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Experiential Skepticism
and an Exploration of
Mediumship and
Life After Death

Taking Soul Birds Seriously:
A Post-Secular Animist
Perspective on Extra-
Ordinary Communications

Paranormal Beliefs in
College Culture:
*"In my house we have a
ghost named Isaiah."*

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Introduction

Jack Hunter



Welcome to *Paranthropology* Vol. 6 No. 2, the somewhat late second issue of 2015. In spite of its lateness, however, I think this is an excellent issue. To begin, Jennifer Lyke presents an insight into the cosmological understanding of US mediums based upon phenomenological investigation and analysis. Then Brian Taylor continues the theme of taking experience seriously with his very personal exploration of ‘Soul Birds’ as part of his wider ‘animic’ reality. Next Brooke Hansen and colleagues explore the paranormal beliefs and experiences of students and staff at Ithaca College and uncover some fascinating and revealing data. This is followed by Elliot Benjamin’s agnostic auto-ethnographic approach to the study of mediumship, in which he describes his own experiences participating in events at a Spiritualist Church. We then have two reviews, one from Jules Evans of the psychedelic conference Breaking Convention, and the other from T. Peter Park of the New Jersey UFO/Paranormal Spring Conference. To finish we have the abstracts from a recent round-table discussion on ‘The Emerging Field of Paranthropology,’ which took place at the 58th Annual Parapsychological Association Conference. I am

also very pleased to announce the publication of *Strange Dimensions: A Paranthropology Anthology*, which celebrates 4 years of the *Paranthropology Journal*. It features 16 chapters (plus an introduction and foreword), covering everything from William Burroughs to Crop Circles, via alien abductions, mediumship and surfing. If you have enjoyed the journal, or found it useful, please consider buying a copy of the anthology, as it is the very best way to support its continued existence (see page 49 for more details). Thank you, and I hope you enjoy the issue!

Jack Hunter

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A Qualitative Investigation of United States Mediums' Impressions of Spirits and the Afterlife

Jennifer Lyke



Abstract

Proof-focused research aimed at evaluating the validity of mediums' perceptions of the spirit world has provided the basis for a contentious scientific debate about whether information received by mediums is partially veridical or fundamentally delusional. However, little empirical research has gone beyond attempts to establish the veridicality of alleged spirit communications to qualitatively investigate the unique perspectives of mediums regarding the content they claim to access. Qualitative work with mediums thus far has focused on the mediums themselves, as opposed to their perceptions of the nature of discarnate entities or the afterlife.

This investigation attempted to summarize themes in mediums' descriptions of the spirits and the afterlife using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative method of investigation founded on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, which seeks to understand individual perceptions and interpretations of experience. The specific aims of this research were to interview six mediums regarding their understanding of the nature of the afterlife and spirit experiences based on their perceptions and impressions, and to identify commonalities and discrepancies among the themes they described. The mediums, who each participated in a semi-structured interview, were chosen from a list of Windbridge Certified Research Mediums (WCRMs) for maximum geographic diversity, and IPA was used to identify meanings participants assigned to their perceptions and impressions.

Analysis identified themes shared across participants as well as aspects of reports unique to individuals or subgroups of participants. Themes common to all mediums' descriptions of the spirits and the afterlife included the following: the afterlife is part of a timeless, omnipresent non-physical reality; spiritual evolution organizes non-physical reality; spirits may reincarnate; discarnates may remain connected to the living; death is a transition; suicide is a mistake; and a variety of spiritual entities inhabit non-physical reality. The mediums had differing views regarding the availability of discarnates and reincarnation, the nature of angels, and the variety of spiritual entities that exist in the afterlife.

Possible factors influencing mediums' interpretations of their experiences are discussed. Given multiple possible interpretations of the impressions they report, it is useful to ask mediums themselves what sense they make of their experiences. These findings are potentially useful for understanding people who have similar experiences and choose to interpret them in a framework that includes the possibility of survival of consciousness after physical death. Similarities among mediums' descriptions may be influenced by commonalities among their particular psychological characteristics, membership in a unique sociocultural subgroup, or they may reflect common elements of a particular kind of transpersonal experience. The results of this investigation should be viewed in the context of the ongoing debate regarding the validity of mediums' perceptions.

Keywords: mediumship; qualitative investigation; IPA; spirits; afterlife

Mediums who claim to have contact with spirits have been investigated for the last

150 years from a variety of approaches. Early research focused on case reports and participant investigations of séance experi-

ences, often related to Spiritist practices (Rhine & Rhine 1927). More recently, proof-focused research aimed at evaluating the validity of mediums' perceptions of the spirit world has provided the basis for a contentious scientific debate about whether information received by mediums is potentially veridical or fundamentally delusional (Beishel & Schwartz 2007; Kelly & Arcangel 2011; O'Keefe & Wiseman 2005; Schwartz & Russek 2001). In addition, several books summarizing mediums' views on the afterlife and spirit communication have recently become available for the popular market (Beischel 2014; Olsen 2014; Podmore 2014). However, little empirical research has gone beyond attempts to establish the veridicality of alleged spirit communications to qualitatively investigate the unique perspectives of mediums regarding the content they claim to access. That is, qualitative work with mediums thus far has focused on the mediums themselves, as opposed to their perceptions as they relate to the nature of discarnate entities or the afterlife.

For example, Taylor and Murray (2012) performed a qualitative investigation exploring the process by which mediums become indoctrinated into their social roles. They suggest that mediums experience sub-clinical auditory hallucinations, and their delusional beliefs that they are communicating with spirits who inhabit a non-physical reality are a coping strategy, which serves to maintain their functional status in society (Taylor & Murray 2012). Rock, Beischel and Schwartz (2008) performed a

phenomenological analysis of mediums' sensory experiences during communication with discarnates, which resulted in seven constituent themes. However, almost no research has systematically explored the content of mediums' reports, such as nature of the afterlife or the experiences of spirits, as they are interpreted by mediums based on their perceptions and impressions.

Accordingly, this investigation attempted to summarize themes in mediums' descriptions of the spirits and the afterlife using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith 1996). IPA is a qualitative method of investigation founded on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idio-graphy. It seeks to understand individual perceptions and interpretations of experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). Wilde and Murray (2010) have argued that IPA is uniquely suited to the investigation of anomalous experiences. They suggest, along with others who support the phenomenological investigation of anomalous experiences (Irwin & Watt 2007), that qualitative research into the meanings of anomalous experiences can add to understanding of these classes of phenomena generally. Roxburgh and Roe have conducted phenomenological investigations in which they asked mediums about their understanding of the nature and role of spirit guides (Roxburgh & Roe 2013) as well as investigating how mediums come to experience their perceptions as mediumistic (Roxburgh & Roe 2014). However, neither of these efforts addressed other aspects of the cosmological

interpretations mediums give to their experiences.

Therefore, the aims of this research were to interview six mediums regarding their understanding of the nature of the afterlife and spirit experiences based on their perceptions and impressions, and to identify commonalities and discrepancies among the themes they described. There was no attempt to establish the validity of the mediums' interpretations of their experiences.

METHOD

Participants

Participants ($N = 6$) were selected from a list of Windbridge Certified Research Mediums (WCRMs) for maximum geographic diversity across the United States. WCRMs have been screened and trained by the Windbridge Institute for participation in research studies and have demonstrated a relatively high level of accuracy on readings conducted under controlled conditions (Beischel 2007). They were contacted by email and invited to participate in a structured phone interview regarding the nature of the afterlife and the experiences of spirits. One medium failed to respond to the initial email. They were offered \$100 for their participation. Mediums in the final sample were from six different states. Their average age was 58 years old ($SD = 6.44$). Four of the mediums said they had no religious identification. The other two identified as Wiccan and Spiritualist.

Procedure

Mediums were identified through the website of the Windbridge Institute (www.Windbridge.org). They were emailed regarding the goals and process of the research, sent a copy of the general questions framing the interview (see Appendix A) and an informed consent, and asked for their participation in the research. Upon receipt of the signed informed consent, interviews were scheduled and later conducted by phone and recorded using iPadio. Interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes. During the interview, the nature of qualitative research was described and the mediums were informed that the questions were intended to provide only a rough outline for conversation. Interviews were subsequently transcribed, and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Reid, Flowers & Larkin 2005) was used to identify meanings participants assigned to their experiences. Mediums were given pseudonyms: April, Beth, Catherine, Darlene, Ellen, and Felicia. Mediums did not review transcripts of the interviews, but were encouraged to follow up with further information if they felt it necessary after the interview was finished.

IPA uses an inductive approach. Data analysis in this case involved reading and re-reading transcripts, highlighting key words and themes that emerged in the text, and subsequently grouping those words and themes into larger concepts that seemed to capture the essence of the mean-

ings participants derived from their experiences as prescribed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). This process identified several themes shared across participants as well as aspects of reports unique to individuals or subgroups of participants.

RESULTS

The interviews revealed several common themes among mediums' perceptions with some discrepancies with respect to particulars. The two overarching themes that were the explicit focus of this research were the nature of the afterlife itself and the nature of the spirits and their experiences. More specific themes that emerged within these categories are summarized below.

The afterlife is part of a timeless, omnipresent non-physical reality.

The mediums expressed broad agreement regarding many aspects of the afterlife, generally describing it as existing "side by side" or "up against" physical reality. All mediums agreed that time, as it is experienced in physical reality, is illusory and irrelevant in the dimension they believe they access. The mediums described the ordinary experience of time as a sort of "perceptual illusion," "frame of reference" for functional purposes, or a "construct" created by the human mind.

Well, as far as time, I - in the spirit world my understanding from them and my experience in there is that

there really is no time there - that, that time is something that is a pattern or a construct of this world, of the physical reality, so that time doesn't really exist in the spirit world - *Beth*

The mediums also agreed that the afterlife is not separated spatially from the physical world. They described it as "a separate dimension," "all around us," and "parallel." They also almost unanimously described the spirit world as existing at a "higher frequency" relative to the physical world and that spirits in the afterlife are contacted by traversing an illusory barrier:

I don't believe that the spirit world is a physical place. It's not a place at all, it's a frequency. And so it's really right - they are - when people cross over and make their transition from physical life back into spirit, that they are right here among us in the physical dimension, but they are just vibrating at a different frequency. So they're really right here - *Darlene*

One medium suggested mediums facilitate communication by raising their energies to meet those of the spirits as the spirits lower their energies to meet humans. Another described the boundary between the spirit world and the physical world as a "veil" or "wall," and explained that spirits could pass through this boundary easily, although humans have to make a special effort to pre-

pare their consciousness to cross the boundary.

