

SCIENCE

Coincidence: paranormal event or just the luck of the throw?

Things that happen at the same time have a special relationship to each other; researchers ask why

By Elaine Kendall

Most of us live on such familiar terms with the idea of coincidence that we think of it in offhand catch phrases and react to it with stock responses. We describe coincidence as funny, fantastic, weird, or bizarre; dismiss it as "mere," "only," or "lucky"; use it for small talk. Of all the paranormal phenomena, coincidence remains the least controversial and the easiest to accept. It's not as intimidating as precognition, as unsettling as *déjà vu*, or a nuisance like psychokinesis. Coincidence is just a capricious old friend, amusing but undependable, responsible for "I was just about to phone," "Imagine meeting you here," and "How odd that three new books about Napoleon were published this week."

On any sliding scale of extrasensory perception, coincidence would rate no more than a comfortable two or three. Whenever it's startling or dramatic enough to disconcert us, we explain away our unease by the laws of chance and probability, which are

elastic enough to accommodate the most unwieldy circumstances. The odds may be a million to one; but odds are odds, and it's reassuring to know that they're there, keeping the world in bounds and in perspective. We don't consider ourselves in an altered state of consciousness every time we run into a classmate at the movies, win the daily double, or miss the plane with engine trouble. We call it chance and let it go at that.

Coincidence functions so unpredictably that it could never draw the crowds that come to see demonstrations of levitation or psychic healing. Because it has no charismatic gurus and makes no special claims or promises, the popular literature on *New Frontiers of Mind* tends to slight it. Coincidence doesn't televise as well as key bending or even dowsing. It's not as titillating as UFO's nor as pretty as Kirlian photography.

Coincidence supplies the novelist's plot,

and the historian's inevitability, the theologian's miracle, the artist's inspiration, the statesman's manifest destiny, and the philosopher's unity. Very often, it's also responsible for the scientist's success, and that may be why science organizes to fight back.

Coincidence is, in fact, the most protean of all phenomena, changing shape and form to operate on every level of existence, appearing in such elaborate masquerade that it often goes unrecognized. We could hardly manage without it.

Explicit information about coincidence seems curiously skimpy and dated, and even the newest books about paranormal experience depend rather heavily on incidents reported a half-century ago. There was a flurry of interest at about the time that the Titanic sank, and a great many people remembered feeling chills as the ship went down; but equally dramatic and verifiable examples have seemed increasingly rare ever since. Coincidence seemed to decline in direct proportion to transatlantic boat travel.

Train wrecks also produced some fine examples of coincidence, but cars and planes have not added much to our knowledge. Danger alone is not enough. Coincidence seems to require an element of romance to function well. The most remarkable examples have always seemed to pertain to disaster and death, which may partially explain why investigation has lagged in favor of cheerier topics. Moreover, people tend quite naturally to attribute happy and fortuitous occurrences to their own worthy efforts, instead of to outside forces. As a result, the Society for Psychical Research hears much more about unpleasant ones. The official records are full of intimations of assassination, earthquake, fire, and flood, but the routine synchronicity that constantly bends our lives is hardly noted at all. And that may be just as well. There's so much of it around that selectivity is essential to keep the topic interesting.

Because coincidence is still the nearest thing we have to a universal phenomenon, it has engaged the attention of some extremely notable minds, but usually privately and generally with inconclusive results. Until very recently, however, these informal experiments were carried on rather quietly, among congenial friends, but now the subject is no longer confined to parlors.

In February 1974, Professor John Wheeler, the eminent nuclear physicist, lecturing a group of his colleagues at Oxford, said that "there may be no such thing as 'the glittering central mechanism of the universe.' Not machinery but magic may be the better description of the treasure that is waiting." Such a statement would have been unthinkable fifty years ago.

