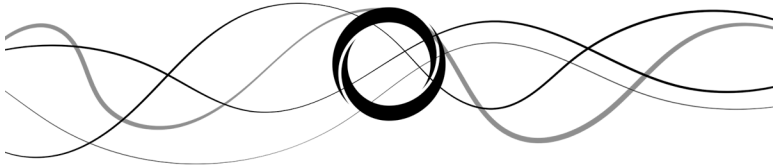


THE PORTALS



“ See those little circles there? Those are portals to another dimension.”
Max looked at his uncle with incredulousness.

At fourteen, Max loved all things fantastical—he had a collection of Piers Anthony and Terry Brooks novels; *Lord of the Rings* played incessantly on his DVD player (his mom refused to buy the Blu-ray set, considering its redundancy unnecessary and too costly despite Max’s protest to the contrary); and a large percentage of his free time (too much, according to his dad) was dedicated to *World of Warcraft*. He proudly proclaimed his geekdom at school and kept a constant vigil for a new excursion into the realm of imagination.

Still, he knew the difference between fantasy and the real world. He’d love to ride a winged hippogriff across the sunset or journey through the galaxy in the Millennium Falcon, but he knew he was just a kid from Houston. The

closest he would get to space travel was taking a field trip to the Johnson Space Center. He would never be an astronaut as he was terrible at math, and his interest in science leaned toward figuring out how things burned or exploded.

“Portals to another dimension?” Max repeated, trying to keep disbelief out of his voice. He liked his uncle and didn’t want to hurt his feelings. Regardless, he knew the man had a habit of going off the deep end with strange ideas. When Max was little, he loved hearing about aliens who visited the Earth centuries ago and bred the human species, or how houses built from metal would generate a healing magnetic field, or that there was a hole in the Earth’s core at the North Pole that planes would fly into and disappear. These conversations would go on for hours, sparking the boy’s imagination.

The problem, of course, was that Max was now growing up and understood what was factual and what wasn’t. He hadn’t become cynical—not yet—but his mind was becoming set regarding the world around him, which was tangible and often unpleasant. Bigfoot existed no more than the Bermuda Triangle or the end of the world, as the Mayan calendar predicted.

“Portals.” Bob Gutermuth’s eyes held a steady gaze at Max. A hint of a smile indicated he was either teasing his nephew or revealing a well-kept secret.

Max began to think of him as his Weird Uncle Bob about six months ago. This was right after Bob not only rid his house of the microwave oven after reading on the Internet that microwaves “killed living food,” but he actually buried the nuker in the backyard to prevent others from being affected by its deadly technology. Bob seemed to get a lot of

strange ideas from the Internet—at one point, he proclaimed aliens used the Web as a transportation device. Max laughed at that, thinking that his uncle could not believe such outrageousness, but now he wasn't sure. Bob also once said that he could email God. Max wondered if the aliens that traveled online ever visited God or if they just sent Him instant messages.

The “portals” of which Bob spoke were spots of random sizes that bespeckled photos taken on a beach with a digital camera. Bob had taken a trip to Galveston the previous weekend and now displayed the photos taken there on his laptop for his nephew to see.

A thought passed through Max's mind that maybe a particular video game influenced his weird uncle, but dismissed that idea because fifty-two-year-old Robert Gutermuth, an electrician who only discovered electronics the year before last, had never played a video game in his life. While the word “portals” conjured images in Max's mind of lightning-blue holes appearing to allow characters to move from one playing level to another, he was sure that to his uncle, it most likely meant clunky metal doors on a submarine.

“Uncle Bob,” Max said, trying to sound patient and not condescending, “those are water droplets.”

“No, they're not. If they were water droplets, they'd be the same in every picture because they'd leave a stain on the lens. But see...” He switched between one photo of still Gulf water nestled against flat sand and another identical picture. The only dissimilar elements were round imperfections of various sizes that dotted the screen. They differed with each shot. “They change. The portals move.”

“Uncle Bob,” Max said again. He almost said “Weird Uncle Bob” and had to pre-censor himself. “You aimed the camera at the beach. Water spray hit the lens and evaporated. More spray landed on the lens when you took the next picture. It’s pretty obvious.”