*Spiritual evolution
organizes non-physical reality.*

The mediums generally agreed that the afterlife is organized into planes, levels, or dimensions with discarnate entities occupying only one level of the afterlife. The nature of the levels was not clearly defined by the mediums, but there was agreement that natural forces organize spirits into “soul groups” or “neighborhoods” of similar spiritual energy.

I do believe that it is organized. I do believe there's some sort of system where they kind of - like we find our place here in the world, but we find our place there in the spirit side of life, too. Energy will find its place because every energy is a different vibration, just like us here on the physical [plane], we're all a different vibration so we're going to gravitate with what resonates with us. – *Felicia*

All mediums endorsed the idea that there is a purpose to physical life and to continued existence as a discarnate. The stated purpose was explicitly described as “learning lessons” in a system like “school” by all mediums, including experiencing levels like “kindergarten” and “graduating” to higher levels of spiritual development based on lessons learned. The mediums generally explained that existence in “Earth School,”

that is, as humans in physical form, provides an opportunity for a particular type of experience, which serves the purpose of facilitating spiritual development. For example, April emphasized learning as the driving principle behind relationships and experiences of physical incarnation:

Yeah, well I think this is the arena for learning. I think the reason we choose physical life, and I do believe that we choose it, is to experience certain things. You know my core belief in this is that we choose, we have a soul contract if you will, coming into physical life with regard to what our mission is here. In other words, what do we want to work on, what do we want to learn in this lifetime? We also choose our families, or those who might not be a family blood relative, but it could be also including those who we will fall in love with and marry, friendships, all kinds of bonds. I do believe that, you know, all of that is addressed and much of it is chosen prior to even taking your first breath, you know, and coming into physical life. So we really are choosing what we want to work on here.

The mediums agreed that the principles of spiritual evolution continue on the spiritual plane after physical life. They expressed an understanding that souls evolve toward “completion.” For example, Ellen, who used

the term “Heaven” to refer to the afterlife, said:

[W]hen they cross over into Heaven there are different levels of Heaven and experience over there, and it depends on what your soul needs to learn, and the purpose of the soul is to become more and more enlightened and to be like The Creator and be loving, be pure love. That's what our purpose is as a soul. And so a lot of us have a lot more work to do than others, so depending upon how much we need to learn is what level we're put on. The same as like going to school.

The mediums described a variety of spiritual entities that they perceived to exist in the non-physical dimension. Some mediums' descriptions were more clearly defined than others. For example, Ellen reported perceiving angels “in their traditional form,” whereas Catherine's impressions of spiritual entities were more varied and amorphous:

There are different levels of spirit that come through. They feel different to me. If somebody's been gone a very, very long time and they've done whatever work they needed to do on the other side, they come through very loving and peaceful, they feel like they're on an ocean wave to me, and they don't really have a message other than true love, and that's the most

blissful feeling. They're absolutely gorgeous. And then there's like archangel energy that comes through that will just blow you out of your chair. Um, it's totally different. And then there's kind of more Earth-bound energies. There's brand new spirits that have just crossed over. Their energies are kind of scattered and hard to connect with. Um, there's wounded spirits who suffered and suffered before they passed. Their energy feels much different than the other levels. So. . .there are so many different levels of energy on the other side.

Spirits may reincarnate.

The mediums unanimously endorsed the idea of reincarnation, although they differed in their descriptions of the particulars of the process and their willingness to speculate about it. There was no consensus on how reincarnation might work beyond the general agreement that souls could choose to return to Earth in another body. Some mediums believed reincarnation would make that spirit unavailable for communication with mediums, while others thought perhaps souls and spirits could divide such that a soul could reincarnate in another body, but that entity's spirit would remain available in the afterlife. The mediums agreed that individual spirits exercise control over some circumstances into which they reincarnate, although they differed on which aspects of embodied life

might be chosen. For example, some believed spirits could choose the family into which they would be born, while others did not. There was agreement that the point of reincarnation is “so you can learn your lessons, and clean up whatever karma you need to clean up, and evolve at a higher level. . . .The circumstances [of reincarnation] create lessons one needs to learn to create their highest self” (Catherine). Darlene also explicitly stated that even people who are victimized or have very difficult lives chose those experiences before being physically embodied, with the implication that such circumstances facilitate spiritual learning.

*Discarnates may remain
connected to the living.*

The mediums primarily reported experiencing communication with discarnates, people who had once been alive as human beings, although they all agreed that there are other types of spirits in the afterlife who may or may not ever have been embodied in physical form. April explained that different entities could be contacted by the medium “focusing” differently. She described the different levels of spiritual entities as corresponding to different levels of vibration, with higher vibrations corresponding to higher levels of spiritual development.

The mediums generally agreed that every physical being exists in the spirit world after death. The terminology of their descriptions differed, but they agreed in

principle that energy fields related to the physical body remain after the death of the body and can be described as continuing to exist as a “frequency,” “vibration,” “auric field,” or “thought.” Darlene explained: “So in essence when people leave the physical world their consciousness continues on, their memory, their characteristics. They become non-physical but they keep that silhouette, let's call it the spiritual body, that's perfect and whole.”

The mediums agreed that relationships are the primary element of spiritual connection, both among discarnates as well as between discarnates and living people. April emphasized the eternal nature of relationships, saying, “Love is forever, relationships are forever, and even challenging relationships are forever.” Although the mediums most frequently contact blood relatives of sitters, they also felt there are other bases for attachment between discarnates and physical humans:

Like when you're leaving your physical body at the time of death that you're going to meet your mother and your father, your grandparents, your dogs or cats. They're all part of your family. They're all part of your soul group. And friends, because whoever we connect to in this lifetime is part of our soul group, they're all our soul mates. They're all here to help us learn and grow. - *Felicia*

The mediums agreed that a primary goal of discarnate communication is to let humans know that physical death is not the end of spiritual existence. Catherine said, "That's all the other side wants is to be noticed, to be acknowledged, and to be listened to." The mediums agreed that the messages from discarnates are always positive, communicating peace and happiness in the afterlife. Many messages appear to serve the purpose of helping sitters identify the discarnate. For example, most mediums mentioned that they often receive information regarding the discarnate's death, as well as specific memories that could be identified by sitters. The mediums interpreted the overarching purpose of discarnates' messages to be "healing."

They show me things that they liked to do when they were here, or they just want to say that they're not in pain. Maybe if somebody was really sick and they liked to dance, they'll show me dancing. If - like say I'll see a gentleman playing golf, and maybe he was in a wheelchair before he passed but he used to play golf, and then he had a car accident and then he became quadriplegic, you know? I'm saying like things like that, you know, where physically it would be impossible for them to do what they're showing me they're doing, but the sitter can identify and say, "Yeah, oh they used to love golfing," or "They used to love to dance and sing. I'm so happy

that they're able to do that again," you know? A lot of it - you know - showing peace, showing happiness. It's always a sense of peace and happiness, always. Never anything morbid or depressing, ever. - *Felicia*

Ellen and Felicia also described that discarnates are sometimes motivated to "guide" or "watch over" living people. Strong spirits can also overpower messages from weaker spirits: "Some personalities are weaker than other personalities. The stronger ones will push the weak ones out of the way to get their message across" (Ellen). However, the mediums had a variety of explanations for occasions when discarnates could not be contacted, including the possibilities that discarnates may not want further contact with physical humans, quiet or peaceful people are also quiet and peaceful as discarnates, or discarnates may have been reincarnated so they are unavailable:

So it just depends on the extent of the relationship and the personality of the person that passed. Some of them just leave. They get over there and see how beautiful it is and they're done with this life, and they just go on, and it doesn't matter how much their loved ones want to hear from them, they're gone. And you have to let them go and respect that. - *Ellen*

The mediums generally agreed that spirit communication sometimes occurs during dreams. Three mediums (Beth, Ellen, Felicia) specifically mentioned that they believe this occurs because people's defenses are lower during that state, although not all dreams involve spirit communication. In particular, Ellen mentioned that dreams involving spirit communication could be distinguished from other dreams by their vividness.

Death is a transition.

Some mediums mentioned that death is not an absolutely clear dividing line between life and the afterlife. Felicia gave examples of contacting the spirits of people in comas or very sick people in hospice, which they believed suggested the energy of a living being may pass into the afterlife through a gradual process:

I can't exactly be sure but I know that when I am contacting the energy, I am contacting a place called the spirit side of the afterlife, but it may perhaps be a place of consciousness where the body maybe is just beginning to cease its operation in the physical world. It may not be that everything has ceased and then there's the afterlife. – *Felicia*

Some mediums were very specific about the process of the dying experience. Catherine said, "I feel like the spirit world comes in close when it is close to that living

person's time to go." Other mediums specifically mentioned that guides, angels, and deceased family members may be available to facilitate the dying person's transition. Ellen described a very specific process of the soul leaving the body based on witnessing the dying process in hospitals:

What happens is that when the soul - at the moment that the soul leaves the body it comes up - it comes up from the feet. It starts being pulled up from the feet and it comes up through the crown of the head and it just ascends upward. And when it comes out it's transparent, so sometimes I just see the energy come out, sometimes I see the form of the human come out. I know it's the human and it comes out. So that's what happens first.

Several mediums mentioned that they believe deceased loved ones wait on the other side to welcome dying family members. April said, "When one crosses over all their family, their loved ones, their friends, animals, they're all there waiting for them. They're having a celebration. It's a welcoming home." Several mediums also suggested that immediately following death discarnate spirits may linger near the physical world for a few days, which they attribute as the source of hallucinations, dreams, or other signs to living people that the spirit of their deceased loved one is nearby.

The mediums agreed that death is experienced as a transition to which discarnates

gradually “acclimate,” although they emphasized different aspects of the experience in their descriptions. Some suggested people’s beliefs during life might shape their particular sensations and impressions during the dying process. For example, April described that “[w]e die into our beliefs.” In other words, religious beliefs or symbolism might literally appear in the initial experience of death, but that those idiosyncratic perceptions might eventually give way to a more universal experience:

[O]nce we're acclimated to the fact that we're no longer in physical form and we actually realize, you know, that we've transitioned, I think a lot of things become very clear to us very quickly, okay? And the experience from that point on might be very similar for everyone who's made their transition. – *April*

Beth, in particular, emphasized that reflecting on the embodied life experience is an integral part of the transition to the after-life.

Suicide is a mistake.

Several mediums mentioned they experience discarnates who committed suicide differently than they do discarnates who died from natural causes:

You know usually those people are - they're still filled with the depression, the sadness, the whatever it was that

caused them to commit suicide. . . .and the turmoil. They carry that over so that they don't - they didn't cross over and then everything became perfect. . . .They didn't have this sudden realization of, you know, great, great awareness and enlightenment once they crossed over. Typically people who've done that are, are almost stuck there for a while. – *Beth*

Ellen said discarnates who committed suicide regret the choice they made “because they can look back and see the damage that they've done to people they love or that they care about.” Multiple mediums suggested discarnates who committed suicide require particular learning experiences in the afterlife as remediation for that decision.

