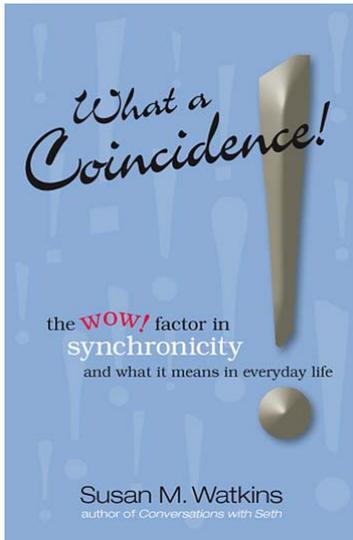


BOOK REVIEW



Susan M. Watkins

*What A Coincidence!:
The wow! factor in synchronicity
and what it means in everyday life* ↗

Paperback, 176 pages
Moment Point Press, 2005
ISBN-10: 1930491077
ISBN-13: 978-1930491076

Susan Watkins had this great facility as a kid: she could find marbles. She could also find money, but “as any kid knows, marbles are the real treasure.”

Thinking of it now, it seems as if I must be remembering dreams instead of something called reality, except that I still have the marbles, dozens of beautiful milky glass ones in all colors, sitting in a jar on my desk, the dark blue “commander” agate perched on top. All I had to do, back then, as walked along the quiet streets of my neighborhood, was imagine a marble lying in the dirt by the sidewalk, and one or two steps later there would be, appearing in response to my thoughts, or so it felt...

[T]here’s something about imagination that we all begin to lose as we mature — a trust in it, even a willingness to depend on it. Most kids do this naturally until they’re taught otherwise, especially about tricky subjects like money. You can’t conjure things out of thin air!

But conjure them I did, at least for a while. As with the marble, all I had to do was imagine some money lying near the sidewalk and bang, a few steps later, there it was. Again, I didn’t do this all that much; it wasn’t a purposeful acquisitive thing. It was playful and funny, like pretend, and couldn’t be forced. But I “knew” that if I turned my mind in a certain way, it would work. I remember ambling down the street one spring afternoon with my pal Darlene; seven or eight years old, all the time in the world on our hands, and she says something like, I wish we had some money to go to Pop’s (the neighborhood store) and buy some candy, and I sweep my eyes toward the grass and say, “Money like this?” just as if I’ve already seen what’s lying there waiting for me, because there it is: three folded dollars sticking up from the weeds.

I reach down and pick up the bills, grinning like a cat. Darlene is incredulous — almost

angry. She refuses to go to the store and spend the money. "Jesus wouldn't like that," she says, in a tone that implies I've stolen the bucks from The Man himself, and maybe in some sense she's right; stolen it from the dream world, is the thought that crosses my mind. Of course, smart-mouth me says something like, "Jesus doesn't give a poop," which upsets Darlene even more, and so we part company for the day and I go home with my found treasure, or maybe I walk to the store and spend it, I've forgotten. But what I remember clearly is that wonderful, wild feeling, funny and free, that went through me as I reached over and grabbed the money. As if anything were possible, whatever I imagined. (60)

There are a number of books and studies of coincidence out there and, as Watkins points out, almost all of them fall into the expected opposing camps: either we're fooling ourselves by believing there's hidden meaning in the intrinsically meaningless objective universe, or coincidences are messages from the deity, giving us an elbow in the ribs when we need it most.

The problem is, a lot of nonsense has been attached to the entire subject of alternate perception, ESP, dreams, precognition, and the like, not to mention the debilitating culture wars that tend to spring up around nonsense in general. But to take the stance that such things as dreams and coincidence are meaningless seems to me a hopeless folly, cutting one's self off as it does from an entire psychological landscape in a way that can only diminish our sense of community and optimism....

Thus for me the idea that coincidence is merely a misunderstood statistic (though it can be exactly that) or the function of a brain that evolved to recognize patterns in a world filled with lethal randomness certainly isn't incorrect; it's more what I'd call the top layer of the picture. We create the events; we create the instruments to measure the events. The measurements are trustworthy, pragmatic, often beautiful. They show us the fantastic intricacy of our world. They lead us out of abject superstition toward science, scholarship, technology; and depending on them for everything, we've managed to mess things up but good. On the other hand, the messes we've made on behalf of the divine are much older and arguably more catastrophic. Moreover as witness current events, divine convictions are now armed with technology. Some nudge! (10)

As should be obvious from these quotations, Watkins is both a gifted writer and a keen observer. For some thirty-seven years on an almost daily basis, she has recorded her dreams, instances of coincidence, precognition and suchlike — thousands of them. They are backed up by news clips, magazine articles, photographs, postcards, letters, email, and the occasional odd object, as well as by updated annotations and analyses.

