

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The following are four examples of the kind of experience with which this book is concerned.

A professor of biology, Adolf Portmann, was delivering a lecture that he intended to conclude with a story about a praying mantis. Just as he was about to broach this subject, a praying mantis flew into the lecture hall through an open window, circled around Portmann's head, and landed near the lectern lamp, to the effect that the insect's wings cast on the white wall behind him a huge shadow in the form of the arms of a praying man.<sup>1</sup>

In all his years of driving, relates the writer Paul Auster, he has had just four flat tires. These occurred in three different countries and were spread out over a period of eight or nine years. On each occasion, however, the same person happened to be in the car with him—an acquaintance he saw rarely and briefly and in his relationship with whom there was “always an edge of unease and conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

One night a man dreamed that he was visiting Australia with his wife and some family and friends. He was being driven in a car around a large town and came eventually to a square where there was a church with three large bells hung at ground level in the open. Some months later he and his wife actually did visit Australia, and on a car excursion from Melbourne with a couple of relatives they ended up in the town of Wangaratta in north Victoria. There they came across a church on the floor of which, just inside the door, were three large bells—with a further five lying elsewhere in the church—waiting for a new bell tower to be built.<sup>3</sup>

An analyst on vacation suddenly had a strong visual impression of one of her patients she knew to be suicidal. Unable to account for the impression as having arisen by any normal chain of mental associations, she immediately sent a telegram telling the patient not to do anything foolish. Two days later she learned that, just before the telegram arrived,

the patient had gone into the kitchen and turned on the gas valve with the intention of killing herself. Startled by the postman ringing the doorbell, she turned the valve off; and even more struck by the content of the telegram he delivered, she did not resume her attempt.<sup>4</sup>

These four experiences are highly varied in both their content and the manner of their occurrence. They have, however, an important set of characteristics in common. Each of them involves two or more events that parallel one another in such a way as to suggest that they are connected, and yet the usual way in which such connections are accounted for—in terms of some kind of causal relationship—seems inapplicable. The occurrence of such experiences has come to be called “meaningful coincidence” or—in the term introduced by the Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung (1875–1961)—“synchronicity.” A full account of this latter term will be given in chapter 2.

There is certainly nothing new about such experiences themselves. Their basic form can readily be discerned in events traditionally described as, for example, answered prayers, successful magic, divine interventions, signs and omens, and moments of good or bad luck. Within the last one hundred years, however, the phenomenon of synchronicity has come to receive an increasing amount of attention independently of its relationship to any specific traditional belief structures or modes of thought. Though the present work refers to traditional frameworks for elucidation, its primary concern is with this recently emerged independent status of the phenomenon.

A considerable body of writing specifically on synchronicity has already accumulated. However, a disproportionately small amount of this writing has been concerned with exploring at a serious level the possible spiritual aspects of the phenomenon. (A full account of what is meant by “spirit” and “spiritual” in this work is provided in chapter 2. Briefly, the terms refer to an aspect of consciousness and reality that cannot be reduced to either the physical or the psychic.) As a contribution toward meeting this lack, the present work is a sustained inquiry into the relationship between synchronicity and spirit. Although the primary aim is to add to our understanding of synchronicity, some insights may also be gained into the more general problem of studying anomalous and spiritual phenomena of whatever kind.

The work is set within the broad field of religious studies. This is a field traditionally very accommodating toward multidisciplinary and polymethodological approaches,<sup>5</sup> and considerable advantage has been taken of this. My specific approach has been to set to one side initially the problem of situating the present study within this or that particular discipline or circumscribed set of disciplines, focusing instead simply on the

phenomenon of synchronicity itself, in whatever variety of forms it has seemed most accessible to further scrutiny. In practice, this has meant several things: First, briefly reviewing existing studies mainly within the fields of analytical psychology, parapsychology, statistics, and cognitive psychology. It has also involved invoking theology and philosophy in order to elicit and elaborate on possible spiritual implications within the concept of synchronicity. Again, it has meant looking in detail at a kind of synchronistic case material that has not previously been studied—namely, extensive series and clusters of interrelated incidents all experienced by a single individual. Finally, it has led to a detailed and multifaceted examination of the ancient Chinese Oracle of Change, the *I Ching*.

