

## On Coincidence

From my point of view there is no such thing as a coincidence. But the word is charged with emotional significance. How many times in fiction, when faced by evidence of ESP or any manifestation beyond his rational understanding, the scientist hero cries out:

“*Coincidence!* It has to be! Anything else is unthinkable!”

What is the magic word that exorcises and banishes magic? I turn to Funk and Wagnall’s Standard Dictionary. “Coincidence: circumstance agreeing with another implying *accident*.”

I do not understand exactly why this assertion of randomness produces such a potent sedative effect. It seems to convey a comforting conviction that there is no God in any heaven and what is happening here is no one’s plan, intention or responsibility. It *just happened*. Ask why it happened and why just at this particular time, and once again the magic word is invoked:

“It was coincidence.”

The universe is random, Godless and meaningless. Any belief in creators or purpose is wishful thinking. And when you point out that perhaps all thinking is wishful, reactions of intense irritation give evidence that we are dealing not with logic but with faith.

Truth is another highly charged word. However, truth is used to vitalize a statement rather than devitalize it. Truth implies more than a simple statement of fact. “I don’t have any whisky,” may be a fact, but it is not a truth.

“What is truth?” said jesting Pilate, and prudently did not stay for an answer. For Christ indeed spoke the truth as enunciated by the Voice of God from the non-dominant brain hemisphere. He spoke with the raw material of which dogmatic truth is made. He spoke with the voice that must be obeyed because it is *there*. Julian Jaynes, in *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Brain*, postulates that this voice was once heard by all men and guided human destiny up to about 1000 B.C. The priest-king, he says, was regarded with awe because he had the power to produce his voice in the brains of his loyal subjects. The voice lost power and prestige during a period of chaos, migrations and social upheavals.

The voice is still heard by some individuals, but is now regarded as a symptom of mental disorder. To hear that voice is to obey, and so Pilate had as much reason to avoid contact with Christ as he would to avoid a loathsome and highly contagious disease. Many have related the awesome power of the voices, often ordering the subject to commit some violent and dangerous act. We now know that these voices are transmitted from the non-dominant brain hemisphere, and that they can be induced by electric stimulation of the transmitting area in the non-dominant brain hemisphere of normal subjects.

Perhaps the voices must be obeyed because they have taken over the motor centers of what is normally voluntary action under control of the dominant brain hemisphere.

As to where the voices came from in the first place and how they gained access to the non-dominant brain hemisphere, that is one of the mysteries. The theory set forth in Arthur C. Clarke's 2001, that stranded space travellers took over a tribe of apes, in this way teaching them at the same time to understand and obey the spoken word, seems to me as probable as any other theory I have heard on the origin of language. According to Jaynes's hypothesis, language derived not from practical necessities but from the religious experience. Religious truth is always of a categorical and dogmatic nature: "I am *the* way and *the* light." Use of the definite article conveys the concept of one and one only. *The* way. *The* universe. *The* truth. No proof or argument is admissible. Religious truth is *absolute*. Certain individuals seem to have been charged with this truth and able to infect others over thousands of years.

Generations of believers believe because an inner voice tells them that this is the *truth*. And this is a brand of truth as potent as Einstein's great truth: "Matter into energy." However, religious truth seems to go in the other direction of grounding energy into matter, that is, into lifeless repetition of dogmatic formulations. Korzybski, who developed the concept of General Semantics, the "meaning of meaning," points out that Western thought has been crippled by the formulations of Aristotle and Plato. We are still thinking in either/or, absolute terms that don't correspond to what we know about the human nervous system and the physical universe . . . Korzybski would start a lecture by thumping a table . . . "Whatever this may be it is *not* a table. It is not the verbal label 'table.' We can call it anything so long as we agree that this object is what we are referring to."