A variety of spiritual entities inhabit non-physical reality.

The mediums all agreed that the spirit world contains other entities in addition to discarnates. Catherine described a variety of types of energy that are not necessarily clearly delineated in particular forms or roles:

So to me there are so many levels of positive and negative energy, just like in the living world. . . .[Y]ou have alien energy, animal energy, plant energy, weird energy, you know, traumatic energy, you've got all of it all kind of in-

teracting and combining just like you do in the living world.

All mediums described “guides” as a particular category, although they differed in the names they used and their descriptions of other entities. Other categories included “angels,” “masters,” “teachers,” “aliens,” “light workers,” “watchers,” and “The Others.” All entities were described as more highly developed than discarnates, however. Some mediums explicitly outlined a hierarchy of entities existing specifically in “higher realms” or a “different dimension” than discarnates, and several mediums described that communicating with discarnates feels qualitatively different to the medium than communicating with other spiritual entities:

Spirit guides, from what I can understand, they help you while you're on Earth. They are teachers, and you can hear them and see them and sense them and they help you and they give you information. And I have several of those. And these are human beings, I feel like, that have graduated enough to teach. They understand the human experience enough to teach you. – *Ellen*

Several mediums distinguished between the roles of guides and those of angels. For example, Felicia said, “The guides help us learn lessons where the angels help us with struggles.” All mediums, however, agreed

that spiritual entities do not control human experience although they can be of assistance in various ways.

Spirit guides typically, you know, will give you guidance but never tell you what to do. They'll say, "You know, you probably should be looking at this. You may want to ,” you know, they make you aware of choices. . . .They don't choose for you. – *Beth*

The mediums’ reports of their relationships with angels also differed dramatically from each other. Ellen experienced angels as always available and described them almost like playmates in the non-physical dimension, whereas Beth was clear that she did not subscribe to the popular conceptualization of angels. Several mediums specifically referenced the fact that religious upbringing may distort individuals’ conceptualizations of angels, including those of mediums themselves:

So people will talk about angels, you know, "And the Angel of the Gardens came to me," and, you know, "Oh, the Angel of this is coming to you tomorrow," and “Let's pull our angel cards,” and it's always these messages of love and light and peace and joy and happiness, and there's never any real challenge there. And it's always “Let's look to - angels will solve our problems.” Well, that's not the reality, we

solve our problems. You know, angels aren't going to look out for you. – *Beth*

The mediums also distinguished between discarnates and another category of spirits, which they viewed as attached to the physical Earth. The mediums who addressed these “Earth bound” spirits, or ghosts, agreed that they exist at a lower level of spiritual development than the discarnates with whom they interact during mediumship. The mediums suggested different reasons that spirits might stay “stuck” to a lower plane of existence, but all implied that maintaining a strong connection to Earth after death indicates an aberration in the usual transition process. For example, they suggested the most common reason spirits would fail to move on to the afterlife are unfinished business or attachment to something in the physical world. Some also mentioned a tragic or sudden passing, attachment to children, not believing in an afterlife, or fear of punishment might prevent spirits from transitioning to the afterlife.

Most mediums did not address the existence of animals in the spirit world, but those who did specified that the animals that are most often available for communication are those that have had relationships with people, such as domesticated pets. Beth explicitly suggested that other animals exist in “a totally different dimension” than discarnates.

The mediums reported a variety of other entities that exist in non-physical re-

ality. Catherine and Ellen specifically mentioned spirits called “The Others.” Ellen reported that they have a human form, although they are not human, that she does not see their faces or feet, that her sense of them is that of a “dark presence,” but that they assist in healing and “work for the greater good.” Catherine said they “come in” to help people transition during the dying process. Several mediums also mentioned aliens as entities that exist in the non-physical dimension. However, none reported direct contact with them and the mediums varied in their willingness to speculate about their roles.

The mediums all acknowledged that negative energies exist in the spirit world, although they did not see these entities as very common or problematic. Some identified them as associated with people who were evil in life. Catherine said, “Like if Grandma was the meanest woman in the universe when she was alive, she's usually pretty darn mean on the other side, too.” Some believed that evil people are on the same path of spiritual development as other humans, and that they would eventually develop toward greater maturity although it might take longer for them, but others believed they would not evolve. Some mediums also believed evil forces sometimes are not separate spiritual entities. For example, they might be “thought forms that are powered by people's intentions” or “residual negative energy” that feeds “off other people's energies.” Catherine and Ellen specifi-

cally mentioned spiritual energy related to war that continually repeats behavior.

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation reveal general consensus among the mediums interviewed regarding their views of the spirits and the afterlife. Not surprisingly, the mediums agreed that human beings have spirits that exist in a non-physical reality after the death of the physical body. They agreed that this non-physical reality is timeless and omnipresent, and that it is organized according to principles related to spiritual evolution. The mediums generally agreed in their descriptions of discarnates' roles and messages, the nature of the death experience, and the principle of reincarnation. They also agreed that a variety of other spiritual entities, such as angels, guides, and ghosts, exist in non-physical reality in addition to discarnates. Some of these themes confirmed findings from other sources regarding the nature of spirit communication (Walliss 2001), energetic nature of spirits (Williams, Evans & Skinner 2003), and phenomenological experience of spirit guides (Roxburgh & Roe 2013). However, the mediums also disagreed regarding some aspects of the spirits and the afterlife. In particular, they had differing views regarding the availability of discarnates and reincarnation, the nature of angels, and the variety of spiritual entities that exist.

IPA is a method of phenomenological investigation, which is uniquely suited for

addressing mediums' unusual perceptual experiences. Given multiple possible interpretations of the impressions they report, it is useful to ask mediums themselves what sense they make of their perceptions. Certainly mediums' interpretations of their experiences are not necessarily objectively valid, but they are useful for understanding the experiences of people who have similar impressions and choose to interpret them in a framework that includes the survival of consciousness after physical death. Thus, similarities and differences in mediums' perspectives are important regardless of their causes. At the very least, the results of this investigation demonstrate that important spiritual themes may emerge and inform individuals' interpretations of their unusual experiences.

Mediums' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences are certainly shaped by individual cultural and psychological factors. Therefore, similarities among mediums' descriptions may be influenced by commonalities among their particular psychological characteristics, membership in a unique sociocultural subgroup, or they may reflect common elements of a particular kind of transpersonal experience. The mediums who participated in this study have an established level of validity due to their certification as WCRMs, so their interpretations are likely to represent the interpretations of mediums who can sometimes successfully produce accurate information regarding discarnates under controlled circumstances.

Other mediums in the United States are likely to share views similar to the participants in this research since this sample was selected from different parts of the country and had a variety of religious identifications. However, since mediumship is practiced in many countries, future investigations should explore cross-cultural similarities and differences among mediums' interpretations of their experiences. Such investigations could help isolate the unique cultural influences that shape mediums' interpretations of their experiences.

Finally, the results of this investigation should be viewed in the context of the ongoing debate regarding the validity of mediums' perceptions. If the balance of empirical research demonstrates mediums are not able to produce valid information about discarnates at a rate greater than chance (e.g., O'Keeffe & Wiseman 2005), then mediums' impressions may perhaps legitimately be interpreted as fantasies shaped by psychological and cultural factors. However, if the balance of future research establishes that mediums' are sometimes capable of producing accurate information about discarnates at a rate greater than chance under controlled conditions (e.g., Beischel & Schwartz 2007), then understanding the multiple factors influencing mediums' impressions of the spirits and the afterlife becomes more complicated. In either case, mediums interpretations of their perceptions and impressions warrant further investigation.

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Appendix A Questions for Semi-Structured Interview

Questions about the Spirit World

1. What is the relationship between the spirit world and our physical reality?
 - a) Is there time in the spirit world? If so, how does it relate to our experience of time in the physical world?
 - b) Where is the spirit world in relation to our physical universe?
2. Is the spirit world related to realities experienced in other altered states of consciousness (e.g., dreams, psychosis, hallucinogen intoxication)? If so, how?
3. Do all mediums communicate with the same spirit world?
4. Are there other dimensions of the spirit world beyond the one with which mediums communicate? If so, how do they differ from the one(s) accessible to mediums?

Questions about Spirits' Experiences

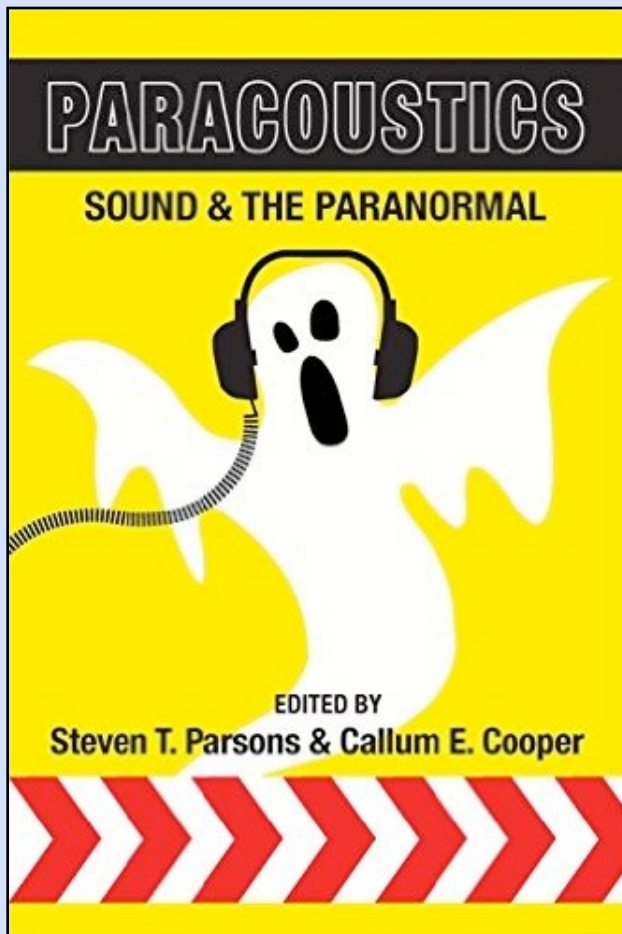
1. What happens after physical death?
 - a) Does every being from our physical world go to the spirit world after death? If not, what are the other possibilities?
 - b) Are all spirits' experiences similar? If not, how are they different and what determines the differences?
2. What aspects of physical embodiment remain after physical death (e.g., physical characteristics, personality, emotion, beliefs, motivation, etc.)?
3. How long do spirits stay in the spirit world?
4. If not forever, then what determines when they leave and where do they go?
5. Can spirits be reincarnated in our physical world? If so, what is the process (e.g., do they choose time, place, or other aspects of the environment for their physical existence, or are those conditions chosen for them)?
6. What factors influence the effectiveness of spirit to medium communication (e.g., the medium's personal or cultural beliefs, willingness, other conditions in the physical or spiritual environment)?
7. Is there a purpose to existing in spirit? Is there a purpose to the particular com-

munications of spirit?