The majority of the work that has been done thus far on the subject of synchronicity is, not surprisingly, within the field of Jungian psychology. Jung himself, who coined and introduced the term “synchronicity,” wrote two significant essays devoted solely to its explication—one extensive essay and the other a more easily digestible abridgement of it.<sup>6</sup> Also influential were the statements on synchronicity contained in his foreword to the Wilhelm-Baynes version of the *I Ching*.<sup>7</sup> The ideas contained in these three sources are repeated, and occasionally modified or extended, in various other contexts throughout Jung’s voluminous writings.<sup>8</sup> Practically all of this material will be drawn on throughout the present study and especially in chapter 2, where Jung’s theories provide the point of departure for the definition and characterization of synchronicity in this work.

Among Jung’s immediate followers, Marie-Louise von Franz has made the largest contribution to the subject of synchronicity.<sup>9</sup> Principally she has pursued certain indications within Jung’s work concerning the possible relationship between synchronicity and natural numbers. This has led her into profound and fascinating explorations of the emerging interface between psychology and physics, and has also resulted in some suggestive speculations concerning the operation of divinatory procedures such as the *I Ching*. However, von Franz’s primary orientation is toward the scientific end of the spectrum of possible relevance of synchronicity, while the orientation of the present work is toward the religious and spiritual end.<sup>10</sup>

Another Jungian-influenced approach to the understanding of synchronicity is the attempt to view the phenomenon mythically, that is, in terms of the “god” or “spirit” that might be considered responsible for it. Thus, various writers have thought to elucidate aspects of the nature of synchronicity by viewing it imaginatively—or “imaginally”<sup>11</sup>—as the expression of one or other of the gods of the Greek pantheon: Hermes the trickster and transgressor of boundaries; Pan the god of spontaneity; or

Dionysus bestower of the experience of mystical fusion and timelessness.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the way usually inert matter can appear in synchronicity to be miraculously animated has caused the phenomenon to be imaginatively explored in relation to the figure of the Golem.<sup>13</sup>

Among the numerous other Jungian contributions are studies with a more clinical emphasis,<sup>14</sup> attempts to modify Jung's theoretical thinking,<sup>15</sup> and a miscellany of other studies relating synchronicity to, for example, apparitions, the theories of relativity and quantum physics, typology and hypnotic induction, the Rorschach test, and relationships between adoptees and birthparents.<sup>16</sup> There is increasing interest, too, in the relationship between Jung and Wolfgang Pauli and the significance of this relationship for the development of the synchronicity concept.<sup>17</sup> Finally, there has also been some stimulating recent research attempting to relate synchronicity to processes of emergence and self-organization.<sup>18</sup> Within all of this, however, the possible spiritual aspect of the phenomenon receives only marginal attention.

Indeed, within the Jungian framework there have been very few major studies focusing on the more spiritual or religious dimension of synchronicity. Three notable exceptions are works by Jean Shinoda Bolen, Robert Aziz, and Victor Mansfield.<sup>19</sup> The first of these emphasizes the importance of synchronicity as an experience that can lead to a sense of cosmic meaning and connectedness.<sup>20</sup> It does so, however, in a rather intuitive way, and the book is at its best when dealing with the more practical and psychotherapeutic aspects of synchronicity, before it moves into a consideration of the spiritual dimension. Aziz's book, by contrast, is a scholarly attempt to elucidate the significance of the concept of synchronicity for Jung's own psychology of religion, and engages in an illuminating way both with many general aspects of Jung's psychology and with particular issues relevant to the phenomenology of religion.<sup>21</sup> The main thrust of Mansfield's book is to reveal connections between relativity and quantum physics, Jung's theory of synchronicity articulated in terms of compensation and individuation, and Middle Way Buddhism. In relation to Buddhism, Mansfield skillfully develops the idealist implications within Jung's thinking.<sup>22</sup>

My own previous book-length study of synchronicity is a detailed examination of Jung's writings on the topic.<sup>23</sup> It looks in turn at how the theory of synchronicity fits into Jung's overall psychological model, including a consideration of its apparent inconsistencies; the wide range of personal, intellectual, and social contexts that informed Jung's thinking on synchronicity; how Jung himself applied the theory of synchronicity within his critique of science, religion, and society; and the continuing relevance of the theory for understanding issues in contemporary detradi-

tionalized religion. In contrast, the present work is concerned with elucidating the phenomenon of synchronicity as such rather than Jung's theory of it, and therefore has a wider range of theoretical reference. It is also more focused on the specifically spiritual implications of synchronicity.