Once you start paying attention to this sort of thing, it quickly becomes apparent that coincidence is never ambiguous. Unfailingly, it gives you the sensation of waking up from an important-feeling dream. You're supposed to take note here; something has just *happened*. Risen up, as it were, from *somewhere*. But from where? And why?

And it's more than something happening, and then something else happening that's like it or suggestive of it. Plenty of "like" things occur without that charged sense of significance about them, and to force significance on everything is to fall prey to the Texas sharpshooter fallacy (she shoots at the side of a barn and then draws a bull's eye around the holes). We're set up to recognize patterns and to retain their meaning for a lifetime—language, clothing, food, traffic, social mores, nearly everything, in fact. So the recognition of arrangement and design in itself is not what you would call paranormal; it represents part of our basic psychological make-up. It's not the totality of that make-up,

however — far from it. What I'm examining here is the idea of pattern recognition as something emblematic of the psyche's larger capacity — and that drawing circles around the bullet holes may be part of the process, intuitively speaking.

You read something in a newspaper and that day find it mentioned in several different forms on the Internet; you can't get your garage door to open up and later see a funny ad on TV for garage openers featuring stuck doors; you become interested in a certain make and model car and suddenly everybody's driving one. All examples of pattern recognition, nothing more extraordinary than the result of living in a pool of constantly emerging information. The difference is that the charged coincidences (the center stage, as it were) tend to appear out of the blue in overt clusters, with a loose sort of parable at the core and often with a definite beginning and end to the cluster unit. (29)

Watkins is also a severe critic of unbridled speculation. She knows only too well that one can go off the deep end too easily, trying to bend everything to suit a pre-held belief, whether it's in the existence of UFOs or *in the lack of meaning*.

Somewhere in the middle lies a window to the workings of consciousness; clues as to how and why we got here and maybe even a way to mitigate (or at least expose the roots of) the messes." And this is where I think an anecdotal, yet sensible look-see at coincidence and oddball connections and encounters is worth a study, or at least an inquiry, without specifying proof or disproof as an absolute (though surely we will keep our wits about us). (10–11)

Striving to avoid Texas sharpshooting at all costs can lead you out of credulity but land you in a dried-up mechanical universe where nothing means anything, a credulity all its own. The only ideology more hopeless than that is assigning everything to the whims of an inscrutable deity. *Neither extreme takes into account the intent of consciousness, nor looks at reality as an expression of that intent...*

We have to live in a loosely agreed-upon linear world, or all would be chaos. Yet that agreement lies atop a construct that is purely intuitive, a literally endless amalgam of buried knowledge, hunches, clairvoyance, and dreams. It's up to our intellects to keep all this sensible; but our intellectual appreciation doesn't have to go it alone, and given its due can easily accommodate the intuitive origins of whatever information we might perceive.

And sometimes that information jolts our intellects like a well-timed kick in the pants. (30–31, original emphasis)

Watkins offers numerous intriguing examples, such as the following. In the summer of 1993 she decides to build a maze of flower beds and walkways around her house and needs a huge pile of shredded wood chips in order to do it.

Problem is, there's no easy way for me to acquire them. Since my car is a hatchback, I have no means to haul anything like this myself, and don't feel I can ask anyone to lend me a vehicle, as borrowing a truck to lug heavy, filthy wood chips six miles or more on someone else's tires and springs seems too presumptuous. Hiring the job would be possible, though expensive. So after ruminating on this for a while, I give up and imagine that the chips will somehow or other magically appear. Except for deciding where I'd put the pile, I create no special solution to accompany this — all I do is think something like, the chips will just magically appear, that's all. In my head I see them heaped on the grass, steaming and reeking of delicious rot. Then I go on to other garden chores and forget about it.

A day or two later I'm driving down the highway into Watkins Glen when I pass a group of men trimming tree branches and running them through a grinder into an enormous hopper, which is already half-full of my beloved chips. I make note of the company's phone number from the side of the trucks and decide I'll call them when I get home and ask if they could bring me a load — after all, they have to dump them somewhere, and my house isn't far from this ongoing project.

I get home about an hour and a half later, and as I'm taking grocery bags out of my car, a pickup with this tree-trimming company's logo on it comes up the driveway. The workmen, it turns out, have also been hired to prune trees near the electric lines on my property, and they're just checking in with me before they start. As we're talking, the big grinder-truck I'd noticed before pulls up by the foot of the drive, and oh my yes indeed the hopper is overflowing with wood chips, which they gladly unload in my previously-determined yard spot upon request....