8. Are all spirits beings who were once embodied in our physical world? If not, who are the other ones?
9. Is there anything else someone who is not a medium should know in order to understand spirits and spirit world better?

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NEW PUBLICATION



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Taking Soul Birds Seriously: A Post-Secular Animist Perspective on Extra-Ordinary Communications

Brian Taylor



"The idea of the soul as a winged creature or bird is not new here. It is a widespread and extremely ancient belief that the soul assumes the form of a bird or, put more extremely, that all birds are human souls." Beryl Rowland, 1978, p. xiii.

*"When we think autobiographically we only include events that happened to us when awake; the Ojibwa include remembered events that have occurred in dreams. And, far from being of subordinate importance, such experiences are for them often of more vital importance than the events of daily waking life. Why is this so? Because it is in dreams that the individual comes into direct communication with the *ātiso'kanak*, the powerful 'persons' of the other-than-human class."*
Irving Hallowell, 1960/2002, p. 39.

In a discussion of Ted Hughes' poem *The Jaguar* Michael Malay cites Czeslaw Milosz's definition of art as 'the passionate pursuit of the real,' and observes that 'the fullness of nature, and of our experience of it, continually outstrips language' (Malay 2014, Milosz, 1983, p. 56). As my perspective on events around my mother's death in 1991 evolves, I have a growing sense that our lives unfold within an animic *real* that ulti-

mately eludes even poetic description. In particular, the epicentre of a major bereavement may be a moment of such depth, richness, turbulence, anguish, and complexity, that the prospect of representation becomes unthinkable. As Michel Foucault put it, "Headed toward death, language turns back upon itself" (Bouchard, 1977, p. 54).

Poetic language may, of course, be sufficiently oblique, conversant with metaphor, alert to subtle cue, and sensitive to emotional tone, to evoke extra-ordinary experience. Phenomenology gets closer to poetry than most formal approaches because it helpfully shifts our focus of enquiry towards a tentative, non-judgemental, and dialogical exploration of meaning (Bracken, 2002) and crucially, acknowledges mystery (Polt, 1999).

During the European Enlightenment the notion of a divine cosmic hierarchy in which 'every being (human, animal, plant, spiritual) had a rightful place [and] natural and social worlds were viewed as spiritually infused with value, meaning, and purpose' was overturned by a mechanistic paradigm that radically distanced 'us' -most obviously men as architects of, and participants in,

public patriarchies - from the rest of nature (Seidman, 1994, p. 11; Seidler, 1994; Hearn, 1992). According to Zygmunt Bauman “natural science could be defined almost by the absence of miracles, and indeed of anything bizarre and extraordinary, suggestive of a conscious...and intending subject.” (Bielharz, 2002, p. 129). Monological scientific rationality still marginalises engaged subjectivities (other voices, sensual participation, emotional relationship, intuition, dreaming, divination, visionary experience) as potential sources of knowledge (Plumwood, 2002, pp. 41-6; Greenwood, 2009; Curry, 2010, pp. 3-7). Fortunately, however, “stories of authority (given to us from on high by men in black frocks and white coats)...are fracturing in the face of *participant stories...stories of difference*, multiplicity and a plural universe” (Plummer, 1995, pp. 133-4).

END OF LIFE EXPERIENCES

Qualitative studies that attend carefully to diverse stories and perspectives without imposing ontological assumptions can contribute to this ongoing cultural re-evaluation by illuminating neglected but important experiential terrain. Peter Fenwick *et al*, for example, found that 'end of life experiences' (ELE's) - which may include deathbed visions, reports of moving between this world and another reality characterised by intense experiences of compassion, love, and 'light,' where the dying person is met by deceased relatives and/

or helpful spiritual beings, appearances of the dying person to an absent relative or close friend, and synchronous events such as clocks stopping at the time of death - are not uncommon. They argue that since such experiences are often felt to be profoundly significant they need to be taken seriously if we are to develop best practice in spiritual end-of-life care. The prevailing scientific view, however, has been that ELE's, especially deathbed visions, 'have no intrinsic value, and are either confusional or drug induced' (Fenwick *et al*, 2009, p. 2. c.f. Romme & Escher, 1993 on voice hearing).

What drew me to this study was the finding that “serendipitous appearances or dreams of significant animals, birds, or butterflies, which held special meaning for the dying, and also often for relatives,” were reported by 45% of respondents in a retrospective study and 35% in a prospective study. In more recent lectures Fenwick elaborates on this, saying “we have *so* many reports of birds:”

“We have accounts of birds who come into the room of the dying, are seen on their windowsills, or collect in large groups around the hospice at the time the person is dying. In cases we've heard, the dying person who has had such visits has always been interested in birds, and the type of bird that appears around their time of death is the one in which they have been interested” (Fenwick, 2012).

This is broadly consistent with my own experience, with the non-sentimental testimony of several people known to me, with other published reports (Marzluff & Angell, 2005, pp. 136-138), and not least with a widespread and ancient body of lore associating birds with survival beyond death and the flight of human souls, at least some of which seems likely to have originated from such encounters (Rowland, 1978; Armstrong, 1959). Birds have also been strongly associated with divination and shamanism.

Some of my own most vivid experiences around my mother's death conform to the general schema described by Fenwick, not least a powerful eruption of premonitory grief almost two years before her death, and a bird trying to get in through my partly open bedroom window after the death. (Taylor, 2012, pp. 118-20). For me, however, because those experiences were informed by previous intensities, and were integral to my developing animist worldview and practice, I see marked continuities between the phenomena reported during ELE's and other kinds of transformative experience. More than half of Fenwick's respondents, for example, report a sense of being 'called' or 'pulled' by something or someone. These terms, that I've long used in relation to bird encounters, and that others use in relation to geomancy, are arguably paradigmatic of animism understood as a rela-

tional ontology and epistemology (Bird-David, 1999).

THE COMMON KINGFISHER

More than twenty five years ago the common kingfisher, *Alcedo Atthis*, came into my life, in the flesh, and then in dreams, before, during, and after, what turned out to be a protracted and complicated bereavement. During that liminal period kingfisher dreams often preceded an appearance by the bird, and unusually close encounters tended to coincide with further upwellings of grief. Some of those encounters were (and occasionally still are), marked by an uncanny precision of timing, and/or an intimacy of communion quite unlike anything I'd previously experienced. Some of the dreams, meditation imagery, and visionary experiences, were (and occasionally still are), charged with an intense world-opening beauty. Until 'we' in the over-developed West understand that we live in a profoundly mindful, sentient, and agentic world, however, communications from other-than-human beings, especially in the form of dreams or visions (Hallowell, epigraph) will remain inconceivable as 'real' moments of relationship.

My field notes - a ragged archive of personal diaries, bird and wildlife records, dream diaries, and notes on divination¹ (free-range ornithomancy, dowsing, and astrology), now include over a hundred and forty kingfisher dreams along with details

¹ Divination in the broad sense of 'guidance of the sacred'. (Cornelius, 2003, pp. 129-130).

of what was happening in my life at the time. Without them I would not have been able to track the association between appearances by kingfishers and eruptions of grieving, or the apparent willingness of these (and other) birds to portend or accompany other human deaths - to act as psychopomps in keeping with kingfisher lore that speaks of the bird's 'vertue prognostick' and ability to survive death, as well as situating the survival of the human soul in the context of the midwinter renewal of nature.

I would not have been able to confirm, for instance, that my most recent sequence of kingfisher dreams occurred between March and June 2012. At that time the birds were very much in my waking thoughts, but I was also concerned about a very dear elderly friend whose health was failing. Because the hallmark of these intensely personal moments has been a distinctive feeling tone, an upwelling of primal love and connection that opens the core of my being, I don't want to be drawn into a discourse of proof here, but as an indication of the kind of occurrence I'm talking about, I offer the following, necessarily compressed, story:²

On the 5th of August of that year I was feeling uncharacteristically low. We drove

a few miles to a spot suggested by my partner, crossed the road and went down some steps to a fishing lake, whereupon I almost immediately stumbled upon a brilliantly lit Kingfisher perched on one of the fishing platforms, only five or six feet away. The bird took off, unhurriedly I thought, tracing a mesmerising arc of sapphire light across the still green surface of the water. We walked quietly round to the next pond where I immediately spotted him again - there was no red on the bill, so this was a male - close to the path, at about head height, in a goat willow overhanging the water. He turned his head briefly to look at me, then flew off again, further along the tree-lined pond. I'd never seen a kingfisher there before, so hadn't been expecting this. Not for the first time Alcedo Atthis left me in tears.

The next day my elderly friend had a serious fall. The day after that he had another fall, and to cut a painful story short, was taken into hospital where he died two days later.

In a dream on the 15th I agreed with him that "it had probably been right to be thinking about a lift only one way; into hospital, not back." Then a kingfisher flew off along a broad canal, under a distant bridge, skimming the water surface.

That afternoon I went to a place suggested by the dream, and "suddenly became aware of a fast flying bird, powering upstream, leaving a trail of blue light."

2 Because of a widely accepted need to protect spiritual experience from casual disclosure, and moments of anguish or intimacy from intrusion, such material falls under the rubric of sensitive research. I use a traffic light protocol for auto/biographical writing: i) core material (red), around which a non-negotiable firewall is maintained (ii) intermediate material (amber) that requires protective measures such as the omission of certain aspects or details, changing names to safeguard confidentiality, or fictionalisation; and (iii) public material (green), that is not regarded as sensitive.

On the following day, after another luminous bird dream, I was in floods of tears, remembering the intimacies of a wonderful friendship.

My records show that I hadn't seen a kingfisher since the previous November, that these were the only two I saw during the whole of 2012, and that I didn't meet another until October 2013. There were no further kingfisher dreams until July 2014. My perception of that event on 5th August was informed by many previous occurrences, including two startlingly synchronous and equally moving showings involving my friend's companion species.

ANIMISMS

"The non-reality of spirits, like the quasi machine reality of non-human animals and the reservation of subjectivity for humans alone, is not carved in ontological stone, after all...." Patrick Curry, 2010 , pp. 8-9.

