



DISTURBING DIGITAL COINCIDENCES

BY DON STEINBERG

I am beginning to experience what I would call disturbing digital coincidences. Call me crazy, but on Wednesday I asked my Amazon Echo Dot, “Alexa, what time is it?” On Thursday, I got an e-mail from Wayfair suggesting that I might like to order a thirty-inch farmhouse-style wall clock that lends any room a touch of charm. Coincidence?

While chatting with a colleague via Skype, I cleared my throat and coughed twice. Hours later, my Facebook feed displayed an ad for Mucinex. On Sunday night, I watched a YouTube video of ICE agents hassling immigrants. On Monday morning, the first song in my Spotify “Discover Weekly” playlist was “Cold as Ice” by Foreigner.

On a phone call using my landline, I told my parents that Janice and I were thinking about having another child. Moments later, the doorbell rang. It was a door-to-door salesman selling

First Response Early Result Pregnancy Test Kits.

Janice and I went to a far corner of the living room to discuss our idea of moving to Brooklyn. We made sure to whisper to each other, our hands cupped over our lips. Nevertheless, we both received “pins you might like” suggestions from Pinterest for boards featuring photos of bearded men pushing luxury baby strollers.

My cough began getting worse. My throat grew raw and sore. During a FaceTime conversation with my sister, I had a coughing fit so bad that I was forced to put down the phone. When I picked it up, there were four marketing e-mails from health clinics and hospitals. Several real-estate agents called and said they had heard that we might be selling the house. Bonobos.com e-mailed me with suggestions for jackets “that might match that Galapagos Blue shirt you’re wearing.”

I deactivated the smart doorbell, because I felt that it might somehow be snooping on us, and I flushed my Fit-bit down the toilet. The Bluetooth-connected light bulbs seemed safe for the moment. Advertisements for various kinds of clocks continued to follow me on Web pages across the Internet: a cuckoo clock for sale on Etsy, a vintage but possibly broken clock (“not tested”) offered on eBay, a digital clock displaying the time as a series of equations on ThinkGeek.com.

Janice and I worked out a crude sort of sign language to communicate silently. I pointed at my mouth to indicate that I was hungry. My phone buzzed with a coupon from Grubhub. We sneaked out to the driveway, pretending that we were going out to smoke cigarettes. The lawn was strewn with fallen tree limbs from the stormy winter, and the gutters above the garage overflowed with dead leaves. A neighbor came over carrying a printout of local landscapers from Angie’s List.

I got in my car and drove, just to clear my head. At the end of the street, the “check oil” light on the dashboard came on. When I pulled into a gas station, the attendant was holding containers of motor oil high, one in each hand. “Thanks for getting here so quickly,” he said. “How’s your cough?”

While I waited for the oil change, an e-mail arrived from Monster.com with the subject line “We Found These Jobs for You.” One of the listings was “Smart-Doorbell Deactivator.” And then came the e-mail from my employer, announcing the layoffs.

My health deteriorated further. My whole body ached. It hurt to move. My fever rose to a hundred and five, and soon I was vomiting blood. Why had I ignored those hospital offers? I asked Alexa what the weekend weather would be. She stopped her forecast details at Friday. “Last chance for savings” offers from Hotels.com flooded my in-box.

As I began to lose consciousness, I turned on the TV. Netflix suggested that I might like to binge its new series about arrogant Wall Street bond traders who are willing to stab anyone in the back to grab more power. I actually hate that kind of show. I think they’re recommending it to everybody. ♦