Standing alone as a focused, scholarly contextualization of Jung's theory of synchronicity is Paul Bishop's study. This work presents synchronicity as the heir to Romantic notions of "intellectual intuition," the belief in the possibility of acquiring knowledge by a form of direct cognition that bypasses the need for sensory information.<sup>24</sup>

Psychical research and parapsychology played a large part in both the genesis and the subsequent development of Jung's theory of synchronicity. In addition, these disciplines have provided the context for several studies of coincidence that do not center on Jung's ideas. For example, before and independently of Jung, the psychical researcher Alice Johnson published in 1899 a lengthy study based on a large number of carefully reported and documented coincidences, sifting them for possible evidence of the paranormal.<sup>25</sup>

Arguably the greatest impact on the study of coincidences outside specifically Jungian circles was made by Arthur Koestler, who was also writing from a predominantly parapsychological perspective. In the early 1970s he published two books specifically on coincidences, and also accumulated a large collection of spontaneous case material through appeals in the media.<sup>26</sup> In addition to parapsychology, his thinking on this subject was greatly influenced by physics and the other hard sciences. He postulated that there were two complementary principles operating at all levels of reality: a self-assertive tendency, which enables entities to assert their individuality and autonomy, and an integrative tendency, by which those same entities remain subordinate to the demands of the larger whole of which they are a part.<sup>27</sup> His suggested explanation of coincidences is to see them as expressions of his integrative tendency, which he thought could be regarded as "a universal principle which includes a-causal phenomena."<sup>28</sup> However, unlike Jung—and rather surprisingly for a novelist—Koestler shows little appreciation of the psychological and imaginative dimension of the phenomenon.

On the question of whether there might be a spiritual aspect of coincidences, Koestler's theory seems neutral. He points out that the integrative tendency can give rise to a range of self-transcending emotions, that is, "a craving to surrender to something that is larger than society and transcends the boundaries of the self—which may be God, or nature, or a Bach cantata, or the mystic's 'oceanic feeling.'"<sup>29</sup> The integrative tendency, as Koestler presents it, exists throughout reality; if there is a spiritual aspect of reality, then presumably the integrative tendency would

also operate within that aspect. Thus, the theory does not seem to have any specific implications for ontology. Of coincidences more specifically, Koestler remarks that certain of them can have

a dramatic impact which may have a lasting effect and lead to profound changes in a person's mental outlook—changes ranging from religious conversion in extreme cases, to a mere agnostic willingness to admit the existence of levels of reality beyond the vocabulary of rational thought.<sup>30</sup>

However, in spite of this theoretical openness to the idea of the spiritual, the center of gravity of Koestler's writings on this subject is scientific and not specifically concerned with issues of spirituality.

Koestler's work was the inspiration for the first large-scale survey of coincidence experiences carried out in 1989 under the auspices of the Koestler Foundation.<sup>31</sup> A questionnaire that appeared in *The Observer* on December 24, 1989, generated 991 usable responses. Examples of the accounts received appeared in a book by Brian Inglis in 1990,<sup>32</sup> while the entire sample was coded and analyzed by Jane Henry and the results published in 1993.<sup>33</sup> Concerning the types of coincidence experienced, 33 percent of the respondents accepted the characterization "prayer answering," and similar numbers the characterizations "guardian angel" (34 percent) and "library angel" (30 percent).<sup>34</sup> Concerning what factors might have accounted for or influenced the coincidences, 51 percent accepted "Destiny/Fate/Karma" as a possibility, 38 percent accepted "Synchronicity (Jung's theory)," and 36 percent accepted "Divine or diabolic intervention."<sup>35</sup> The survey was not specifically designed to elicit information regarding the spiritual experiencing and interpretation of coincidences, but the preceding figures nonetheless serve to suggest that many experiencers do view them in this light.