Deborah Bird-Rose describes participants at her friend and colleague Val Plumwood's funeral being moved by the appearance of a large butterfly that flew amongst them before landing on Val's body and staying there long enough for them to feel this was 'a truly significant moment' before flying into the forest she had fought to protect. Bird-Rose, for whom the moment epitomised Plumwood's philosophical animism, emphasises the intentionality of the butterfly rather than 'magic' or 'co-incidence':



Peacock Butterfly, *Aglais Io*.

"In opening one's self to others as communicative beings, one places oneself in the position of being able to experience communication." In her work Val Plumwood challenged 'hyperseparation' and the dualism that attributes mind exclusively to humans, and advocated 'an enriched materialism in which matter and mind are mutually forming'; a materialist spirituality grounded in gratitude, respect, and ecological belonging (Bird Rose, 2013, p. 94, p. 98)

Butterflies are, of course, often perceived as symbolising the liberation of a discarnate human soul from an ageing and/or wounded body by the transition we call death. In 1946 a twenty year old Elizabeth Kübler Ross visited the Nazi concentration camp at Majdanek, where her friend had lost her husband and twelve children. Walking along the rows of wooden barracks where perhaps three hundred thousand

people, “men, women, children, and entire families, spent their last days, and hours,” she found names, initials, and drawings, scratched on the walls. One image was repeated everywhere she looked: “Butterflies. Some crude, some quite detailed.” Only after twenty five years, having worked with hundreds of dying people and listened to many Near Death Experiences, did she conclude that those people must have known they would soon be leaving their bodies “the way a butterfly leaves its cocoon” (Kübler Ross, 1997, pp. 75-76).

Kübler Ross adopted the symbol of the butterfly in her influential work on death and dying, but its analogical power derives only partly from the appalling context in which she discovered it. In Ancient Greek, *psyche* meant both butterfly and soul. The tradition associating the flight of butterflies, or birds, with the human soul comes to us freighted with problematic associations from its Platonic provenance³ and a considerable history of harm done in the name of spiritual transcendence (Jantzen, 1998; Brody, 2000, pp. 242-244). Variations upon a 'soul bird' motif can also be found, however, in Ancient Egypt, across the Bronze Age Middle East, in Siberian shamanism, and in many non-Western indigenous traditions (Taylor, 2012).

The apparently incommensurable discourses of Bird-Davis and Kübler-Ross speak to an ongoing debate around 'new'

animism. The Victorian anthropologist E.B. Tylor defined animism in terms of a 'belief in souls or spirits,' interpreted as a theoretical construct designed to elucidate the difference between life and death, the appearance of dream figures, and the apparently conscious actions of natural phenomena. (Tylor, 1871; Hunter, 2015). New Animism proposes a radically different relational and ecological understanding drawn from post-colonial ethnography and dialogue with indigenous traditions, the hallmark of which is a this-worldly focus on respectful social and ecological relationship. As Graham Harvey put it: “animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others” (Harvey, 2005, p. Xi; 2013, pp. 1-3). Whilst welcoming this development for the ethical focus it contributes, I've been concerned that 'new' animism may, once again, be marginalising extraordinary experience and ways of knowing, and in the process conceding vital ground to Tylorian scientism.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram took ethnographers to task for writing extensively about shamans' relationships with “supernatural” entities whilst overlooking the ecological dimension of their craft (Abram, 1996, p. 8). Almost conversely, however, Edith Turner and others argue that anthropologists have failed to

3 For example Plato described the body as a prison to be escaped from, regarded incarnation as a fall from grace, and women as inferior because they were the agents of birth. The philosophical habit of thinking in terms of hierarchical binaries is attributed to Plato. (Jantzen 1998: 62,137-8).

take the reality of spirits, or for instance, telepathy, seriously (Turner, 1994; Shel-drake, 2008). This inhibition can only have been encouraged by critiques of supernaturalism, however valid.

Harvey has called for the term 'spirits' to be abandoned because of its association with dualistic notions of the "supernatural," and "meta-empirical" beings distort perceptions of non-Western shamanistic traditions in which such beings, or 'persons,'⁴ are regarded as part of 'life,' or 'nature,' or simply as 'neighbours' (Harvey, 2003, pp. 9-11). Whilst agreeing on the cultural politics and the need to develop post-dualistic understandings, my instinct is to reclaim 'spirit' and 'soul,' with due care, not least because their unambiguous designation of 'discarnate' life may be appropriate and useful, even in some non-Western indigenous contexts.⁵ My background in 'mental health' self-advocacy informs a sense that the ontological status of visions, voices, or presences, is less important than their meaning and effect, the power relations surrounding them, and uses to which they are put.⁶

New animism draws heavily on Irving Hallowell and Nurit Bird-David's ethnographic insights into animism as a relational epistemology and ontology, but both

describe indigenous understandings that might be recognisable to Western spiritualists (for example). Hallowell's mid-twentieth century account of Ojibwe world views refers to the concept of an *òctcatcákwin* (vital part or soul) that survives beyond death and can leave the body during dreams, when powerful other-than-human persons or "grandfathers" can be met. He also mentions the belief that a deceased human can reappear as a ghost or animal - "often a bird" (Hallowell, 1960/2002, pp. 93,101).

Nurit Bird-David describes Nyaka *Devaru* performances during which trance states enable communication with 'predecessors' and *devaru* ('superpersons,' including elephant-*devaru* and minor Hindu deities), and notes that 'in the modernist sense' this would be termed "spirit possession." She also refers to *piccacio* - the souls of people who died alone in the forest and are dangerous until helped ritually to coalesce with other ancestors and *devaru*. (Bird-David, 1999). According to one of her interlocutors, however, "Bird-David tends to conflate natural phenomena...as well as artefacts, with the spiritual beings - malevolent spirits, ancestral spirits and forest deities - that, according to the forager's religious ideology, inhabit or have their 'abode' in the forest, or are identified with certain

4 Harvey had just introduced Irving Hallowell's neologism for the Ojibwe non-anthropocentric conception of personhood as 'other-than-human-persons.' or other-than-kingfisher persons, etc. (Hallowell, 1960/2002).

5 Darby Costello, *Desire and the Stars*, <http://www.darbycostello.co.uk/> -articles, accessed 6/4/15.

6 Many of Peter Fenwick's respondents had been reluctant to talk about deathbed visions for fear of being thought mad. (Fenwick and Fenwick 2008).

figurines or icons...these two aspects of the forager's life-world are distinct" (Morris, 2013). I am in no position to adjudicate, but wonder whether ethnologists themselves are qualified to evaluate such performances.

Morris's observation that binary distinctions need not be interpreted dualistically suggests a way forward in relation to contemporary animisms. (Bird-David, 1999, p. 83). Patrick Curry makes a similar point in his helpful discussion of the post-secular:

"Contingent local distinctions between spiritual or mental and material...are not the problem, any more than are either rationality or spirituality *per se*. It is their... conversion into an ideology and programme (rationalism, spiritualism, etc.) which is pathological."

Curry juxtaposes Merleau-Ponty's conception of *flesh* as "the wild Being of/as the world..." with Val Plumwood's materialist spirituality and Abram's insight that "intelligence is no longer ours alone but...a property of the earth; we are in it, of it, immersed in its depths...." (Curry, 2012, p. 4; Abram, 1996, p. 242). As an astrologer, though, he will also be keenly aware that the earth 'herself' is immersed within the vast yet intimately responsive body of cosmic nature, the 'responsive cosmos' of divination. (Willis & Curry, 2004; Brockbank, 2011).

I wonder, therefore, whether objections to the notion of transcendence (as opposed to transcendental-*ism*) might be an anthropocentric defence? From a human existential viewpoint nature seems riven with dualities - none more radical than the apparent chasm between 'life' and 'death' - that give rise to perceptions of complete alterity. But what seems to be *shown* to people before death is a vision of continuity, a subtle earth perhaps.

For Heidegger, Being as a whole reveals itself through *physis*, 'nature.' Woven into the etymology of *alētheia*, unconcealment, is the tradition that incarnate existence entails a necessary (error of) forgetfulness. (Farell Krell, 1993, pp. 72-4, p. 126, p. 445, p. 448). From the verb *phainethai*, meaning 'to show itself,' we derive both phenomenology and the 'showings' and 'appearances' of divination, a way of knowing predicated - as indeed an animist science would be/is - on respectful relationship with/in a living communicative world - whose mysterious depths are the stuff of dreams.

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A gaggle of Jackdaws chatter their way along the top of the hillside. Our house, where I've lived for almost forty years, feels like a ship, sailing through time. The town continually rebuilds itself around me. Lives come and go, not least in the surrounding fields, woods, and moors. I'm told I was always something of a dreamer, but these days I take dreaming seriously. What brings me here is a hard won 'spiritual' connection with other-than-human beings.

<https://animistjottings.wordpress.com/>

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ESSAYS ON PSYCHEDELICS
FROM BREAKING CONVENTION



This book presents an interdisciplinary selection of 23 essays first presented at Breaking Convention 2013, the 2nd conference on psychedelic consciousness, culture and clinical research, held at the University of Greenwich, London.

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Cross-cultural approaches explore the use of psychedelics in New Guinea, Central and South America, British free festivals, electronic music and backwards in time to the ancient civilisations of India and Rome.

The journey ends with an exploration of the role of psychedelics in artistic expression, spirituality and death. In the final chapter, Neurotransmissions presents the only published account of the world's first pure DMT trip.

<http://strangeattractor.co.uk/books/neurotransmissions/>

Paranormal Beliefs in College Culture: “In my house we have a ghost named Isaiah.”

Brooke Hansen, Luke St. Clair & Jessica Mancuso



Interest in the paranormal and reports of experiences that fall under this broad heading are persistent and even on the rise in American culture (Lyons, 2005; Moore, 2005; Newport & Strausberg, 2001). Anthropologists have long studied these phenomena under a variety of different labels (magic, religion, supernatural, witchcraft, possession, etc.), and clearly have much to contribute to this area of study. Debates rage on in academic and lay circles about what constitutes paranormal occurrences, whether they are real or not and the psychological impact they have on believers. Anthropologists can step back and adopt holistic and meta-perspectives on these debates and explore what this all means in the context of culture. We want to study peoples' beliefs from the perspectives of their lives and cultures. We also want to investigate how different disciplines go about studying the paranormal and what that reveals. What does it mean when a sociological ethno-classification system defines the paranormal as “events that *violate* the boundaries of current scientific belief” (*italics added*), which include ESP, cattle muti-

lation, Big Foot, UFOs, ghosts, crop circles and the Loch Ness Monster (Lewis, 2002, p. 14)? How do we make sense of this? In response to a psychology article advocating expunging students' paranormal beliefs, a research team was formed at Ithaca College to arrive at more anthropological understandings. Scope of belief and emic perspectives were collected by adapting a survey instrument to include collection of discourse.

