

We are all Children of Coincidence

Why are you reading this? Do you believe in chance, probability, conspiracy, serendipity or synchronicity? Theories on coincidence range from "Show me the numbers!" to blind faith in "God's wink." As the world gets smaller, the questions around coincidence are getting bigger. And there's advantage in answering them. As Steve Jobs says "creativity is just connecting things."

Here's some current context:

1. The Butterfly Effect Can the beating of a butterfly's wings in New York cause an earthquake in China? So say chaos theorists. Ashton Kutcher, star of the movie "the Butterfly Effect", learnt the hard vertical way. Screw with the past small time, alter the present big time. Introduce your grandparents to technology, and you get the idea.
2. Shuffle In the iPod Shuffle, the shuffle option is top of the menu where it belongs. "Life is random," says the serendipity-selling slogan. Or is it? Does the Shuffle "give chance a chance?" Is the buzz about it playing its favourites true? "Random is random" assure the iPod engineers - the algorithm works. But why do I hear Born to Run every day?
3. Smart cows. Apart from being gay nymphomaniacs, British research now says cows bare grudges, nurture friendships, and are excited by solving intellectual challenges. So what's happening down on the farm when we're not watching? A rolling-eye conspiracy against humans or an emotional coincidence with them? And who is farming whom?
4. Right over Left Acting on Intuition is hot. Jobs reducible to rules or machines - from conveyancing and programming to TurboTax and accounting, are being off-shored. The premiums are in ideas, stories emotion - and love; in fine arts and film degrees, not MBAs. A sign in Einstein's office read: "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted." Bring it on Albert!
5. Six degrees and falling The idea that we are each part of a synchronous design is heating up. Stanley Milgram's 1967 "six degrees of separation" theory has spread through popular culture, from John Guare's 1990 play and the Kevin Bacon game to Duncan Watts' research and Gladwell's Tipping Point. Now search engine technology is pumping gas into social network theory. "Smart tags" will create the semantic web.. A web not for browsing, but for answering questions in a digital flash.
6. Pattern Recognition Semantic webbing is part of a bigger pattern. William Gibson's book about Cayce Pollard – with her pathological sensitivity to

logos – had its finger on the random pulse. New security biometrics are part of the picture. So is “Biomimicry”, as championed by Janine Benyus, where nature’s ruthlessly-efficient designs are applied to solve human problems. Example? Studying a leaf to invent a better solar cell.

7. Blink: Malcolm Gladwell is the rock star of post-modern analysis, and he’s got the hair to back it up. In his New York Times #1 bestseller, the little battler marries random instincts and pattern recognition, using style not ceremony. The connection between instinct and narrow slices of experience is on the money for smart decision-making. Emotion over information, with sanity checks as a fail-safe? Buy Blink now.
8. The Bio-economy: If the 19th century was the age of chemistry, and the 20th of physics, the 21st is the age of biology. Hard, predictive science with linear growth is behind us. Ahead is soft science with non-predictive quantum outcomes. From hydrogen to computers, soft is the new order. Quizzed on why Apple is in vogue, Jobs made a cognitive leap: “Software is the key... In fact, software *is* the user experience.”

Now some coincidence at everyday level:

9. How many times have you thought of someone, and a second later the phone rings, and it’s them? More than you can shake a stick at.
10. In probability theory, the birthday problem is famous. You need to get together 367 people to ensure 2 of them share a birthday. But for a 50-50 chance of this happening, you only need 23 people gathered.
11. Lincoln made Congress in 1846, Kennedy in 1946. Lincoln made President in 1860. Kennedy in 1960. Both were shot on a Friday in the head. Before Lincoln was shot he was in Monroe, Maryland. Before Kennedy was shot he was into Marilyn Monroe. (Oops).
12. What is it with “G” and the latest science geniuses and gurus? First James Gleick on the speed of modern life. Next Gibson’s Pattern Recognition. Now Gladwell’s Blink. Looking for the next bestseller? Look under G!!
13. My close friend John Kirwan scored the greatest solo try in rugby history against Italy in the 1987 World Cup. Now he coaches Italy’s national side.

What to say about coincidence? First, improbable events are a certainty on the numbers. Foresight with accuracy is rare, but remarkable coincidences in hindsight are a sure thing. Events with million-to-one odds occur 295 times a day in America. But is destiny just random chance? I say no (which screws the theory of quantum mechanics). Recent research on mind and heart

agrees, showing we are synaptically and emotionally primed to find coincidences ("the neurons that fire together wire together"), and quite possibly, human thought changes the future.

Ninety five percent of human thought is not fully conscious. Conscious understanding was never a reliable guide, as Psychologist George Millar demonstrates with a conversation on a ship. Says one: "There sure is a lot of water in the ocean." Says another: "Yea, and we've only seen the top of it." The thin-sliced sub-conscious, fed by emotional tributaries, is a better bet. Rigorous research now indicates the brain acts as an early warning system and the heart receives and responds to intuitive information. It turns out we can be aware of an event 5-7 seconds before it occurs. The bottom line is that when stuff has an underlying cause, we tend to notice it.

So maybe the metaphysicists are right. We are each a walking point of time, mysteriously interlocked, interconnected and synchronized to work together. Who can say for sure? What we can do is make coincidence work for not against us. As Heraclitus wrote: "the unseen design of things is more harmonious than the seen." So here are some thin slices of synchronicity:

14. Believe in the power of mystery. If we know everything, there is nothing left to discover. Assume: 5% you know, 15% you know you don't know and 80% you don't know you don't know. Be open to coincidence. It will lead you to a life of fun and surprises.
15. Good coincidence, serendipity, is like fishing. To land a whopper you need a line in the water. For a beautiful life, expose yourself! Global interconnectedness is a huge opportunity. Proactively seed your presence in multiple spaces. Follow up on *every* coincidence. As Woody Hayes said, "luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity".
16. Malcolm Gladwell says you have to accept the risk of failure to hit a home run. Failure is the ultimate reality check! Be in over your head. Don't be afraid to lose because then and only then will you know what you're made of. Just remember, a genius is a person who makes the same mistake. Once.
17. Don't confuse coincidence with certainty. We *are* all connected. Confront bad coincidence. Where we are born in the world should not determine whether we live or die as a child. There are huge problems like AIDs and poverty to sort out. Africa needs to be solved not saved. As Rock legend Bono said last month: "Idealism detached from action is just a dream."
18. Listen to collective intelligence, what James Surowiecki called the "Wisdom of Crowds." It's a fantastic way to cut through expert crap. A Google search is collective coincidence working together. Why are smart companies now asking consumers to design and create their products?

So the market doesn't dump their offering.

19. Make the small decisions with your head; the big ones with your heart. People who change the world sure do. For the New Year, online magazine Edge asked 120 luminaries "What do you believe is true even though you cannot prove it." A fantastic question with incredible responses. I'm a radical optimist. I love radical optimism. The words that sum up my life? Nothing Is Impossible.

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