Other worthwhile work on coincidence from a parapsychological perspective includes a book by Alan Vaughan and articles by John Beloff, Ivor Grattan-Guinness, Lila Gatlin, and Charles Tart. Also worth mentioning in this context is a study carried out by Stephen Hladkyj which found that reports of synchronistic experiences shared more characteristics with parapsychological experiences than with mystical experiences.<sup>36</sup>

Coincidence phenomena have also attracted the attention of Freudian psychoanalysts with an interest in parapsychology. Freud himself published several papers dealing with "telepathy" and "occultism," as he referred to these phenomena.<sup>37</sup> These papers are collected, along with other contributions, in a book edited by George Devereux.<sup>38</sup> One contrib-

utor, Jule Eisenbud, long continued to write interestingly on this subject from the psychoanalytic perspective.<sup>39</sup> Recently, Mel Faber has developed a wholly naturalistic interpretation of synchronistic experiences based on post-Freudian psychoanalytic insights.<sup>40</sup> His explicit aim has been to provide an alternative explanation to that offered by Jung and in particular to challenge the spiritual interpretation of synchronicity.<sup>41</sup>

Other writers address the problem of coincidence from the perspectives of statistics and cognitive psychology. Regarding statistics, George Spencer Brown has suggested that the apparent significance of coincidences and of results in parapsychology may be due simply to a mistaken understanding of how statistics operate.<sup>42</sup> The mathematicians Persi Diaconis and Frederick Mosteller, without calling the basic principles of the discipline into question, have argued that statistical considerations alone are able to explain away the apparent meaningfulness of most coincidences.<sup>43</sup> In response it has been noted that in most real-life cases of synchronicity there are so many imponderables that even approximate evaluations of probability become dubious.<sup>44</sup> Again, it has been questioned whether it is even sensible in principle to try to evaluate synchronicity statistically. For example, Jung and von Franz argue that statistics work precisely by ignoring what is unique about the individual case, whereas synchronicity tries to investigate that uniqueness.<sup>45</sup> Others have drawn attention to problems in the very nature of statistics, including that there is no normative probability theory.<sup>46</sup>

Caroline Watt has reviewed various considerations from cognitive psychology that demonstrate that people are generally very poor judges of probability under the kind of conditions of uncertainty in which most coincidences take place and are also prone to perceive or process information erroneously.<sup>47</sup> She notes, however, that these considerations, which are usually invoked to explain away anomalous experiences, cut both ways and could equally explain why certain events are judged or perceived not to be anomalous when in fact they are.<sup>48</sup>

Awareness of these statistical and cognitive psychological explanations of putative coincidences not only can help sharpen our powers of judgment under uncertainty but also, through preventing us from too hastily abandoning the search for causes, can sometimes lead to the discovery of unrecognized causal factors. As Diaconis and Mosteller point out, "much of scientific discovery depends on finding the cause of a perplexing coincidence."<sup>49</sup> However, the statistical and cognitive psychological explanations would need to be actually proven in each particular case if they were to invalidate the kinds of spiritual explanation or interpretation that are the focus of the present study.

Several writers have suggested that certain heterodox scientific theories, particularly those with an emphasis on holism, may be relevant to an understanding of coincidence. Two theorists whose names crop up repeatedly are the physicist David Bohm and the plant physiologist Rupert Sheldrake.<sup>50</sup> Particularly suggestive is the centrality and flexibility of the concept of information within both Bohm's theory of the implicate order and Sheldrake's hypothesis of formative causation. The concept of information also plays a role in von Franz's speculations on the relationship of synchronicity to number, as well as in several other investigations into the possible *modus operandi* of coincidence.<sup>51</sup>

Another emphasis in recent work on synchronicity is on narrative. This emphasis has informed both the collecting of accounts of synchronistic experiences and the manner in which they are then analyzed and understood.<sup>52</sup>

In view of the important role played by the *I Ching* in Jung's development of the concept of synchronicity, it might be expected that researchers would already have explored this in some depth. However, apart from Jung's own work and its immediate extension by von Franz, very little of substance seems to have been written on the subject of synchronicity and the *I Ching*. There is an article by Wayne McEvelly that attempts to clarify the relationship from a philosophical perspective; a couple of pertinent sinological articles—very solid and illuminating—by Willard Peterson; and an article by the psychologist and parapsychologist Michael Thalbourne and some colleagues that reports on an experiment suggesting that a paranormal factor may be at work within the *I Ching*. The concept also receives attention in some of the writings on the *I Ching* by Stephen Karcher.<sup>53</sup> Apart from these few studies, the relationship between synchronicity and the *I Ching*—and even more the relationship of synchronicity to spirit in the light of the *I Ching*—has been left pretty much as an open field for research.