“The lens is too small.” To prove his point, Bob pulled a small digital point-and-shoot camera out of his computer bag. He showed Max the tiny glass aperture on the device. “If water sprayed on it, it would cover the entire lens.”

“Hmm,” Max grunted. He didn’t agree, but didn’t want to argue the point.

“The portals can’t be seen with the human eye. No one can tell they’re there. But digital technology has changed that. This,” he said, motioning to the camera, “is modern magic. With cameras like these, we can now see the invisible world around us.”

Max didn’t believe what his uncle said, but was curious about where this conversation was leading. With Weird Uncle Bob, you never knew, but it always ended somewhere interesting if not believable. “Where do the portals go?”

Bob looked around the living room. Even though the house was unusually quiet because of the rest of Max’s family being elsewhere, Bob leaned in toward Max and whispered to the boy in a conspiratorial manner.

“The Earth has six major energy centers,” he explained. “There’s one in the Bermuda Triangle, another at the North Pole, and others spread around the globe. They provide the psychic power to everyone on Earth. Without these portals emitting their energy, life on the planet would cease.”

“But where does the energy come from?”

A twinkle gleamed in Bob’s eyes, the creases at the

corners deepening like a chiseled etching. “Like Rod Serling used to say, there is a fifth dimension. It’s not of the physical plane, but a state of mind. The beings that exist there are of pure thought.”

“No bodies?”

“No bodies.”

Max let this sink in. He still didn’t believe it; however, the gravity in Bob’s voice, the surety in his body language, and the way his eyes seemed to say, “*This is for real*,” made Max want to believe. He was an adolescent Fox Mulder.

“How do people live without bodies?” Max suspected that Weird Uncle Bob was making this up as he went along, but he was curious what Bob’s imagination would conjure. The dreamer part of himself pushed aside the skeptic in him.

“Because they’re pure energy.” Bob’s voice remained in a strong whisper that made even the silliest of ideas interesting. “They exist all around us, but can only travel between our world and theirs through these.”

His finger tapped the computer screen, pointing out one of the larger orbs that seemed to float over the beach.

“What if...” Max wasn’t sure if he should continue the thought, but he found his courage. “What if one of us—a regular human, I mean—went through a portal?”

Bob grinned and sat back in his chair. “*That* is an excellent question.”



LIFE CONTINUED, THE WAY IT HAS A BAD HABIT OF DOING. MAX returned to his ordinary regimen of that of a middle schooler. The ritual of morning prep, attending class, avoiding homework until the last minute, texting with friends, and squeezing in as many hours of entertainment that a day allowed filled Max's waking moments.

Weird Uncle Bob went back to his life, and Max's thoughts of him disappeared to the recesses of his mind. As was often the case with family and friends, love doesn't diminish, but when they were elsewhere, they were simply low on the thought order.

So it was with Max regarding Uncle Bob. Now and then (in particular when Max played a particular video game), the idea of portals and energy beings crossed his mind. He gave this concept a cursory pondering and then proceeded to more important issues in the life of a young teen.

Three weeks after Bob's visit, Max wandered into the kitchen to dig into the refrigerator. He had already eaten dinner and one snack, yet was craving more. If only there were energy portals for teenagers...

"No, I haven't talked to him in a couple of weeks," Max's mom said into her cell phone. She was cleaning up the dinner dishes with one hand while the other held the wireless device to her ear. She circled around Max like mothers learn to do when their children are underfoot.

Max tuned her out, like children often do when their mothers are engaged in a conversation that doesn't apply to them. He found a bowl of tuna fish that had been in the fridge for three days. He considered the pros and cons of slapping it on some bread and eating it as a sandwich or just spooning it out of the bowl.

“What do you mean, missing?” Kimberly Gardner’s tone and demeanor changed abruptly, catching Max’s attention. His mother froze in place, her back becoming rigid. Her free hand drifted to her face with the index finger tracing the ridge of her lower lip. Creases of concern furrowed her forehead.

Max regarded her with curiosity. This bit of mystery was more interesting than tuna fish.