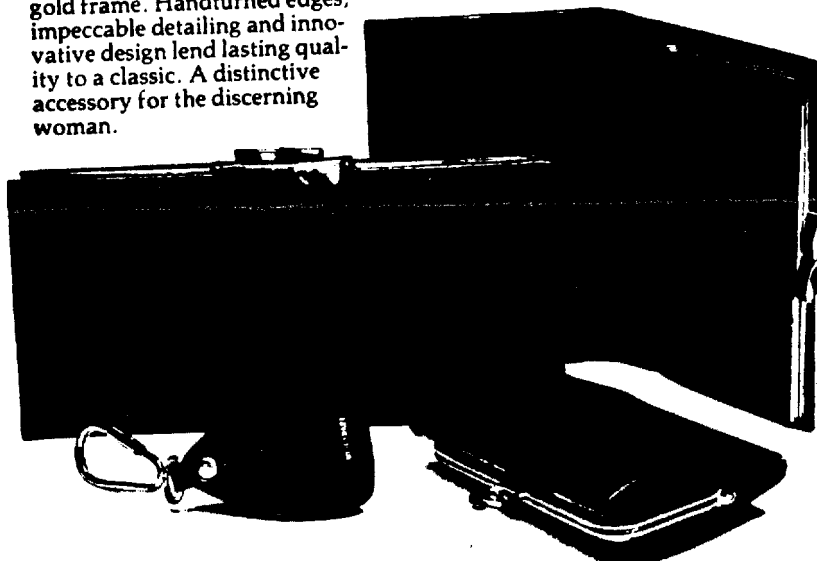
Even in an area like psychiatry, where an exploration and understanding of how coincidence works would seem most rewarding, the Establishment attitude has continued to be somewhat aloof. "There's a divinity that shapes our ends./Rough-hew them how we will" is fine drama but poor therapy. In the 1950s, when Carl Jung published his thoughtful essay on synchronicity and its effect upon personality development, other psychiatrists were curiously unresponsive to this phase of his work. Their attitude was adamant, but understandable.

Coincidence makes a wonderful excuse

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for irresponsible behavior of all kinds. Adultery, for instance, would be difficult if not impossible without it. Moreover, coincidence does tend to boggle the mind and to resist interpretation, thus making the work of the psychotherapist even more tedious than it already is. Perverse, tricky, and intriguing, coincidence reduces the most carefully constructed and logical argument to a shambles. The speculative sciences find it hard to tame; the exact sciences cannot be blamed for wanting it to go away.

The greatest single trouble with coincidence has always been the fact that it cannot be produced upon demand. Because accounts of coincidental happenings are invariably what scholars disparagingly call anecdotal, the whole topic suffers from a competitive disadvantage. Anecdotal evidence, no matter how persuasive, is difficult to duplicate and verify but very easy to exaggerate. It leaves the serious intellectual community cold. Coincidence, therefore, has always had an anomalous place in research; and, until very recently, it has remained there, an embarrassment and a menace to almost everyone concerned. The parapsychologists were welcome to it, and it became theirs by default.

Now, reconsidered as another kind of causal event, coincidence is suddenly attracting a fair share of attention from the more orthodox scientists as well. New tests and more imaginative experiments are luring it out of its corner. Physicists and mathematicians, who routinely deal in imperceptible aspects of the universe, have always known that coincidence could not be ignored or dismissed, though not all of them were eager to admit it. Philosophers and psychologists have become more receptive than before; and there is constant experimentation in all these fields, controlled and cautious attempts to excavate what Arthur Koestler calls *The Roots of Coincidence*.

At UCLA, Thelma Moss, Ph.D., and her colleagues at the Neuropsychiatric Institute conducted a variety of tests that show that "coincidence" can be encouraged if one provides the proper conditions. Emotion, for example, seems to be a definite factor in its occurrence. If one person attempts to guess the subject matter of a picture that another person is being shown, his chances of being right seem best when the scene is violent or tragic, only fair when it's pleasant or even sensual, and merely average when it's bland. And if the two people participating in the experiment are related in some way, they seem to be significantly more adept at this exercise than total strangers. Somewhat inadvertently, this particular project also seemed to prove that bad news travels fast, just as millions of ordinary people have always suspected it did.

Ongoing research, with more dramatic implications, is currently being performed at SRI International in Menlo Park, California, by Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, Ph.D., both physicists with impressive academic credentials and solid backgrounds in traditional scientific research.

Targ and Puthoff have been producing coincidence more or less on order since 1974, and have documented their results in their book *Mind-Reach* (Delacorte). The Targ-Puthoff trials are hard to classify exactly, since they cross the arbitrary boundaries that have always separated coincidence from its more eccentric relations—telepathy, clairvoyance, and that most troublesome connection of all, the out-of-body experience. *Mind-Reach* deals with what its authors prefer to call "remote viewing," but the elements of coincidence are strong and the family resemblance is unmistakable.

