

Who's responsible for coincidence?

Our spiritual lives would grow if we could step beyond the false notion that God arranges our circumstances.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue



(Photo by vencavolrab / iStock / Getty)

In a 2018 game between the Chicago Bears and the Detroit Lions, Bears kicker Cody Parkey hit the uprights four separate times in the same game, missing two extra points and two field goals. It was a quirky sequence of events that had never occurred before, and may never again, in the NFL.

A 22-year-old waitress serving drinks in a Westlake, Ohio, bar asked for ID from a customer one day, only to have the 23-year-old patron produce the server's own driver's license. The server's wallet had been stolen in a nearby town weeks earlier. Instead of filling a pitcher of beer, the server called the police, who then arrested the unsuspecting patron.

Minnesota Twins outfielder Denard Span hit a line drive foul ball into the stands in 2010 that struck his mother directly in the chest, momentarily knocking her out and requiring fast medical attention. “What are the odds of that happening?” Twins’ pitching coach Rick Anderson asked at the time.

Welcome to the world of coincidence. Coincidences fascinate us, and we like to assign meaning to them. Something in the human spirit craves events that astonish or surprise. For many who like to connect the dots of random events and see a reason for everything, God plays the lead role. To them, *coincidence* is a dirty word, the sign of a godless universe—unless, that is, God can be given responsibility for arranging the circumstances.

But if God had arranged for Cody Parkey to miss those four kicks, what might have been the purpose of that arranging? Did God have it in for Parkey or the Bears? (The Bears won the game.) In the case of the waitress’s stolen license, if God set up the memorable circumstances for the license’s retrieval, why doesn’t God make a more concerted effort to find more stolen wallets? As for that batter’s foul ball, are we to conclude that God was looking for a conspicuous way to deepen the bond between mother and son?

Our minds get suspicious when no one is in control of our every circumstance. That chance and coincidence could be part of the fabric of the universe—and one of the by-products of human freedom—is simply incomprehensible to many. They go searching for a responsible party and, eager to identify someone who might be in charge, find God to be the go-to choice. “If bad things happen,” observes Roberta Bondi, “it is better to have a God we can’t understand and who hurts us, but is at least in charge.”

Our spiritual lives would grow exponentially if we could step beyond the pious but false notion of God arranging our circumstances for the sake of sending good and bad events our way. God doesn’t send events into our lives or arrange circumstances either to please or disappoint us. What seems to interest God far more is the texture of our souls and the composition of our character. How we shape these determines how we navigate the various events we encounter.

Instead of elevating coincidence to the status of miracle and trying to assign gospel-level meaning to every chance event, maybe we can learn to trust God’s constancy in our lives enough to help us say more comfortably: *Whatever happens, happens.*