

Essay

Murphy's Law: Is it right or is it wrong?

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It was in the early '80s and I could still vividly recall when I eagerly picked up and bought a book entitled "Murphy's Law". Holding the pocket book securely in my hand, I then asked myself, "What is in this book that made it an international best seller?"

Actually, I heard about this book from my friends who were praising to high heavens the truth that was being spread around by the author. I didn't know who Murphy was and what I read from the book was that Murphy was a keen observer of life and he came out with a set of practical rules that governed his life. His famous dictum was: "If Anything Can Go Wrong, It Will."

Like a siren call in the book "Odyssey", I was mesmerized by the message that Murphy was conveying and I just accepted it, hook, line and sinker. Who would not be swayed with the convincing examples that Murphy gave? In fact, I could even experience the truth of the message and they were happening around me in my daily life. That message was even supported by an oft mentioned adage: "Expect the best but be prepared for the worst."

For quite a while, I had been talking and spreading the truth of Murphy's Law and I even lent my book to some of my friends who had not read it. Then I noticed that the message was already spreading like wildfire and that books stores were even selling poster frames of Murphy's Law. People were proud and eagerly hanging these frames in their offices. Even the world media was hooked by the message, telling people that the end of the world is coming by way of a nuclear holocaust. This dire forecast was supported by the threatening evidence of the increasing nuclear arsenals of the East and West, embroiled in a never ending Cold War of attrition.

With the ever growing tension that was developing around the world at that time, the answer to the question of why Murphy's book became an international best seller suddenly dawned on me. "We, the citizens of this planet, knowingly or unknowingly, are the ones feeding on this reality."

"There must be something wrong with Murphy's Law," I said glumly, "Although couched in a very subtle way, it actually leads people to think that negativity is their inevitable destiny."

Thereafter, a thought swayed in my mind, telling me, "That is what is wrong with people. They think that they are thinking but actually they are not. They are just so focused on their negativity and the fear that comes with it, that it becomes a reality to them."

I didn't know how that answer came to my mind. But it started my search for what really lies behind the message of Murphy's Law.

In my search, the adage that was sketched in my poster frame, "The pursuit of truth shall set you free, even if you never catch up with it", has always guided me and given me energy to push on.

One morning, a stirring just came into my mind. It came on repeating itself, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." I started to search for its meaning. Then I blurted out, "If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then ugliness is also in the eye of the beholder." "How could that be?", I said, "Ugliness is self evident and not dependent on the perceiver. Everybody knows whether a person is ugly or not." Right away, an answer emerged from my mind, "You're missing the point." "What point?", I asked. There was silence from then on.

Years passed by and my search went on and on.

It was while I was reading a book one evening that my eyes were riveted on the statement, which says, "You are what

you believe you are.” I then asked my self, “Is this the answer I’m looking for?” Suddenly, a thought emerged from my mind, telling me, “If you see the glass of water as half empty, you are right. If you see the glass as half full, you are right.”

I was then led to a second hand book being sold at “Book Sale”. Following my ritual when buying a book, I declared, “If you really belong to me, I will leave you for a while and return again to find out whether you are really for me to read or not.”

I returned to the book store two days later and the book was still there. It was entitled “Casey’s Law”, written by Al Casey. When I opened the book on the first chapter, my eyes were readily focused on the opening paragraph:

“For decades, if not for centuries, the inevitability of failure has been associated with a mysterious, no doubt depressive, Irishman named Murphy, who has steadfastly maintained that if anything can go wrong, it will.” I never set out specifically to disprove Murphy. Instead, during nearly fifty years in business, including stints as the head of the Times Mirror Company and American Airlines, and several years in government service, I discovered what I have come to call Casey’s Law: “If Something Can Go Right, It Should.”

I was so thrilled in buying the book that I just said, “At last, somebody came out with a law that goes against Murphy’s Law. There is no contest between a depressive Irishman who was preaching the “inevitability of failure”, and a highly successful Irish-American business executive who is now preaching the “inevitability of success.” But then who can argue against the successful record of Murphy’s Law, as an international best seller. The book “Casey’s Law” did not even succeed to become a national best seller. Maybe the reason for this is that, “Bad news sells.”

Much as I was thrilled with the publication of the Casey’s Law, I was faced with the question of probabilities that the future holds either for Murphy’s Law or for Casey’s Law. Both of these laws refer to future happenings. One of them refers to the inevitability of failure and the other refers to the inevitability of success in the future. But then, how can either of them refer to the inevitability that failure or success will happen when the future has not yet happened? The philosophy behind each of these two laws led me to design a program module for a creative seminar/workshop based on “Management of Probabilities” and entitled, “Yes YOU Can ... Design Your Future.”

Since the situations I was previously referring to speak not of a quantifiable measurement of statistical probability, I guessed that the inevitability of something to happen, either as success or failure, would now depend on the subjective degree of belief that one has under any situation. And that degree of belief is also dependent on the degree of focus and desire that one has on his objective or target.

My guess was right but I was dead wrong with its non-measureability. I was fully surprised to know that a renowned Swiss mathematician named Daniel Bernoulli formulated the measurement of probabilities on something that could not be measured or counted. This was achieved when he established his basic thesis that “people ascribe different values to risk.” Mr. Bernoulli’s idea was cited by Peter L. Bernstein in his worldwide bestseller book “Against the Gods, The Remarkable Story of Risk.”

I really admire the intellectual and historical tapestry that Mr. Bernstein weaved into his book, especially when he wrote the following:

“Gut rules measurement. . . . And that is a very good thing. If everyone valued risk in precisely the same way, many risky opportunities will be passed up. Venturesome people place high utility on the small probability of huge gains and low utility on the larger probability of loss. Others place utility on the probability of gain because their paramount goal is to preserve their capital. Where one sees sunshine, the other sees thunderstorm. Without the venturesome, the world will turn a lot more slowly. Think of what life would be like if everyone were phobic about lightning, flying in airplanes, or investing in start-up companies. We are indeed fortunate that humans differ in their appetite for risks.”

My long search for a scientific basis to support my premise of subjective degree belief was rewarded later on when I stumbled upon a scientific formulation known as the “Bayesian Theorem”. This was formulated by Thomas Bayes, an 18th century British Mathematician, on the basis of subjective probability which in turn is based on the degree of belief of the perceiver.

Now, I can understand the point of the message “If you see the glass of water as half empty, you are right. And if you see the glass as half full, you are right,” because, “Where one sees sunshine, the other sees thunderstorm.”

From a greater scheme of things, however, it can be said that “It is not a question of who is right or who is wrong: Murphy’s Law or Casey’s Law. Each side of the equation is just a side of a coin that can be flipped to give a 50/50 percent probability of happening.” The only question left to be asked is, which side will you choose? Of course, a negative choice will, more or less, lead to a negative result. A positive choice will, more or less, lead to a positive result.

But then a paradox of life will come into play and that is, “There is a lesson to be learned from everything that is

happening under the sun, whether you think they are good or bad, right or wrong.” And this is the very reason why I wept when I meditated on the Bible verse, “Thank God for everything.”