Since 2010 the lead author has been teaching Anthropology of the Paranormal, exploring what students think about the paranormal, and how American culture defines and articulates it in contrast with cultures around the world. Some of the students came to the class thinking that we would delve into the question of whether the paranormal is real or not, assuming that the global nature of anthropology will have some clues pointing to universal truths. While some truths are revealed (all cultures have some beliefs in what we call the “supernatural” or “paranormal”), the course really revolves around the contributions of theories, (such as interpretive/symbolic anthropology and phenomenology), how dif-

ferent disciplines investigate the “paranormal” and explorations of the student’s own interpretation of this field (See Figure 1). We do of course explore the subject of anthropologists writing about these experiences as real in the reflexive genre (Lee, 1987; Messenger, 1992; Swartz, 1994; Turner, 1994; Young & Goulet, 1994) and analyze the impact this has on the discipline of anthropology and beyond.

Over the years students have generated numerous definitions and classification systems of the paranormal and pondered how and why they came up with these categories, which were generated from free listed items they considered “paranormal.” Did the media, their peers and/or other influences shape how they came up with these categories? (Figure 1). We have also used a provocative article by an Ithaca College psychology professor titled “Reducing Student Beliefs in the Paranormal” (Beins, 2002) as a catalyst for class discussion and as an example of how different disciplines go about discussing the paranormal. In the article, Beins identifies strategies “for helping students cast aside their previous beliefs” and states that “the number of students who are persuaded to abandon their beliefs in the paranormal is distressingly small” (2002, p. 44). A discourse analysis of the article reveals words such as “combat,” “misconceptions,” “distress,” “turbulent,” “reduce,” “cognitive dissonance,” and “subliminal” (2002, p. 44). The discussion of the article was made even more immediate with Dr. Beins’s office being located just down-

stairs from the Anthropology of the Paranormal classroom.

As a result of pondering this call to reduce students’ beliefs, a research group was formed to investigate what the beliefs were at Ithaca College across the campus, not just in student subcultures, but among faculty and staff as well. This led to a campus wide survey which pointed to significant levels of paranormal beliefs spread across the five schools which comprise Ithaca College (Communications, Music, Business, Humanities and Sciences and Health Sciences and Human Performance). The research group agreed that typical surveys conducted by psychologists, sociologists, and Gallup type organizations were limited in many ways, but especially deficient in letting us into the lives of respondents to get at their perspectives in their own words. This type of data is generated of course in structured and unstructured interviews we employ in the social sciences, but interviews are time consuming. The survey method is more commonly used across various disciplines and quick to administer, therefore we wanted to adapt it. We felt that by adding spaces to enter stories and responses we would enhance survey data collection and obtain a better understanding of paranormal beliefs in the context of American culture. The results of the survey are discussed and directions for further research identified.

Figure 1: Anthropology of the Paranormal Class (Fall 2010) *Classification Systems for All Paranormal Phenomena in a Free Listing Exercise*

Group One:

Magic
Belief systems
Folklore
Aliens/science fiction
Evil forces
Creatures
Western beliefs

Group Two:

Religion
Creatures/ Folklore
Supernatural Abilities
Supernatural Communication
Signs
Ghosts & ghost related things
“Weird” phenomena

Group Three:

Religious
Occult practices
Conspiracy
Earthly Phenomena
Extra-Physical
Undead
Monsters

Group Four:

Satanic/Dark
Learned trades
Natural Abilities
Rituals involving materials
Popular mythology
Ghosts
Stigmatized cultural constructs

METHODS

During the spring of 2013, a research team organized by the lead author developed and administered a college wide survey about the paranormal to elicit responses about how the paranormal is defined and if respondents held beliefs and/or knew someone who experienced out of body experiences, near death experiences, ghosts/spirits, hauntings, telepathy, miracle or unexplained healing, angels and demonic presences. Questions were also included about religious/spiritual affiliation and beliefs in luck, superstitions and UFOs/alien. Despite long standing local lore about a lake monster in Cayuga Lake, we did not ask respondents if they believed “Cayuga Katie” existed. Respondents were asked if they perceived these phenomena as imag-

ined, real, a form of mental illness or other. The survey was constructed after reviewing and discussing similar instruments (Harrold & Eve, 1995; Lewis, 2002; Newport & Strausberg, 2001; Tobacyk, 2004). We concurred that surveys are informative for overall trends, but do not let us inside the “black box” of belief where discourse can provide us with insights about what these beliefs are in the context of cultures and subcultures. The survey was developed in Qualtrics to accommodate yes/no/unsure answers and to provide a write-in box for definitions, clarifications, explanations and stories. It was advertised on the college’s main internet news and information outlet.

GENERAL FINDINGS

There were 137 responses to the survey representing all five schools at Ithaca Col-

lege. Not all respondents answered all the questions. Ages ranged from 18-62 with the majority of respondents being college-aged students (74%) mostly from the northeast, predominantly New York State. Staff accounted for 21% of responses and faculty 5%. While a majority of all respondents held beliefs in ghosts (60%), possession (57%), near death experiences (80%), and out of body experiences (55%), fewer indicated beliefs in telepathy (48%), angels (44%), aliens (42%) and demons (33%). Many people answered they were unsure about these phenomena. Students, faculty and staff from the school of Humanities and Sciences comprised 51% of the respondents, followed by Communications with 25%, Health Sciences and Human Performance with 11%, Music with 7% and Business with 6%. In keeping with similar surveys on the paranormal (Lewis, 2002), 72% of the respondents were female, 27% male and 1% preferred not to be identified by these two gender categories.

College culture includes students, staff and faculty and there were some interesting differences between the groups. Using an aggregate of seven commonly mentioned paranormal phenomena (out of body experiences, NDEs, ghosts/spirits, telepathy, angels, demons and UFOs) faculty and staff showed a greater amount of belief (59%) than students (50%). Students were more unsure (27%) than faculty and staff (19%) if these existed, which might be explained by age differences and life experiences. Both groups were more or less equal in “no be-

liefs” in these categories (23% for students and 22% for faculty and staff). When comparing staff and faculty some interesting patterns emerged. Faculty were more sure of themselves in declaring yes or no for belief. For NDEs, ghosts/spirits and telepathy not one faculty member reported being unsure. They indicated 87% belief and 17% disbelief in all three categories. Staff showed greater belief than faculty in out of body experiences (67% versus 50 %), angels (50% versus 40%), demons (27% versus 17%) and UFOS (50% versus 17%). Faculty showed greater belief than staff for telepathy (83% versus 71%) and ghosts (83% versus 68%). Given the relatively small numbers of faculty and staff who participated in the survey (26%), it may be difficult to make generalizations without further surveys. To explain these differences that are present, we will have to pursue follow up interviews.

In terms of religious/spiritual affiliation, respondents were asked to “check all that apply” and the breakdown was as follows:

#	Answer	Response	%
1	Religious	45	36%
2	Spiritual	61	49%
3	Agnostic	18	14%
4	Atheist	23	18%
5	Other	8	6%
6	Undecided	19	15%

The text box that followed this section asked “If you checked religious and/or spiritual, how would you describe your-

self?" and produced over one hundred descriptions which were very interesting. These descriptions would also be useful in a study on religious/spiritual affiliation and diversity in northeastern mid-sized college campuses. Some of the discourses included:

- *I am a Christian, though I realize that that definition can be considered a broad categorization. I believe that Christianity is all about one's relationship with God and how we reflect that in our daily life. Many times non-Christians assume that Christianity is all about good works. It is to a certain extent, though it should never be the basis of it.*
- *Unaffiliated with any organized religion. I feel like there's no way to prove that there is a higher power, and that there is no way to disprove it, so the impasse is natural. I don't, however, rule out that there is some higher power and I do believe in the spirit.*
- *I believe there are forces beyond human comprehension and that they affect our lives....go karma!*
- *Primarily Roman Catholic but a self-practicing one. Do not regularly attend church and believe some things which the church does not.*
- *I follow Jesus; it's a lifestyle*
- *I am unsure of my beliefs and continue to pursue education on the topic*
- *Pagan*
- *JEW!*
- *Quaker*
- *Abrahamic*
- *Alcoholics Anonymous (belief in Higher Power, bettering oneself and the Serenity Prayer)*
- *Tibetan Buddhist*
- *I am Roman Catholic*
- *Taoism, Buddhism and a splash of Christianity*
- *Mediocre*
- *Definitely post "Death of God." Religion involves the construction of symbols and parables which enable us to talk about what some theologians have described as "the beyond in our midst" or "ground of Being."*
- *I believe the mind is likely a quantum computation, as is the entire Universe, and our perception of a self may be a manifestation of the neural network in our cereberal (sic) cortex limited its sensory inputs. I believe the quantum state may be preserved after the destruction of the brain.*
- *I believe in an overarching God that is not good or evil but just. Also that God is in nature and that there are lesser gods*

that have different purposes in our world, similar to shamanism/Shintoism.

What is clear from this data is that 85% of respondents, self-identifying as religious/spiritual, represented a range of different religious perspectives and held a wide variety of paranormal beliefs. When aggregated by belief in seven common categories - out of body experiences, NDEs, ghosts/spirits, telepathy, angels, demons and UFOs - religious/spiritual respondents indicated 65% belief, 23% unsure and 12% reported these phenomena do not exist. As one might expect, a different pattern emerged for those self-labeling as atheist. They indicated 22% belief, 15% unsure and 63% reporting these phenomena do not exist. It is interesting to ponder how at least some people considering themselves atheist did indicate belief in UFOs, demons and ghosts. None said angels exist. Taking the people who checked they were "other" or "undecided" in their religion/spirituality, 50% indicated belief, 35% were unsure and 15% reported no belief in these seven paranormal phenomena. As with other areas of the survey, we wish we had included write-in boxes for "other" and "undecided" people and the "not sure" if it exists or "does not exist" categories. These likely contain much nuanced cultural information to help us understand the landscape of paranormal beliefs in America.

The complex relationships between religious and paranormal beliefs have been studied by many with mixed conclusions. "[O]ne might become convinced that relig-

ion and the paranormal go hand in hand," but Bader and colleagues found that some church attendance can increase beliefs in the paranormal but "once attendance is greater than once a month, however, paranormal belief drops dramatically" (Bader *et al.*, 2010, p. 98). Lewis (2002), in his sociological analysis based on survey data, found in general positive correlations between spirituality scores and some paranormal beliefs, but the connections depended on the specifics. "Respondents' interest level, spirituality, gender, and personal experience were related to many of the variables, yet these relationships varied from phenomena to phenomena and were not predictive of most beliefs" (2002, p. 157).