Remote viewing, a nice neutral term for an astonishing blend of phenomena, works this way. The subject is comfortably established in a soundproof, electrically shielded room and given a set of map coordinates indicating a specific place on the globe. Any area will do, as long as an adequate description of it is available and can be verified. The location is chosen at random. The subject then draws a sketch of the site, indicating as best he can its significant features—its outline, buildings, bodies of water—whatever comes to mind. Remote viewing is not telepathy, because telepathy is mind to mind; nor is it clairvoyance, which is mind to event. It comes closer to something that has been extravagantly called "astral travel," but that sounds too bizarre for what has become a normal everyday exercise for a group of normal everyday people.

The remote viewers are getting the facts right; not always exactly, but generally in the essential particulars, putting rivers, lakes, trees, hills, structures, and roadways in the proper places and more or less in proportion, and often including such specific details as window arrangements, archways, and statues. Do they do this only by coincidence? Probably, but more reliable. Photographs of the actual sites taken at a later date and

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reproduced in the book next to the drawings show startling correspondences.

Targ and Puthoff have now tested more than fifty people, and they maintain that the majority of their subjects have been able to accomplish the assignment. Skeptics are no worse at it than true believers; and, although some subjects are far more adept than others, no one has failed entirely. Distance seems to make little difference in accuracy or the lack of it. A school building in the neighborhood is no easier to reproduce than an airport in Central America or an island in the South Pacific.

The experiments have been continually escalating in difficulty with no decrease in efficiency. Some participants have even been taken undersea in a submarine where their perceptual abilities seem to function as well as in the lounge chairs at Menlo Park. Most people seem to improve with practice, getting more proficient at this curious job just as they might get better at backhand volleys or Beethoven sonatas.

The boredom that usually afflicts such research projects has not been a problem with this one. Remote viewers, once aware of their new ability, seem delighted to exercise it. One veteran of the Stanford experiments, a Los Angeles photographer, has offered to assist a team of archaeologists; and the buried ruins are turning up where she says they will be, thereby saving a great deal of time, trouble, backbreaking labor, and foundation money. A forthcoming book by Stephan Schwartz, *The Secret Vaults of Time* (Grosset & Dunlap), shows that archaeologists have long made use of such special help, though the information has not been generally bruited about until the recent surge of interest in such matters. If this particular strain of coincidence could be tamed, directed, and applied, its implications would be enormous. So far, none of the remote viewers has reported locating an oil field or a uranium mine, but the potential is there.

Russell Targ provided an elementary demonstration of remote viewing by asking me to describe an object on his desk. At that point, I had neither met him, been to his office, nor yet talked to any of the subjects. The only connection between my office in Santa Monica and his in Menlo Park was the Pacific Telephone Company line, which works no better than its counterparts elsewhere and often not as well. "Describe what I'm looking at," he said. "Color, size, kind. Draw it. Don't try to read my mind."

"Something natural," I said. "Not manufactured. No particular color—maybe beige or grey. Neutral. Not completely round but no sharp corners."

"Not bad," Targ said. "I've got a quartz globe on a rectangular stand on a tan blotter." Pens, pencils, a typewriter, pictures, books, or the phone itself would have been more logical guesses and easy outs. I could have chosen them, but I didn't.

It has since occurred to me that Russell Targ may have a table piled with so many objects of every description that it could be impossible to miss; but, then again, he may not. Scientists usually prefer an uncluttered work surface, and though one correct guess is surely coincidence, it's also a score of 100 percent.

All of us, of course, have learned to exploit coincidence to some extent. We give it other and more acceptable names—opportunity, accident, hard work, talent, even faith—because we need to feel responsible for our lives. But suppose, for a moment, that we could train ourselves not just to take advantage of these happy conjunctions when they happen but to generate them? The Mind-Reach subjects have apparently made considerable progress in this direction, within a relatively short time and without interfering with their other duties or obligations.

In *Janus* (Random House), his newest book of speculative essays, Arthur Koestler maintains that the human brain is a "luxury organ," one "developed in advance of the needs of its possessor." Koestler derived that notion from Alfred Russell Wallace, the man who developed a theory of evolution by natural selection in the same year that Charles Darwin proposed his, an intellectual feat that remains one of the greatest intellectual coincidences of all time.

The brain has not changed at all since we were loping around in the primeval ooze, though the uses to which we have put it have expanded significantly. According to Koestler, the Cro-Magnon crouching in his cave chipping stone and bludgeoning game already possessed the incredible organ that would eventually put men on the moon. He had, however, no notion of its possibilities. Little by little, through the centuries, it has been hit by good and horrendous misses, centuries of successful trial and ghastly error, he learned. A little. There is no reason to believe that we have yet made every one of the possible connections. None at all. ▽