Sometimes the slightest things change the directions of our lives, the merest breath of a circumstance, a random moment that connects like a meteorite striking the earth. Lives have swiveled and changed direction on the strength of a chance remark.

—BRYCE COURTenay, 1996

1  The Wheel of Fortune

Have you ever stopped to wonder how you arrived at where you are? Sit back for a moment and think about it. Ask yourself, “How did I end up at my current job, in this city or state or country, with these particular friends and family?” If you are like most people, you will probably think back to some of the major decisions you made throughout your life. You might consider the skills, interests, and talents you have acquired across the years. Perhaps you will recall the hard work and effort you have exerted in order to get to where you are. Undoubtedly, these are all important factors in helping to explain the specific twists and turns that have occurred in our lives.

But there is another factor that may be just as important. Yet it is the one element that we often forget when explaining our journey. It is the random factor.

This book will argue that randomness exerts a profound influence in shaping the course of our lives and the world around us. It has
both large and small effects on the manner and direction that our lives take. It may not always be obvious at first, but across time, it is frequently profound.

I began to appreciate this while working on an earlier book, *Chasing the American Dream: Understanding What Shapes Our Fortunes*. In that book, my co-author Kirk Foster and I interviewed 75 people from all walks of life. They ranged from an older man who was homeless and sleeping on the streets to an entrepreneur whose wealth was valued at well over a billion dollars. During the span of a year I wanted to learn more about the particulars of how these lives turned out, as well as listening to their thoughts and ideas about the American Dream. I was also interested in the commonalities and differences that defined their lives.

Yet over the course of interviewing, something very interesting came to light. As we explored the twists and turns in people’s lives, the role of luck and chance in shaping the directions of those twists and turns became increasingly apparent. A fortuitous meeting, a missed appointment, a forgotten telephone call, a serendipitous discovery—all of these and more were mentioned as having a profound influence on how people’s lives unfolded. At the time, they may have appeared inconsequential, but in hindsight they took on immense importance.

During our interviews, I listened as individuals repeatedly mentioned these twists of fate and the importance they had in shaping their lives. Sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad, and sometimes in ways that were just different. Interviewees talked about chance encounters, accidents that occurred, happenstance conversations that changed lives, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, being in the right place at the right time, and on and on.

Such randomness can be unsettling because it represents that which we basically have no control over. In America, we like to believe that we have agency over our destiny—that the future is predicated on our current actions and behaviors. We are very much steeped in the no-
tion of rugged individualism, where we are expected to chart our own futures and break our own frontiers through ability and hard work.2

Yet much of life also revolves around luck and chance. Truth be told, there is considerable randomness to life. Philosophers, playwrights, and novelists have long recognized and written about the elements of life that we can neither control nor predict, and yet can have profound ripple effects upon our well-being.

Despite the importance of such randomness, social scientists and sociologists such as myself have generally shied away from studying the role of luck and chance in affecting our lives. Part of the reason may be that today’s heavy emphasis upon statistics and prediction does not lend itself to modeling randomness. By definition, chance events are unpredictable, and are therefore difficult to fit into an equation. However, that does not mean that they are unimportant. Quite the contrary.

Perhaps another reason we downplay the role of randomness in our lives is that we tend to be governed by daily routines. Many of us get up in the morning, eat breakfast, go to work or work from home, have dinner, watch TV or surf the internet, go to bed, only to repeat the same routine the next day. The world can often appear as a continuous cycle of routine. Yet as will be abundantly clear, within such routines there are endless ripples of randomness that can affect and bend the wider currents that push our lives forward.

And as mentioned, another factor for ignoring randomness may be our strong belief as Americans in the importance of agency. America has long been steeped in the ethos of rugged individualism and the Protestant work ethic, both of which place little weight on the importance of luck and chance in influencing life outcomes.

Background

“On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below.”3 So begins
Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel, The Bridge of San Luis Rey. As chance would have it, a Franciscan monk named Brother Juniper has witnessed the tragedy. Wilder’s book and Brother Juniper grapple with questions: Why were these five travelers the ones to unfortunately find themselves in such an unlucky position, resulting in their deaths? Was there something that connected these five lives together? What sense or meaning can be found in such a random event?

Brother Juniper spends the next six years gathering information about each of the five individuals in order to attempt to understand the tragedy. He asks himself, “Why did this happen to those five?” Wilder goes on to write,

If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. And on that instant Brother Juniper made the resolve to inquire into the secret lives of those five persons.4

Unfortunately, neither Wilder nor Brother Juniper is able to answer this question. Brother Juniper compiles an enormous volume of pages detailing the lives of the fallen, but in the end comes to no firm conclusion. However, his blasphemous attempt at understanding such a tragedy beyond divine intention has fallen upon the eyes of the town’s judges steeped in the Spanish Inquisition, and he and his book are ordered to be burned at the stake.