When examining the role of personal experience (from either the respondent or someone they know), it is clear that it partially - but not totally - accounts for belief. For example, of the 80% that believed in near death experiences, 36% cited having an experience themselves or knowing someone who did. Including all responses on the survey, no one thought NDEs were indicative of mental illness and 51% considered them "real experiences; making contact with an alternative plane." Discourse was collected from 13% of all respondents who wanted to describe the NDE. Some of these short descriptions included:

- *Medical – my grandmother went into cardiac arrest and was brought back with CPR. I completely believe she was somewhere else before she was revived*

- *After an operation I felt and overwhelming peace come over me with a relaxing "last breath." Next thing I knew doctors were explaining to me that my heart stopped and they had worked on me for several hours to bring me back to life.*
- *I have talked with people who almost died & they told me their near death experiences.*
- *I was deathly ill and distinctly remember the top of the doctors heads and the door - AND the whispered conversation...*

The majority of respondents (51%) thought NDEs were real, 16% thought they were "purely imagined and never actually happen" and the interesting category for anthropologists to explore is the "other: please explain" category which accounted for 33% of responses. Reference to scientific fields was evident in the "other" explanations:

- *Neurons firing in response to being near death (body shutting down)*
- *The brain's neurons reacting to sudden cell death*
- *Very unsure have witnessed it*
- *A neurological and chemical process*
- *Again, it depends, but I think people make them up, or are triggered by some drug or illness, than the real deal.*
- *Chemicals produced by the body*

The "other" category showed culturally influenced responses from neuroscience, in addition to other ideas about NDEs that could be further explored in follow up in-depth interviews. We believe that more attention needs to be paid to these categories of "other: please explain" or "unsure." They account for a significant portion of responses in paranormal surveys such as the 2001 Gallup Poll (Newport & Strausberg, 2001). In our study 11% of people were unsure about whether or not NDEs existed. In relation to the existence of ghosts/spirits the unsure responses were 27%, for telepathy 22%, for angels 32%, for demons 36%, for UFOs 32% and 25% were unsure if "dreams can give messages from spirits/deceased loved ones or foretell events." We included follow up text boxes for experiences where respondents indicated belief (for out of body experiences, NDEs, ghosts/spirits, black magic, telepathy, miracle/unexplained healing, angels, demons, and UFOs), but not for disbelief or unsure belief. In future surveys with write-in responses, we would most certainly advocate for including additional questions about why people were unsure and what kinds of evidence or experiences would sway them either way.

This section outlined some of the general responses on the survey. The next sections address key areas in paranormal studies regarding definitions of the paranormal and beliefs and stories about ghosts, spirits and hauntings as these constitute a central nexus of paranormal culture in America.

WHAT IS THE PARANORMAL? WHY DO PEOPLE BELIEVE IN IT?

To elicit student, staff and faculty constructions of the paranormal we asked respondents to “list all of the examples of the paranormal that you can think of” and to provide “your definition of the paranormal.” While ghosts and spirits dominated the free listing, examples of the paranormal also included aliens, demons, angels, Bermuda Triangle, devils, vampires, UFOs, Big Foot, Loch Ness Monster, clairvoyance, ESP, telepathy, ParaNORMAN (referring to the 2012 film), banshees, “poltergeyts,” déjà vu, zombies, monsters and werewolves. This seemingly disparate assemblage of items has been generated, linked and reified in the context of American culture through media, popular culture and even academia. Denizens of American culture and its many subcultures are frequently prompted about what is “paranormal” or “supernatural” in shows such as *Weird or What?* (Discovery Channel), songs such as *Thriller* by Michael Jackson, numerous films, popular books and academic treatises (e.g., Bader *et al.*, 2010; Hansen, 2001). Conceptions of how the paranormal is defined in American culture may also be shaped by taking a class in Anthropology of the Paranormal.

Respondents were asked to provide their definition of the paranormal which included the following:

- *The paranormal is the abnormal or certain activity that can be demonic and strange to most people.*

- *Unexplainable, intangible instances of something that can't be explained by science or logic. Not everyone experiences the paranormal in the same way.*
- *Unable to be explained by scientific rationale*
- *Paranormal are experiences with outside forces that do/cannot exist on our plane of living but are still visible to us.*
- *Anything man cannot describe within the contexts of science, logic, or reasoning.*
- *Anything there is little evidence for/ science cannot prove its existence*
- *Anything that could be defined as "of another world" because it is not typical on Earth.*
- *Phenomena that cannot be explained by science*
- *Some living force unexplained or does not fully fit the definition of living. Some examples are ghosts, demons, and angels*
- *Paranormal is anything that is outside of the realm of what is to be expected.*
- *The paranormal is phenomena that we can't explain. The more we try to understand it, the less we come to a conclusion about it. The paranormal is real, and we should be careful about it. Not scared, but careful.*
- *Things that do not exist in the real world - ghosts, aliens, etc.*
- *No Such Thing. I honestly can't believe that you feel it is necessary to ask these questions, so know going in that any*

person believing in these ideas should never be taken seriously and they should be mocked.

The cultural themes coded in these answers are ones we would expect given the American cultural emphasis on an ordered, explainable, Newtonian world. Rationality, normality and culturally shaped dualisms permeate the responses. The axes of real/unreal, living/dead, inside/outside, explainable/unexplainable, logical/illogical, normal/abnormal and science/imagination are clear in this small sampling of discourse (120 people provided definitions).

While these dualisms are inherent in respondents' definitions, it is interesting to note that many people are questioning what might be in the divide between the dualisms as evidenced in the numerous "unsure" answers and also in the beliefs that there is something in between the living and the dead. As anthropologists have long recognized, there is much fodder for our investigations and analyses in the liminal spaces between categories where we find the "undead," NDEs and numerous other phenomena that do not adhere nicely to Newtonian standards or clearly defined binary dualisms. Scholars have acknowledged that the use of the terms "paranormal" and "supernatural" reify the dualisms with their connotations of binary comparisons of nature and normality versus those experiences or beings which lay outside of these constructs (Young & Goulet, 1998). What other terms might we use to move away from this quandary? During five years

of asking this question in the Anthropology of the Paranormal class, students have yet to come up with more fitting terminology.

Young & Goulet, in their volume on anthropologists discussing their own experiences, state that "extraordinary experiences related in this book should not be described as 'paranormal' or 'supernatural.' Such terms imply distinctions such as real versus unreal, or normal versus abnormal which exclude, rather than invite, serious intellectual consideration" (1994, p. 8). Yet "extraordinary" implies an opposing state of the "ordinary." If numerous polls over the last several decades, including ours, indicate a majority of Americans reporting beliefs in NDEs, ghosts and angels, perhaps these beliefs are not so out of the ordinary. One does not have to foray far in the anthropological literature to see that other cultures consider relationships with the spirit world as quite ordinary; these relationships are found within the realm of daily life and nature, not outside it or above it.

In addition to exploring how the paranormal is defined, the question must also be asked why people have beliefs in the paranormal. In retrospect, we wish we had included this question on the survey to see how people would respond. In academia, this question is asked and answered in a variety of ways depending on the data and disciplinary orientation. As Swartz notes, anthropologists often use functional and structural theories to explain "extraordinary" experiences, although she warns that

by doing this we might be implying that “our informant’s premises are false” (1994, p. 209). We most certainly do not want to do this, so care must be taken. We believe that we can adopt functionalist analyses of paranormal beliefs without making assumptions that they are not real or that they are just “supernatural solutions to earthly troubles” (Bader *et al.*, 2010, p. 129).

Anthropologists and sociologists, in contrast [to parapsychologists], are not concerned with the ontological reality of paranormal beliefs. Rather their interest focuses on the social and cultural functions that such beliefs serve. Psychologists are perhaps the most skeptical about the accuracy of paranormal beliefs, and some of their work has proceeded on the assumption that such beliefs are basically misguided and maladaptive. Others retain a more open mind about the possibility that our current scientific understanding may be incomplete. Their work instead explores how such beliefs have arisen and what psychological function they may serve. (Watt & Wiseman, 2009, p. vii)

Sociological and Marxist interpretations have “argued that religious and paranormal beliefs will be the province of the down-trodden...Other religion scholars have theorized that paranormal beliefs represent comparatively new and fringe elements of the American religious marketplace...”

(Bader *et al.*, 2010, p. 129). These explanations seem outdated given the prevalence of beliefs and noticeability of the paranormal in popular culture and media. As Bader and colleagues conclude in their sociological analyses of paranormal America, many assessments oversimplify paranormal beliefs and do not take account of the fact that “believing in something paranormal has become the norm in our society” (*ibid.*, p. 129). Given this landscape, do people believe because those around them believe? Has it become normative to believe? In a study of “making sense of ghostly encounters” Hirsch and colleagues found “In most cases, our participants reached for explanations for their experiences from family, friends and their community, which supports social impact theory as described by Markovsky and Thye (2001)” (Hirsch *et al.*, 2014, p. 8). Respondents in our study provided many vignettes of the experiences of family and friends, thus supporting social impact theory:

- Out of Body Experience: “*my grandmother watched from above when she was in the hospital*”
- Out of Body Experience: “*My mother has several out body experiences, the one she openly told me about was after she gave birth to me--she was floating over her body as they stitched and cleaned her up. The farthest she went away from her body was outside her medical room, she saw her family waiting for her.*”

- Telepathy: *"My grandfather knew when my mother had been hit by a truck and he was two miles away."*
- Telepathy: *"My friend's aunt has this incredible ability - no matter how far away she is - to sense when something's wrong. For example, my friend had a horrific day and was crying, and as soon as she stopped crying for a bit, an email popped in from her aunt that said, 'hey..i feel you..are you okay?'" My friend hadn't contacted her aunt in weeks prior to that, so we were all amazed. She does things like that all the time."*
- Angels: *"My mother believes her deceased relatives who were close to her in real life are her guardian angels"*
- Angels: *"My aunt Lily, they were lost in Austria--they could not find the right way back to their hotel. She says that a man large and tall (abnormally) came out of nowhere and hailed a cab for them. He spoke in German (or so they think) to the cabbie, opened the door for her and her friends. When they were all in they turned to say, Thank you but he was gone. The taxi driver took them to where they were staying that week."*
- Demons: *"But yeah, I've had actually a lot of friends who've dealt with this. One of them had a demon in her dorm room, and several times she saw it hovering over her bed (eventually she prayed and it left). Another friend was on a mission trip and one of the people there started speaking in this really weird, dead voice,*

and her eyes were totally black (again, they prayed and she was healed)."