In the eighteen years I lived in that house, this was the only time I ever had any sort of interaction at all with tree-trimmers, or anyone else, with a truckload of wood chips. (It was also the only time I wanted any, so there you are.) It does seem, however, that the more playful one is about imagining a desired thing, the more immediate and literal the result. This could be the key reason that stuff like this works so well for children — they have no inhibitions about pretending, treating it more or less as a given. (61-62)

The author wonders if the mind has literally an infinite reach, encompassing everything that is possible and probable in a constant, dazzling organizational display from which we pick and choose the shape of our experience. "What if the workings of that display show itself all the time, in a 'paranormal' context that we tend to ignore or belittle? What if everything we need to know is contained in our conscious minds, of which we habitually employ the merest surface layer?" That would certainly agree with the experience of many yogis and mystics — see, for example, the review of *Irreducible Mind — Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* [↗](#) in *AntiMatters* 1 (1) or the article "Sri Aurobindo on Subliminal Consciousness" [↗](#) in *AntiMatters* 1 (2). Another case in point:

Scott and Laura, my house buyers, have been reassuring me about the birds... When I moved, I left the feeders and supplies behind, hoping the new owners would take up the hobby, which they have. Today, Laura sent me a particularly nice email, telling me not to worry about my feathered friends, as she and Scott have come to love watching the mix songbirds, squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, and other forest denizens eating their fill outside the windows. I'm overjoyed by this ... and in an effusive gush of gratitude, I email a thank you to Laura in which I tell her about the birds around my friend Dave's rural home, which has a slightly different ecosystem than exists around my old place. "We've watched orioles build a nest and fledge three babies," I write to her, "heard a black-billed cuckoo in the swamp, watched turkey vultures eat road kill, and generally had some thrilling bird days." I tap out some additional words of bird-lore, and am about to hit the "send" button ... but sit there staring at the screen instead.

Why did I write that? Sure, there are oriole babies in the tree by Dave's house, and yeah, we've heard the cuckoo, and there are lots of other interesting birds, including pileated woodpeckers and a cock pheasant strolling through the yard, all very report-worthy. But the thing is, though we're enthusiastic birders and have often observed turkey vultures soaring overhead, we've never seen one eating road kill anywhere, let alone near the house. Turkey vultures are relatively shy birds for all their size and reputation, and if I had seen such a sight as the one I just described, I would have been totally awestruck.

But no — I made it up!

Well, it's a good story, and as I was writing it I could see the vulture clearly in my mind, sitting on a hunk of road kill in the ditch weeds, tearing it to shreds ... except that it didn't happen. I'm a little ashamed of myself. But then I think, oh what the hell, and I send the email to Laura as is. In for a penny, in for a pound o' rotten flesh.

Next afternoon, Dave and I are sitting in his living room reading newspapers when I look out the picture window and spot a turkey vulture soaring in the sky above the cornfield directly across the road. As we watch, the vulture does something remarkable: it circles lower and lower, lands awkwardly in the grass at the top of the tall, weedy roadside bank, folds its enormous wings, and proceeds to march down the slope until it comes to a dark lump that looks to us like just another rock — until the bird starts pulling it apart! Through binoculars it's plain the unfortunate lump is either a dead squirrel or a mourning dove, which up to this point has been hidden from our notice. Unusually heedless of our presence in the window, the vulture rips and gulps in joyful gourmand splendor. We're just absolutely flabbergasted. Dave grabs his camcorder and films the entire scene. "Can't wait to show the grandkids," he exclaims happily.

So what's going on here? ... [T]his is the first time either of us has ever seen one land on something this close to human activity. Did I clairvoyantly foresee the upcoming vulture feast and incorporate it into my email about bird observations? Or did I make up a story whole cloth that later "came true" in a far more literal expression of "thoughts tossed out" than even I was prepared to accept?

This is tricky stuff. There are words for people who think they're the center of everything ("narcissistic" comes to mind) — and yet, where else does daily experience come from but the individual experiencing it? Picturing a thing and seeing the thing emerge in reality isn't, after all, an entirely radical idea. It's used in such areas as disease recovery, stress relief, even business seminars. But this is something else, something beyond the cause-and-effect of self-hypnotism and good suggestion-giving. While my vulture tale is hardly landscape-transforming (though fiction has acted as portent often enough in history), there are elements in it suggesting a precognitive construction process, a world built on algorithms of imagination and result, with coincidence acting as a staging area for the work in progress. (91–93)

There's more where this came from. *What a Coincidence!* is obviously a thought-provoking and highly commendable read.