Take an abstract word like "truth." You can't see it, you can't touch it. Everyone who uses the word has a different definition. Some are referring to religious truth, others to scientific truth, magical truth, pragmatic truth, some to a private lunacy. Everyone is talking at cross purposes. And all this tedium derives from the idea that if you have a label, there must of necessity be something that the label refers to, some absolute essence of truth floating about in a Platonic cave, along with "good," "bad," "justice," and other meaningless abstractions. I am sometimes asked if technology is good; well, for exactly whom, where and when? If you have a clear purpose in mind then you can decide what is good or bad, relative to your purpose. For example you are building a bridge. What leads to getting a workable bridge finished is good. Concepts that result in the bridge falling down are bad. Philosophy, sociology, and psychology tend to founder in verbiage for lack of a clearcut purpose.

Let us consider a variety of truth quite different from the religious variety: the truth of the scientist. At the present time the nearest we can come to an absolute in this area is 186,000 miles per second, the speed of light. Responsible scientists do not hesitate to say that it is “impossible” to exceed the speed of light, and the word impossible presupposes an absolute standard of possibility. And this absolute in turn presupposes some validity of the measurement tools and the human nervous system that made and recorded the measurements. The so-called scientific method is generally thought to apply to the law of cause and effect. It is however precisely the physical scientists, who have most rigorously examined matter itself, who have punched the first respectable holes in the whole fabric of cause-and-effect with the inferential discovery of the black hole. The gravity of a black hole traps even light, so that escape is impossible, since escape from the gravity of a black hole would require the impossible, namely, exceeding the speed of light. In a black hole no known natural laws apply. Can we then infer conditions where none of our laws apply, including the constant speed of light? Truth in this area seems to end with a question mark.

I will speak now for magical truth, to which I myself subscribe. Magic is the assertion of *will*, the assumption that nothing happens in this universe (that is to say the minute fraction of the universe that we are able to contact) unless some entity *wills* it to happen. A magical act is always the triumph of failure of the will.

Among so-called primitive peoples, if a man is killed in a fall from a cliff, the friends and relatives of the victim start looking for a killer.

“This is the work of Izzy the Push,” says the Chief grimly.

Primitive thinking? Perhaps . . . In *Psychic Discoveries Behind the Iron Curtain* we meet a Russian psychic who was able, from a distance of a thousand miles, to knock a subject unconscious, by the projected force of his will . . . Well, a moment of unconsciousness on a mountain trail . . .

It is related that a freelance journalist with papers and pictures in his possession proving CIA involvement in the Bay of Pigs was on his way to keep an appointment with an editor and show him this material. Now it just so happened that the freelance youth was hitchhiking, and it just happened that a CIA man picked him up. The CIA man did everything he could to dissuade the boy from publicizing the material. He failed and called a special number in Washington. On the way to the editor’s office that boy was hit and killed by a laundry truck. So that cleaned that up. Murder by car perpetrated during a ten-minute walk through city streets? I recollect the old days in Chicago, when the driver often had to follow the target around for weeks in a souped-up car before he got a clear shot. The Company must have had a way of *pushing* the target in front of the truck . . .

The magical push or pull, which potent magic men achieve by a projection

of their malignant will, reaches its purest form in defenestration: the subject, standing near a window, is suddenly sucked out, as if a vacuum had opened before him. I suspect that the Company relies on some machine, perhaps a device that projects a hologram. Scientists say that lasers could move satellites in space. Even a little push at just the right moment when the subject is off-guard . . . maybe a pretty boy or girl gives him the Company Smile . . . just a nudge is all it takes.

Certain pragmatic observations are useful for travellers in the magical universe. One law, or rather expectation, is that lightning usually strikes more than once in the same place.

Here's a big fire in a Kentucky night club, over a hundred dead. Heroic busboy announced the fire and calmed the guests, or the casualties would have been higher. Look through newspaper morgues. Yes, there was a fire in that location before in another night club. No injuries. And here is a night spot on the border between France and Switzerland. Pop group called "Der Sturm" playing. Two hundred dead in fire. There was a fire there before. Several injured. One incident tends to produce similar incidents. An incident may relate to a place, a set of circumstances, or a person.

You can observe this mechanism operating in your own experience. If you start the day by missing a train, this could be a day of missed trains and missed appointments. You need not just say "Mektoub, it is written." The first incident is a warning. Beware of similar incidents. Tighten your schedule. Synchronize your watch. And consider the symbolic meaning of missing a train. Watch particularly for what might be a lost opportunity.