A final area that the phenomenon of synchronicity has impacted on significantly is New Age spirituality. In a 1994 survey of subscribers to the largest-selling New Age magazine in Britain, *Kindred Spirit*, 81.8 percent of the sample of 908 respondents reported having experienced some form of "psi," with synchronicity as the joint-fourth most frequently experienced kind of psi (40.6 percent of the sample).<sup>54</sup> Writings that might be embraced by the broad term "New Age" vary greatly in quality, and might include several of those already mentioned here with some favor.<sup>55</sup> Often, however, it seems that references to synchronicity in the context of New Age spirituality are somewhat vague and intuitive, offering little in the way of genuine enquiry or clarification.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, they do little to



fulfill the need for a detailed exploration of the possible relationship between the concepts of synchronicity and spirit.<sup>57</sup>

The present study aims to demonstrate that the possible spiritual nature of synchronicity can be explicated more rigorously and to a much greater extent than might have been anticipated. It attempts this by exploring general theoretical issues, by attending to experiencers' responses, by interpreting specific features of synchronicities, and by investigating the synchronistic basis of the ancient Chinese Oracle of Change, the *I Ching*.

In chapter 2, I first characterize and define the concept of synchronicity as I shall be using it in the remainder of this work. My definition of synchronicity is largely based on Jung's but involves some important clarifications and modifications. The discussion therefore involves concisely explicating Jung's thinking about synchronicity and how it fits into his overall psychological model. I then similarly characterize and define the concept of spirit. I consider a wide range of understandings of spirit as found within various religious traditions, as well as within Jungian psychology and transpersonal psychology. Out of this diversity I elaborate a fairly accommodating, largely detraditionalized, synthesis suitable for the purposes of the present study.

An attempt to elucidate the relationship between synchronicity and spirit more systematically is made in chapter 3. This involves eliciting from my characterization and definition of spirit a range of more specific spiritual concepts implied within it. For this I draw mostly on a variety of twentieth-century theological writings from within the western Christian tradition, though in each case the understanding arrived at is by no means restricted to the Christian context. No previous attempt has been made to establish the possible relationship between synchronicity and spiritual concepts in such detail.

In chapter 4, the application to synchronicity of these spiritual concepts is illustrated by means of an extensive case study. The case study consists of material that has been published but, in spite of its extraordinary nature, does not seem previously to have caught the attention of any commentators on synchronicity.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, no previous study has presented and commented on such an extensive series of synchronicities—certainly none has attempted to elicit from the synchronicities a comparable range and depth of meaning. The present study especially highlights that the content of synchronicities frequently involves symbolic and mythic motifs.

Following on from this, in chapter 5, an even more extensive body of synchronistic material is presented, again consisting almost exclusively of the experiences of one individual, whose own responses to and

interpretations of the material are reported in detail. At the time of my original work on it (1991–95), the material had been neither published nor seriously studied before.<sup>59</sup> It came to my attention through contacts in the field, and was sent to me directly by the experiencer himself. The presentation of such an extensive body of case material centering on a single individual is again unprecedented within the literature on synchronicity.

Having presented this material and the experiencer's responses to it, I next, in chapter 6, offer my own evaluation and interpretation. My interpretation is attempted using a methodology analogous to that used within Jungian psychology for the analysis of dreams, myths, legends, and other products of the imagination.<sup>60</sup> So far as I am aware, this kind of analysis in relation to synchronicity has not been undertaken before.

Finally, chapter 7 looks at the possible systematization of synchronicity in the ancient Chinese Oracle the *I Ching*. A specific comparison is made between the kind of synchronicities occurring in this relatively controlled context and the kind that occur more spontaneously. I look at those of Jung's writings that specifically relate synchronicity to the *I Ching*; at twentieth-century Western scholarship on the *I Ching*; and at the work of the Eranos I Ching Project in Switzerland (1988–94), which combines Jungian psychological insights with modern sinological scholarship. The discussions in this chapter explore the relationship between synchronicity and the *I Ching* in greater detail than has been done before, and also for the first time use the *I Ching* as a specific framework for elucidating the possible relationships between synchronicity and spirit.