change a child's life with a sweet and a smile. And subsequently, perhaps he never sees a world beyond the dusty smog of Baghdad.

I don't know precisely what Abdallah wished for as a child, but our life trajectories are somehow interconnected. Call it the Butterfly Effect, but when Abdallah stood in the streets of Baghdad marveling at the mechanical magic of US military tanks rumbling down the city streets, I believe all the possible universes set a course towards our paths intersecting.

According to quantum mechanics, the thing we call 'time' doesn't actually exist. We only think it exists because of observable changes to the arrangement of atoms in the universe. But for quantum physicists, there is no past or future, only an eternal 'now' that is made real through our observations of the physical universe.

Atoms, those building blocks of the cosmos, are surrounded by electrons, which — and bear with me on this one — do not exist in specific space and time, but rather as a cloud of possibility. In a Schrödinger's paradox, it is only in the act of observing them that their location in space and time is fixed. That means on the sub-atomic level, there exists not just one single, observable reality, but a whole realm of infinite possibilities.

Furthermore, all those possibilities are intricately linked across the fabric of the universe. Observed changes on the quantum level can be seen mirrored *instantaneously across vast distances* in atoms with seemingly no physical connection to each other. Known as quantum entanglement, it's a mystery physicists have yet to adequately describe. But at its essence, the theory of quantum entanglement means that particles can link together no matter how far apart they are in space, creating an instantaneous re-weaving of the pattern of the cosmos in ways beyond our understanding. Now, I'm only an armchair physicist at best, casually pursuing it as a minor interest; but, if you take these ideas and zoom out to the macro-level, the implication is that we embody far more potential than we know, and are far more interconnected than we imagine.

I believe it's because of that potential and interconnection on the subatomic level that I find myself once again living in Iraqi Kurdistan. My time in the US is an experience I'll cherish — but it is just one electron point in the cloud of possibilities my life could have taken. And of all the possible lives I could be living, I find myself entangled with this one again, here, now: choosing to do the hard thing of moving halfway around the world to a former conflict zone, taking up a management role I feel grossly imposter-syndrome'd into, and attempting to influence leaders and politicians on matters of regional educational policy.

Despite the challenges of this new role, I see my most important task every day as simply standing by the school entrance and greeting each student with a smile every morning — if only to share a glimpse of love and hope in a society still reeling from decades of conflict. Like that US soldier who greeted Abdallah that morning two decades ago, I hope my actions get others entangled in a quantum web of exploring possibilities and spreading positivity. Every day I talk with young people who are curious about the world and thirsty for prospects beyond their borders. And hardly a day goes by when I'm not asked, 'Why did you choose to move *here*, of all places?'

I can't say with certainty whether I chose this life, or it chose me. Was there some cosmic fate that placed me here for this moment? Or did I have the power to choose otherwise? Have I always been destined to seek out this particular challenge in Iraq, or could I have chosen to stay in the US and be that uncle, fashioning crowns out of dandelions and making lazy arcs on the tree swing with the kids? Did I truly choose to explore the far corners of the world, or could I have been fated to explore with my niece a world that extended no further than the fence-line with the neighbors out back?

These are questions that risk keeping me up at night. And no amount of white noise machines or wishing stars can resolve these paradoxical questions. But I won't lose sleep over them; because regardless of whether the physicists are right or not, then all I really have is now — this moment — to make a difference in the world. So no matter which universe I find myself in, I'll live each waking moment with the singular purpose to love — and love well — in mind.



*Joel David Bond currently lives and works in Iraqi Kurdistan. You can find out more about his work at [joeldavidbond.com](http://joeldavidbond.com), or by following any of the social media channels linked here.*



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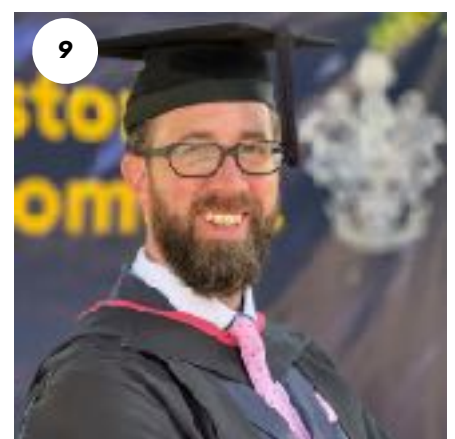
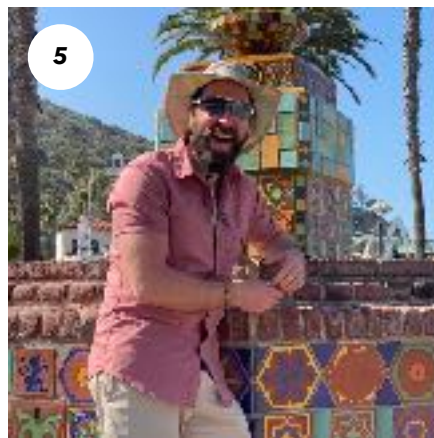
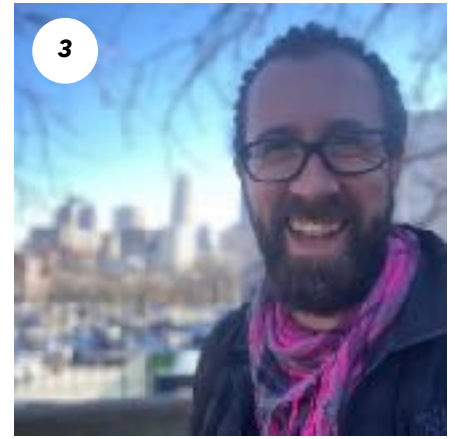


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## PHOTO HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2022

1. Plenty of family time!
2. Hours and hours of writing
3. Exploring my Kansas City roots
4. Public speaking engagements
5. Visiting family in California
6. Searching for publishers for my book!
7. Raising awareness for social issues
8. Being the greatest uncle ever
9. Graduation ceremony in the UK
10. Traveling Europe with Mom & Papa C
11. Staying connected to Iraq