For centuries, writers and philosophers have tried to answer the questions that Brother Juniper grappled with in The Bridge of San Luis Rey. Why are we put on this earth and for what purpose? Why do some of us experience tragedies while others do not? How might things have turned out differently if only . . . ?
Certainly these must have been some of the questions that weighed heavily upon the relatives and friends of those killed in the 9/11 tragedy of the Twin Towers in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the open fields in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. If only a subway connection wasn’t early (or late) that day. If only a meeting hadn’t been cancelled the night before. If only . . . Surely these random occurrences exerted monumental effects upon the lives of these individuals and their families. Like the bridge of San Luis Rey, nearly 3,000 individuals were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In his book *The Only Plane in the Sky*, Garrett Graff spent three years gathering the personal stories of those who were directly touched by the tragedy of 9/11. Over and over he was struck by the role that luck and chance played with respect to who lived and who died. As he writes in *The Atlantic*,

"In all those published accounts and audio clips, and in the interviews I conducted, one theme never ceases to amaze me: the sheer randomness of how the day unfolded, who lived, who died, who was touched, and who escaped. One thousand times a day, we all make arbitrary decisions—which flight to book, which elevator to board, whether to run an errand or stop for coffee before work—never realizing the possibilities that an alternate choice might have meant. In the 18 years since 9/11, each of us must have made literally 1 million such decisions, creating a multitude of alternate outcomes we’ll never know."

Randomness is thus a constant companion as we live out our lives. It exerts its influence in ways that are obvious and not so obvious. In this book we explore the manner in which this companion walks beside us.

The topics of chance, luck, and randomness have been considered since antiquity. Written discourse regarding unexpected and chance
events had its beginnings in ancient Greece. Indeed, the Greek gods of Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades were thought to have drawn lots to determine which realm of the world they would rule over, with Zeus drawing the sky, Poseidon the seas, and Hades the underworld. Epircurus, Aristotle, Euripides, and other Greek philosophers grappled with whether there was such a thing as chance and/or whether the world operated by a knowable and constant set of laws.

The discussion continued into the Roman Empire, where fortune and luck were represented by the goddess Fortuna. One of the tools she relied on to deliver her decisions was the wheel of fortune. The Roman poet Ovid describes how Fortuna would blindly spin her wheel, bringing good fortune to some and ill luck to others. She was considered the deity that affected all walks of life. The philosopher Pliny wrote,

For all over the world, in all places, and at all times, Fortune is the only god whom everyone invokes . . . To her are referred all our losses and all our gains, and in casting up the accounts of mortals she alone balances the two pages of our sheet. We are so much in the power of chance, that chance itself is considered as a God and the existence of God becomes doubtful.

There is an image of Fortuna taken from a manuscript in the Hohenburg Abbey in Alsace, France. Here we find Fortuna spinning her wheel with a handheld crank. Riding the wheel on the left is an aspiring monarch whose future is upward. At the top is the crowned monarch. On the right a falling monarch who will soon be losing his crown, and at the bottom a failed monarch being crushed and thrown off the wheel. In this manner Fortune has her say over the future outcomes of us all.

The idea of luck and chance being depicted as a wheel of fortune was carried into the Middle Ages through a seminal work written by
the Roman statesman Boethius in 523. His writing took place over the course of a year during which he was imprisoned and ultimately executed. This work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, has been described as the single most important text in the West influencing Medieval and early Renaissance Christianity. Following Plato’s lead in the *Dialogues*, the book centers around a dialogue that occurs between Boethius and a woman representing the spirit of philosophy. Chance and fortune feature extensively in the work.

Philosophy tells Boethius that Fortune by her very nature is fickle and constantly changing. In fact, if she stays still, she would no longer be Fortune. As she turns her wheel, she relishes in the fact that those on the bottom of the wheel are brought to the top, while those on the top of the wheel are brought to the bottom. In this way, an individual’s good luck and fortune may sour, just as one with bad luck may unexpectedly experience good fortune. As she proclaims,

This is my art, this is the game I never cease to play. I turn the wheel that spins. I delight to see the high come down and the low ascent.
Mount up, if you wish, but on the condition you will not think it a hardship to come down when the rules of my game require it.10

Yet how much of life is ruled by such chance and luck? Boethius does not provide an answer to this question, but others throughout history have ventured a guess.11

In *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli gives advice and instructions for the would-be prince. The phrase “Machiavellian” has come into usage to convey the techniques that he espouses for the prince to strengthen his power and authority. But Machiavelli also discusses the role of fortune affecting the chances of success or failure. And here he ascribes the odds at approximately 50/50. He notes that at the time of his writing, great changes have taken place across Europe, and that some might argue these are beyond our control:
“Sometimes pondering over this, I am in some degree inclined to their opinion. Nevertheless, not to extinguish our free will, I hold it be true that Fortune is the arbiter of one-half of our actions, but that she still leaves us to direct the other half, or perhaps a little less.”

Machiavelli goes on to compare fortune to a raging river that has the power to move all within its path. And yet, when the weather is fair, an individual can prepare for the flood by building “defences and barriers, in such a manner that, rising again, the waters may pass away by canal, and their force be neither so unrestrained nor so dangerous. So it happens with fortune, who shows her power where valour has not prepared to resist her, and thither she turns her forces where she knows that barriers and defences have not been raised to constrain her.”

In another attempt to place a percentage upon how much of life is governed by chance, Frederick the Great in the eighteenth century was accustomed to saying, “The older one gets the more convinced one becomes that his Majesty King Chance does three-quarters of the business of this miserable universe.”

Yet for much of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, randomness and chance fell out of favor. This was the result of both the power of the church to proclaim all things preordained, and the rise of the scientific method in which the prevailing view was that all of nature is governed by universal laws.

With respect to the teachings of the church, because God is viewed as omniscient and all knowing, there can be no room for chance or randomness. Everything must have a purpose and design according to God’s plans. The existence of randomness is simply unfathomable within such a worldview. As John Calvin announced in 1561, “There is no such thing as fortune or chance.”

With regard to the scientific method, there grew a strong belief among scientists and philosophers that the world operated by a set of laws, and that with enough investigation, these laws were both know-