Suppose you encounter a rude clerk, waiter, bartender, elevator man. Shuffle through the morgue of your memory. It's all there. Why, he's a dead ringer for a rude clerk in Tangier, London, Hong Kong. Even used the same words. You asked for an item and he said: "I never heard of it."

Stop. Look. Listen. What were you thinking just before this affront was offered you? What keyed the previous incident in? Empty your mind. Let your legs guide you. You may remember a disinclination to go into that shop in the first place. Stop. Change. Start. You will notice that pleasant encounters with nice friendly helpful people also come in series. And the only valid law of gambling is that winning and losing come in streaks. Plunge when you are winning and stop when you are losing. "To him that hath shall be given. From him that hath not shall be taken even that which he has." Any system in gambling or in life that entails doubling up when you lose is the worst possible system.

Writers operate in the magical universe, and you will find the magical law that "like attracts like" often provides a key note: the sinister clown in *Death in Venice*. The stories of John Cheever abound in such warnings of misfortune and death ignored by his compulsively extroverted and spiritually

underprivileged Wasps.

I gave my writing students various exercises designed to show how one incident produces a similar incident or encounter. You can call this process synchronicity and you can observe it in action.

Take a walk around the block. Come back and write down precisely what happened with particular attention to what you were thinking when you noticed a street sign, a passing car or stranger or whatever caught your attention. You will observe that what you were thinking just *before* you saw the sign relates to the sign. The sign may even complete a sentence in your mind. You are getting messages. Everything is talking to you. You start seeing the same person over and over. Are you being followed? At this point some students become paranoid. I tell them that of course they are getting messages. Your surroundings are *your* surroundings. They relate to *you*.

I once read the life story of a leper. Years before he found out that he was going to be a leper he was riding a horse which bolted, carrying him straight for a leper colony. Subsequently he turned his leprosy into a profitable part-time business raising leprous armadillos for the government research center.

If you can cool it and achieve a detached viewpoint you will see that in many cases incidents are neither good nor bad nor especially portentous, occupying a neutral area. Here I am, up at 72nd and Broadway, way out of my neighborhood up there for a doctor's appointment. I pass a deli and decide to go in and get a few items. No stores near where I was then living on Franklin Street below Canal. I notice a young man in the store. Later he is sitting opposite me in the subway going downtown. I see then that we are in the same incident band and I *know* he will get off at Franklin Street. No he wasn't following me. No tail would be that clumsy. We were both out of our neighborhood, both thought of the same thing at the same time . . . Better pick up some . . . and we intersected.

There are many variations of the walk exercise, all designed to show the student how incidents are created and how he himself can create incidents. Artists and creative thinkers will lead the way into space because they are already writing, painting and filming space. They are providing us with the only maps for space travel. *We are not setting out to explore static pre-existing data.* We are setting out to *create* new worlds, new beings, new modes of consciousness. As Brion Gysin said, when they get there in their trillion-dollar aqualungs they may find that artists are already there. The similarity between Brion Gysin's pink picture of a desert landscape and the pictures of Mars sent back by Saturn 11 is immediately apparent to anyone who looks at both pictures. The caption of the Mars picture points out the letter "B G" on Martian rocks . . . an accident of course, carved by wind and sand. In 1963 I wrote "1000 mile per hour wind here, storms . . . crackling sounds . . . dry and brittle as dead leaves the scouting party climbed a rise and

there was our ship buried in sand.” Years later I heard about the high wind velocities said to prevail on the surface of Mars.

What you experience in dreams and out of the body trips, what you glimpse in the work of writers and painters, is the promised land of space. What Christians and Moslems talk about has to be actually *done* by living people if we are going to survive in space or anywhere else.

The shift from time to space may involve mutations as drastic and irreversible as the shift from water to land.

In the beginning was the word and the word *was* God. And what does that make us? Ventriloquist’s dummies. Time to leave the Word-God behind. “He atrophied and fell off me like horrible old gills” a survivor reported. “And I feel ever so much better.”