

THIS ISSUE:

**Synchronicity, "Weird Coincidences," and Psychotherapy**

**Bernard D. Beitman, MD**

*Guest Editor*

**B**rain appear to seek order in our surroundings. The recognition of order helps us to survive by providing predictability. Brains also seem to find pleasure in the discovery of order.

Our brains use coincidence detection to help establish order. Two events occurring closely in time (a possible coincidence) suggest a possible causal connection. Causal connections imply principles and laws by which to predict and control the future. Human brains strive to know the future to help determine the best possible outcome for current behavior.

We have long been intrigued by coincidences, often using them to guide behavior. With the advent of the Enlightenment in the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18th century, when reason became the primary source for intellectual legitimacy and brought greater emphasis to the scientific method, coincidences receded from their roles as potential advisors. We can now return to the study of coincidences by applying the methods and knowledge gained from the neurosciences and social sciences to reconsider their potential value.

Why should psychiatrists study weird coincidences?

1) The study of coincidences provides a useful way to understand the neurobiology of belief;

2) Coincidences are commonly detected in the lives of our patients;

3) Some patients are more likely to detect meaning in them than others (eg, those who are self-referential);

4) Some patients exaggerate and distort the meaning of coincidences (eg, manics, paranoids); and

5) Coincidence interpretation may prove useful in clinical practice.

C. G. Jung, an early colleague of Freud and founder of Analytical Psychology, introduced the term "synchronicity" for those meaningful coincidences that aid a person's individuality. The term gained a strong foothold in Western thought after the rock band "The Police" released their album, *Synchronicity*, in 1983. The idea of meaningful coincidence has expanded in "New Age" literature and religious writings, as well as being studied by Jungians, psychiatrists, psychologists, vocational counselors, business leaders, and mathematicians. The term "synchronicity" has been stretched well beyond Jung's original intentions to include confluences of both micro- and macro-events ranging from the political to chemical that appear to have no originating source.

The first article (by Beitman) addresses the brain's need to seek patterns in the surrounding chaos and how coincidence detection plays a

role in providing order. Coincidence can provide clues to cause by suggesting theories that can be tested. On the other hand, and surprisingly, ambiguous coincidences can drive the brain's association machinery to reach conclusions already imbedded as fundamental basic attractors or schemas. Bias inherent in all information processing also influences personal meanings associated with coincidence as does the relative activations of the cerebral hemispheres. We are left with a mystery. Are these weird, meaningful coincidences simply the product of random events to which our brains attach highly personal meaning, or do some of them indicate a window into other ways of understanding the nature of reality?

The idea that many coincidences may be more than "mere" or "just" coincidences is supported by the Weird Coincidence Surveys done in three parts at the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2007 and 2008 as described in the second article "Weird Coincidences Commonly Occur," written by Stephanie Coleman and colleagues. The data from more than 700 people suggest that a significant percentage of University faculty, staff, and students notice coincidences and regularly interpret their meaning. Although by no means a purely representative sample

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of the national population, we can conclude that some of our patients (and we ourselves) are regularly noticing and interpreting coincidences.

What then are the characteristics of those people who regularly notice and interpret coincidences? The data of the third paper by Coleman and Beitman are based upon a statistically refined version of the first Weird Coincidence Surveys used in “Weird Coincidences Commonly Occur.” Anyone wishing to build upon this research should use the WCS-2 (Weird Coincidence Scale-2). The WCS-2 shows that people who are highly self-referential report finding more meaningful coincidences than those who are not self-referential. Also people who are high in “vitality” detect more meaningful coincidences. To extend these ideas to clinical practice, we can more confidently expect our grandiose and paranoid patients to see the events of the world around them to be rich with personal meaning. Other characteristics of high frequency detectors include high intuitiveness, strong negative emotion, and high religious commitment. The data help clinicians to help patients who are bothered by finding too many coincidences or believe that these “discoveries” suggest that they are “crazy.” Patients can be reassured that coincidence detection is common within the normal population

and more likely in people with certain personality characteristics.

In the fourth paper, co-written with Albert Shaw, we add case examples to enrich the descriptions of high frequency coincidence detectors or synchroners. In addition to the high vitality and high self-referential correlates, we describe cases in which intense emotional states also drive the search for coincidences. We also emphasize an often overlooked caveat about coincidences and their interpretation — they can sometimes lead to very unfortunate and tragic outcomes.

Robert Hopke and Ginette Nachman, in both of the two subsequent papers, offer several potentially useful clinical perspectives. Dr. Hopke, who authored a best-selling book on coincidence, *There are No Accidents*, builds upon Jung’s ideas in several ways. He emphasizes emotional impact and symbolism to suggest that highly charged coincidences evolve through life transitions that can be noticed both within and outside the psychotherapeutic consulting office. His clearly written cases can sensitize you to the potential usefulness of coincidence, not only for your patients but for yourself. In her article, Dr. Nachman, continues to illustrate the clinical usefulness of coincidence with several case vignettes, including Jung’s fa-

mous scarab story. She then continues with the broader Jungian definition of synchronicity, which includes the even more controversial idea of psi phenomena, including telepathy. She reviews the work of several psychiatrists who have studied psi clinically. She also reminds clinicians to consider the patient first — whatever the clinician might discover by apparent telepathy or by coincidence must be carefully considered for potential impact on the patient.

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## about the guest editor

\*\*Use photo from April 2008.\*\*

Bernard D. Beitman, MD, is Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Missouri-Columbia. He is author or editor of 14 books and author of more than 100

papers and chapters. He is co-editor with Daniel Monti, MD, of the forthcoming book, *Integrative Psychiatry* (Oxford University Press), in which is included a chapter on synchronicity.

His psychotherapy training program, based upon the book, *Learning Psychotherapy*, has won two national teaching awards and is being used in China and Spain.