“That’s crazy. He wouldn’t just take off without telling someone.”

He? Max made a mental checklist of all the males to which his mother might be referring.

“Yes, I know he has strange ideas sometimes. That doesn’t mean he’s unstable.”

Ah. Weird Uncle Bob. It made sense now. Whoever was on the other end of the phone knew Bob and his oddities, and also knew that Kimberly was his sister. For reasons unknown, Bob was nowhere to be found, so this unknown person contacted her out of distress or apprehension. Max’s mother was not one to succumb to cries of alarm—she was grounded and sensible.

“Has anyone checked inside his house to make sure he didn’t have an accident?” She listened to the other person speak, her lips pursed together. “Has anyone called the police?”

Anxiety surged through Max’s nervous system. If his mother was talking about police involvement, this must be serious.

“What happened to Uncle Bob?” he asked.

Kimberly shooed him away, trying to hear the voice on the phone. “Okay, look, Dave and I will run over there and

check out his place. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation for this."

After hanging up, Kimberly dragged her husband away from ESPN to give him the news. Max insisted on being present, having already heard her half of the telephone conversation, and he wanted to be filled in on the rest. His parents allowed him to stay, but felt it best not to include his younger sister Maddy, who was only ten and would be too distressed by this. Bad news always upset her.

Kimberly explained that the person who called was a guy named Jon McAllister. John worked with Bob and had known Kimberly through a walk-a-thon that both of them took part in every year. He had informed her that Bob had not gone into work for several days and there was no answer when his employer tried to call him. None of Bob's and Jon's mutual friends knew where he was, either. Neighbors had last seen him over the weekend when he had driven away. The car wasn't in the driveway and the house remained dark, so apparently he had not returned home.

Max knew that since Bob had divorced nine years ago, his uncle had taken an active part in many community activities and several recently discovered on-line groups that his uncle said were composed of "like-minded individuals."

Kimberly ranted about those groups. "They're weirdos with no grasp on reality. Who can tell what people like that are capable of? The police need to investigate them."

"I'm sure if it comes to it, the police will do everything possible to find him." Dave sounded like the voice of reason, but Max recognized the tone as one meant to placate his mother when she became excited.

“He always falls for every harebrained idea that comes along,” she continued, as if Dave had not spoken. Max heard this routine many times and understood that Bob believed whole-heartily in some wacky notion until exposed to another, even more ludicrous one. Max found it endearing. To his mother, it was exasperating.

Kimberly and Dave went to Bob’s house, leaving Max behind to stay with Maddy, much to his consternation. He could do nothing about it, though, so he stayed in his room and sulked. Even *World of Warcraft* wasn’t enjoyable to him.

His parents found nothing out of the ordinary. The laptop was gone, but that wasn’t surprising since Bob tended to take it everywhere he went. By all appearances, he left the house and simply never returned. Where he went and why he didn’t come back was anyone’s guess. The only thing left was to contact the police.

The next day, Bob’s car turned up. It had been impounded after sitting parked at a beach in Galveston for several days. Kimberly and Dave got it out of the impound, using the spare key Bob had left with her. Miraculously, they found the laptop in the car, but the cheapie digital camera was gone. It seemed Bob had the camera with him when he vanished.

Vanished. That word bounced around inside Max’s skull. Bob had seemingly dropped off the face of the Earth. Police found no records of him in any hospital or morgue. If he drowned in the ocean, his body would have washed ashore by now. Max didn’t think Bob was dead. He considered what Bob had told him regarding the portal and Max’s own question about a person going through it.

No, that was all crazy talk. It was Weird Uncle Bob talk.

There's no way Bob actually believed what he said. It was conjecture by a man with an overactive imagination entertaining a kid with a similarly imaginative mind.

Wasn't it?

No portals existed. No fifth dimension. *The Twilight Zone* was just a TV show; the outlandish things that happened in those stories did not exist in real life. Inter-dimensional energy beings were fun to think about as a hypothetical, but only mentally unstable people thought they truly existed.

The problem was, Max couldn't convince himself of this. Unless the mafia kidnapped his uncle off the beach, what other explanation was there?

