

FREE SPEECH

POST asks four Rochesterians
to discuss a single topic: **Coincidence**



Every day, people are presented with a set of circumstances that provide an opportunity or a challenge—a chance. They determine how to act or react; they make a choice. That choice determines the outcome and sets the stage for the next chance. As a historian, examining the past in terms of chance and choice allows us to see the agency of individual actors. It gives power to the seemingly powerless. And it demonstrates that no outcome was (or is) inevitable. History could have been different if people had made different choices. Reminding ourselves that nothing is coincidence and that everything depends on chance and choice gives us an opportunity—individually and collectively—to shape our future. History doesn't have to repeat itself if we don't want it to.

—Christine Ridarsky, officially appointed Rochester city historian

I was born and raised in Japan, where the influence of Buddhism is heavily embedded in every aspect of our lives and in our thought process. Say, when one keeps running into the same person over and over, many of us believe these two people were connected in their previous lives. Therefore, they meet now to complete their unfinished business—very mysterious, indeed. Whether it is fate or Littlewood's Law or mere apophenia when the coincidence happens, I am always amused. It opens my mind to think of the other possibilities that did not happen. If I overslept and did not take my usual train, what could have happened? Am I still in control of choices that I make that makes a difference in my life, or not?

—Yuko Matsuda, TV producer, president of M-sisters

A universe without coincidence is one in which everything operates by conspiracy or by the design of an omnipotent builder. Thing is, the builder and/or conspirators would have to be both completely nutso and incredible slobs...Coincidentally, a couple of gametes collided on a planet that happened to have just the right conditions to support your stinky, itchy, painful life, where and when your parents at least momentarily found each other attractive, and they were in a spot on the planet that had adequate resources and shelter to prevent you from desiccating in the heat, washing away in a flood or being eaten by a Komodo dragon—all so you could grow up to drink too much beer, break the hearts of the few people foolish enough to care about you, read this article on the can and die before realizing your dreams. There's a reason for this?!

—Tom Clifford, library assistant, University of Rochester

Coincidence is a word like “individual,” “plot,” “fault,” or “plan.” It's a way of quantifying those universal tendencies and behaviors that have tickled our need for meaning. Through a cognitively reflexive equation we draw lines, separating one hemisphere of eternity from itself. At the same time, it's a trail of breadcrumbs leading into a dark forest of higher spiritual order. To me, coincidence is like a snap, wink, and tip of the cap from a God the child in me still hopes is paying attention.

—Aydin Ture, fine artist and elementary school art teacher