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The Parallel Universe

In the world of Science Fiction there is a concept called the parallel universe. It is a simple concept really. It hypothesizes that everything we know in our world is done exactly the opposite in some dimension that we cannot see, feel or hear. The parallel universe is an intriguing concept in that it has both positive and negative aspects. For example, what might be considered good in our universe could be considered evil in another and vice versa. In this theoretical framework, there are even more than two universe scenarios. Sometimes it is called the “multi-verse” implying many different outcomes. In order to understand that theory, I guess one has to be a quantum physics professional.

If what could be evil in this universe, could be considered good another is possible, perhaps we could correct some wrongs into rights. This thought came to my head the other day as I was driving down the road thinking about the relationship between the fire service and the National Association of Home Builders. I wondered what would happen if in a parallel universe the National Association of Home Builders were the strongest advocates of residential sprinklers and the fire service who was in opposition.

This is a thought process that too many might seem bizarre but it might play itself out in some very unique ways if we allow our minds to contemplate its possibility. Imagine if you will back in the late 1800s when the sprinkler system was first devised that Mr. Parmalee, Mr. Grinnell and all of the others who were strong advocates of sprinklers were running around the country trying to save factories. Initially there was not a ground swell of huge support by the fire service was there? Over time, the creation of the fire sprinkler standard was primarily a function of the private sector to begin with. Although I have never personally seen a copy of it, it is my understanding that the very first standard that served to form the national fire protection association was the standard on sprinklers.

Imagine what would happen in our parallel universe if that concept would have taken hold in the early 1900s. What did the United States look like in 1900? The population of the United States at that point was a mere 76,094,000. If we contemplate the fact that a significant portion of the United States at that point was rural and most of the urban cities were just merely beginning to take off, it creates a huge seed-bed for the use of sprinklers.

Again, keeping our imagination focused on the parallel possibilities, what would have happened if somewhere along that line an early home builder had grasped the very simple fact that putting sprinklers into homes would keep them from burning to the ground and subsequently provide one of the safest environments for John Q citizen to live in? It is probably likely that if any homeowner had done that they would have been challenged at least initially by some fire authorities who likely might



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have thought of the sprinkler system as something counterproductive for the development of the firefighter.

I not only know that possibility exists, but have actually witnessed fire departments in modern times that have gone on record as being opposed to sprinkler protection for no other reason than it seems that it is perceived as reducing the number the fires justifies the existence of the fire department. In reading the autobiography of Mark Twain, I have come across at least three different places in which Mark Twain alluded to the fact that a more intelligent approach to fire protection could have made the world a safer place to be as early as 1900.

I know that this idea was contemplated because I found ads in the Saturday Evening Post as early as the 1920s in which Grinnell had proposed “junior sprinkler systems” be installed in the basement of single family dwellings. I have found records of sprinkler systems that were installed both on the east coast and as far north as Alaska in the early 1920s.

What would have happened if our parallel universe would have grasped that concept 100 years ago? Would fire departments have not grown to the size that they are today? Would we have the number of fire deaths and injuries that we have experienced over the last 100 years in structural fires?

I will leave the speculation to the impact of these statistics to someone else’s curiosity. Without belaboring all of the specifics, I would believe it would be safe to say that America would be a different place than it is today. No Coconut Grove Fire. No Ponet Square Fire. No multiple family deaths. No bonding story. The history books would certainly look different than they do today.

Of course it would have done nothing about the wildland fire problem. Nor would it probably have much of an impact on the fires aboard the ships. The Morro Castle would still have likely occurred. The Grandchamp would have likely to still exploded creating the Texas City disaster. So, even with a perverse and reverse universe, there would have been things fire departments would likely have to respond to. In this fantasy world of reverse logic, what is our simplest problem today may have become more complex. It boggles the mind to image all of these consequences. But society has embraced fantasy hasn’t it? Fantasy has long borrowed the idea of the parallel universe as being the birthplace of legend, myth and even religion. The concept of heaven, hell, Olympus or Vahalla are all alternative universes.

You might recall Rod Serling, the science fiction writer that was the spokesperson on the TV series “The Twilight zone. He often spoke of the fact that “Imagination... its limits are only those of the mind itself. In his mind there was another dimension of time and space. He called it the fifth dimension “beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle



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ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition.” In that parallel universe perhaps people actually live in fire safe homes and do not die because the technology was denied to them.

So, let's be satisfied in the fact that we live in this universe and that the pursuit of the highest possible level of fire protection of single family dwelling still allows the fire service to remain the hero. We are the ones that are trying to change the nation's fire problem.

We can only dream.