

Have you ever been saved from disaster by getting some information that warned you just in time? This happened to me once when I was working on my PhD.

As PhD Candidates we were required to pass three comprehensive tests over our basic education in Physics, and these tests (each four hours in length) were to take place on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday of a certain week. We only had two chances to pass these tests, so I was very concerned about them. I studied for a long time, and took off two weeks from work for intensive study right before the exams. For months I had been writing out notes and condensing them again and again for review. And I worked as many problems as I could to get test-like experience. I laid out a plan of attack for the week of testing, deciding that I would study my condensed notes for a day and a half before each test.

I had taken the first test and studied my day and a half for what I thought was the second. Late into the night before that test, though, a friend from school (Bill Montgomery) called just to check on me. I told him that I was doing pretty well, and then I decided that since I had him on the phone I would ask a question about the subject matter I was studying. When I asked it, he paused. Then he said, "What are you studying that for?" I answered (as though he was an idiot), "because it is the next test!" And he answered, "It wasn't the second test last year when I took the exams!"

Suddenly, my heart froze. Thinking about it, I realized that I wasn't absolutely sure what the order of the tests was. I had assumed it from some kind of internal logic. So I practically hung up on my friend, and ran to get the printed announcement that described the tests. My friend was right, and I was in deep trouble.

I was a day and a half behind, and I needed that time to review. But I only had the night. So I poured 20 ounces of regular Coca-Cola (sugar and caffeine) into a class and prepared for something that I had almost never done in my entire educational career: to stay up all night studying.

It was tough, but I was able to keep my eyes open and cram my brain. I made it to the examination room tired, but feeling like I was as ready as I could be. I was so glad that I had a friend who had checked on me and was able to correct my errant course of study.

The wildest part of this story occurred just before the test was handed out. Having the incredible feeling that I had escaped a terrible fate, I was telling the story to the handful of people in the room. Suddenly, the focus was shifted from my story by one of my classmates, who was there to take the test as well. He stood up, snapped his pencils in half, threw them against the wall, and stomped out. I was stunned, but it was pretty clear that he had made the same mistake that I had. But he had not gotten the message.

The test proctor went looking for him to convince him to go ahead and take the test. Eventually, the boy calmed down and took the test. He failed, but unlike me he was a genius and passed it later.

I finished my set of tests for the week and was not very confident about the results, but I was very hopeful. My advisor called me into his office a few days later and gave me the news. I had passed. I think I asked him what the score was, but he wouldn't tell me. He made it pretty clear that I should just accept things without questioning further. I didn't push it. Perhaps he had to "help" me and had recommended that I be passed.

I have told this story many times in the intervening years. It means something to me in that I had help from someone in the shadows – in essence a guardian angel. We don't always get what we want, but many times we get what we need.