

You Are Surrounded by Alternate Universes

People love the idea of alternate universes. As big as the universe is, it seems we aren't satisfied with things being just the way we are. We often want to know how things could have been different for us if we had chosen differently.

One popular alternate universe hypothesis goes that every choice between A and B creates two alternate universes. In one, you chose to eat that chocolate bar. In the other you didn't. In one you married your wife. In the other world you didn't.

I don't see a lot of evidence for the actual existence of alternate universes. That sort of thing seems to be beyond the possibility of proving, almost by definition. But there is a metaphorical sense in which choices add up to make alternate universes. We get to see the results of the choices we didn't make in the other people who did make them. In other words, other people = alternate universes.

Humans share a lot of DNA with each other, accumulated through hundreds of millions of years of shared evolution. We each contain at least trace amounts of all the traits that are possible to a human being: aggression, passivity, strength, weakness, addiction, health, etc. Every human being contains a world of possibility within them – the shared evolutionary data that comes from those hundreds of millions of years of suffering and death and success and life.

We share so much, but what differentiates us – and what differentiates our worlds – is how we express those traits: in our genetics and unconscious motivations, yes, but also in our more conscious and volitional thoughts and actions. Setting aside the nature vs. nurture vs. epigenetics debate on personality and traits, we each at least have within us the potential to lead a number of different lives.

Your miserable, lonely sibling might reflect the alternate universe in which you had taken fewer chances or hurt more people. Your happy, confident manager at work might reflect the alternate universe in which you had chosen to take more responsibility and work harder. That homeless and drug-addicted person you met the other night might reflect an alternate universe in which your life came down around you and you gave in to despair.

More than you might think, the people you meet reflect back to you a path you could have chosen. It's not always easy to tell, as we're all so different in part because of the accumulation of choices over long periods of time (stretching out before we were born).

But in any case, a choice has the power to split off a different universe for us. Our unchosen paths don't really go away. They probably live on in someone, somewhere. With any luck, we can let those alternate universes around us teach us something about what

we're missing and what we're not.