

## Spooky! Messages from the beyond or just coincidence?

We've all heard eyebrow-raising tales – so what's really going on?

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In 1944, a British soldier fighting in Italy was knocked unconscious by shell fragments. That same day in Monmouthshire, he later recalled, “my wife was washing up after lunch. My daughter, aged two and a half, to whom I was only a name, was playing with some bricks on the kitchen floor. She suddenly got to her feet, went over to my wife, said ‘Daddy’s been hurt,’ and went back to her bricks.”

This eyebrow-raising tale appears in *Connecting With Coincidence*, a new book by the psychiatrist Bernard Beitman – along with so many others it becomes easier to keep one’s eyebrows permanently raised. Beitman has one of his own: in 1973, he found himself inexplicably choking at his kitchen sink – only to learn, the next day, that his father had choked on his own blood and died at the same moment.

The rationalist in me knows this all comes down to the “law of truly large numbers”, which states that, given a large enough sample, many seemingly unlikely things become downright probable. Even assuming the soldier’s memories were accurate, so many fought in the second world war that it’s almost inevitable a few would have odd stories. Beitman tells of one therapist who dreamed of an ex-patient lying immobile in a beach hut; later, he learned that one week after that dream, that patient had taken an overdose in a seaside hotel and nearly died. Spooky! But less so when you factor in the patients the therapist didn’t dream about – not to mention all the other therapists with no such anecdotes to relate.

Still, Beitman makes an intriguing case for approaching coincidences as if they weren’t just random, whatever your beliefs. *Connecting With Coincidence* is full of people taking such happenings as “signs”, telling them who to marry, whether to have kids or get divorced – and it serves them rather well. One widow injures her finger while gardening, forcing hospital staff to cut away her wedding ring, which she takes as a sign from her dead husband that it’s OK to date again. A message from beyond the grave? Presumably not. Did she subconsciously arrange the injury herself? Maybe. But I’m not sure it matters: either way, the incident smoothed a transition she’d been struggling to make.

All very unscientific, I know. But the truth is that the biggest personal decisions in life can’t be made in scientific fashion anyway; there are too many variables involved. Yet we often do seem to know, just below the surface of awareness, what’s best for us – and noticing how we respond to bizarre coincidences can provide clues to that subconscious knowledge.

One of Beitman’s patients, his marriage on the rocks, has a thrilling encounter with an old girlfriend in a bar, which he seems to take as a sign he should recommit to his marriage. Why not as a sign that he should leave his wife? Both interpretations work, but only one had meaning for him. It’s odd to ask whether such coincidental encounters “really mean” anything, as if they’d need to be choreographed by some cosmic force. Who says that’s what “meaning” means?