- Demons: *"My father-in-law, a minister, served in an exorcism of what he called a possessed doll. Long story. Multiple witnesses."*

Theories for beliefs follow the contours of the disciplines attempting to explain them. Depending on what this vantage point is, paranormal (and "occult" type) beliefs might be categorized as regression to a more infantile stage, anti-intellectual, escapist, culturally relativistic, innovative, functional, rebellious, and/or paradigm shifting in acknowledging a new quantum reality (Adler, 1986). Our challenge is to develop more complex models of theorizing belief that are flexible, comprehensive and not ethnocentric (as in demanding such beliefs be expunged).

GHOSTS, SPIRITS AND HAUNTINGS: A CENTRAL NEXUS IN AMERICAN PARANORMAL BELIEFS

Because ghosts, spirits and hauntings are prominent within paranormal themes in American culture, in no small part due to the media, the survey asked for not only the presence of belief, experiences of self/others, and stories, it also asked if there was a definable difference between ghosts and spirits. As indicated above, 59% of people believe in ghosts/spirits, with an additional 20% unsure and 21% reporting no belief. Of those saying "yes" 38% said there was a qualifiable difference between these spec-

tral beings (35% were not sure and 27% said no). We clearly should have also included a prompt about how the soul is similar or different.

- *A ghost is a form that belongs to someone who once was dead. A spirit is a very spiritual being that began as a spirit and not a person. A spirit can be morally good or bad.*
- *I wouldn't use the word ghost at all, but I do believe in a spiritual realm that can occasionally interact with this world as well. I believe in angels and demons fighting for control of this world.*
- *A ghost is the remnant of a person once their physical being has left this world. A spirit is the same as the soul to me, what's inside of us that makes us who we are.*
- *A ghost is a remnant of a soul that's trapped. A spirit is like a soul, and much more friendly. Often a helper and not a hinderer.*
- *Spirits are benevolent and are more of a presence than a being/visible haunt.*
- *Ghost is someone who died and cannot move on while a spirit is a natural entity usually relating to something in nature.*
- *"In my house we have a ghost named Isaiah."*
- *I think of ghosts as people who have not moved on. They people who in life existed in the realm of the hungry ghosts and things haven't changed. Spirit in my opinion is the thing that survives life-*

times and what is left of us when we are reincarnated.

- *I'm not sure I believe in ghosts but think that if they do exist they are spirits left on this earth due to an un-resolved action which resulted in their deaths. I believe spirits are the spirits of those who have passed on who are present for those left on earth, to both witness that which occurs in their lives but also to provide comfort to those who are open to sensing their presence.*
- *To me a spirit does not have a tangible form (invisible, but sensed) whereas a ghost does (is visible).*
- *A ghost is someone/something that has never crossed over; a spirit is a visitor from Heaven*
- *A ghost has a seemingly "physical" presence (the "white sheet" idea, like Casper) and can have characteristics identified. A spirit is more of an invisible being*
- *Ghosts have more of a spooky connotation than spirits.*
- *A ghost may be able to be seen or something in the room may move to signify their presence. A spirit is just a feeling or someone's presence or guidance.*
- *Ghosts have more of a malicious intent. Spirits are more helpful and watchful.*
- *A ghost is stuck behind for a reason. It may have more sorrow, or regret and generally are still here because of negative events. A spirit is a brief presence, meant to travel on shortly after completing some last business. Sometimes to*

guide or protect. Never believed to have malicious intent.

- *A ghost is what you find in story books and cartoons...spirits are the energy that leave the body after death. It doesn't necessarily have a form or shape, but it exists*

A thematic analysis of this sampling of responses leads - again - to binary axes: benevolent/malevolent, free/trapped, heavenly/earthly, invisible/visible and nature/human. As with definitions of the paranormal, these binaries fit in perfectly within American cultural ideologies that organize the world through assessments of good versus evil, the perceived differences between humans and nature and physicality versus invisibility. Additional thematic dimensions should be added to distinguish ghosts from spirits including degree of spookiness, morality, purposefulness, association with reincarnation and relationship to angels and demons. The prevalence of these themes in the media, especially in paranormal and ghost hunting shows, is worthy of note here. The fact that one respondent cited Casper as an example of the physicality of ghosts is exemplary.

The most written discourse on the entire survey was in the section on personal experiences with ghosts and spirits. Newport & Strausberg (2001) and Lyons (2005) noted that younger Americans were more apt to believe in hauntings and ghosts over the older participants, who had a higher belief in demons. In our study, greater belief was demonstrated in ghosts/spirits from

faculty (83%) and staff (68%) than students (56%) but there were many students who were unsure (23%). Interestingly, students were more apt to believe in demons (36%) than faculty (17%) or staff (27%). In general we concur that young people are likely more exposed to paranormal pop culture.

Most participants commented on interpersonal experiences over intrapersonal experiences:

- *My bedroom door used to creak open of its own, which isn't out of the ordinary. But when I was little I used to think it was Jesus coming to visit me so one day when I was 9 or 10 my door opened and I said "come on in, Jesus" and then the door shut all by itself. I don't know if it was really Jesus who came into my room, but I was amazed.*
- *I once experienced sleep paralysis, and I was absolutely terrified to find a large, shadowy figure creeping towards me.*
- *A couple of my friends say they have seen ghosts. One claims they saw a spirit in my house.*
- *I've seen ghosts most of my life. I not only see, but hear and feel them, such as their emotions at that present moment.*
- *My partner removes ghosts from houses.*
- *My friend saw his girlfriend's dead family come to his house.*
- *My best friend, when I took her home to the Philippines, saw a blue orb hovering over my brother our first night there. Ghost—I was sleeping over my grandmother's house and drinking milk late*

before bed, I look out the window (with short white curtains) and the wind blew. It was a white lady (lady in white) floating towards me.

- *My mother (as a child) was in the basement and my grandmother heard her talking to someone. They both her a male voice responding so my grandmother ran down the stairs and my mother introduced the man she was talking to, but when my mother turned around, he was gone.*
- *We had a ghost in our house. It's gone now!*
- *Sensory experiences directly related to a deceased relative (smells, sensations)*
- *I have actually had multiple friends who have seen or interacted with spirits. Not ghosts, though.*
- *I had friends tell me in their apartment, ghosts were moving furniture and slamming doors.*
- *I live on an old graveyard, and a few times I've seen ghosts walk across my room.*

The majority of responses indicated that belief in ghosts and spirits was supported by interpersonal encounters. In addition, responses indicated that the identity of the entities revolved around members of the family. The prevalence of interpersonal experiences may reflect a change in cultural standing that is shaped through the influence of the media; paranormal experiences are more culturally rational than before. The belief of ghosts and spirits may have

moved from the fringe of social acknowledgement to a form of popular culture. Many responses did not involve the individual having a visual experience, but rather that unexplained sensory phenomena was attributed to a ghost or spirit. The presence of belief based on interpersonal experiences may echo a cultural change; the younger generation may be moving away from organized religious institutions while maintaining a belief in the spiritual through the paranormal.

CONCLUSION

Though all surveys are flawed by biases respondents may have about the subject matter, we can conclude there are beliefs in the paranormal at Ithaca College among students, staff and faculty. While other surveys have been done to assess students' beliefs (e.g., Lewis, 2002), college culture includes faculty and staff as well. This more holistic cultural approach should be taken when collecting data. Although only 26% of the survey reflects faculty and staff responses, we can certainly affirm that some have significant beliefs in the paranormal. There are differences between faculty and staff that require further research to understand. A more focused recruitment approach may be needed to obtain more faculty and staff responses. Although none of the faculty in the Ithaca College Anthropology Department took the survey, two of them have given guest lectures in the Anthropology of the Paranormal class discussing their own "extraordinary" experiences

and a third faculty member has a chapter in Goulet and Miller's edited volume *Extraordinary Anthropology: Transformations in the Field* (Nuttall, 2007).

Social and behavioral scientists who use surveys to assess the paranormal should delve into the cracks of belief and inside the black boxes of small and large scale surveys to see what is inside by at least including text options. By adding the discourse boxes to the standard survey instrument we were able to collect emic statements by respondents that aided in the analysis and led to future research directions. Survey data, with or without write-in boxes, should be followed up with in-depth interviews.

Many of the discourses collected in the survey about definitions of the paranormal seem firmly embedded in American culture and the prevalent dualisms such as life/death, visible/invisible, normal/abnormal and science/imagination. However, because so many respondents indicated they were not sure if the paranormal phenomena existed or did not exist, we recommend further research be done. We should examine how this relates to dissatisfactions with the dualistic American cultural constructions of the paranormal. Are they rejecting the "exists" and "does not exist" options because there are more relativistic or postmodern interpretations? Are they unsure because they have not seen it themselves or heard about it from their close social networks? Are we in a paradigm shift where there is a move away from the Newtonian inspired

models that might not fit with lived experience? Tom Shadyac's statement comes to mind, from his provocative film titled *I Am*, "the shift is about to hit the fan" (Shadyac & Hartmann, 2012). Shadyac explores a possible transition from a Newtonian era in science and thought to an emergence into a new paradigm based on connection, quantum physics and recent findings from prominent academics and researchers.

One of the inspirations for the formation of the Ithaca College research group that conducted the survey was an article published by the American Psychological Association on reducing student beliefs in the paranormal to help them become more critical thinkers (Beins, 2002). While the article focused on using counter-attitudinal advocacy, a technique where students argue against their own beliefs to see if they can be changed, the meta-analysis we are adopting asks why paranormal beliefs were used and not beliefs in religion, family, higher education or democracy. In an assignment where students in the Anthropology of the Paranormal class reflected on the article, some have stated: "I think that this is ethnocentric because the author is completely assuming that there is zero legitimacy in paranormal experiences/accounts." Another student commented:

These psychologists are basically saying that there can only be one right answer and it's a scientific one. I feel it is a very narrow-minded approach to the questions humanity has about the

universe. On the other hand, I do feel that students, as well as anyone, should question their beliefs. I do think it's important to know both sides of the story and try to understand both a divine and scientific answer to the paranormal. An anthropological approach would be less abrasive and more respectful to students' beliefs in the paranormal.

One conclusion we can make is that *how we study* and interpret the paranormal is also a cultural product. We are in agreement with Beins that critical thinking should be promoted. However, we advocate not being dismissive of students' beliefs (or faculty and staff) — whether paranormal phenomena are real or not, they have real impacts on peoples' lives. Anthropology is well suited as a field that is inter- and multidisciplinary to explore how different disciplines approach the topic from very different vantage points. Students should study how sociology, psychology, parapsychology, history and other disciplines examine the paranormal and come up with their own conclusions. It is unlikely that any one discipline could provide all the answers, although we admit our biases towards anthropology as holding an important key:

If anthropology is truly a science of human cultural experiences, however, then it must give unprecedented consideration to the impact of the paranormal on peoples' lives. With such

consideration, anthropology will have taken steps towards seeing the human side in the paranormal. (Lee, 1987, p. 74)

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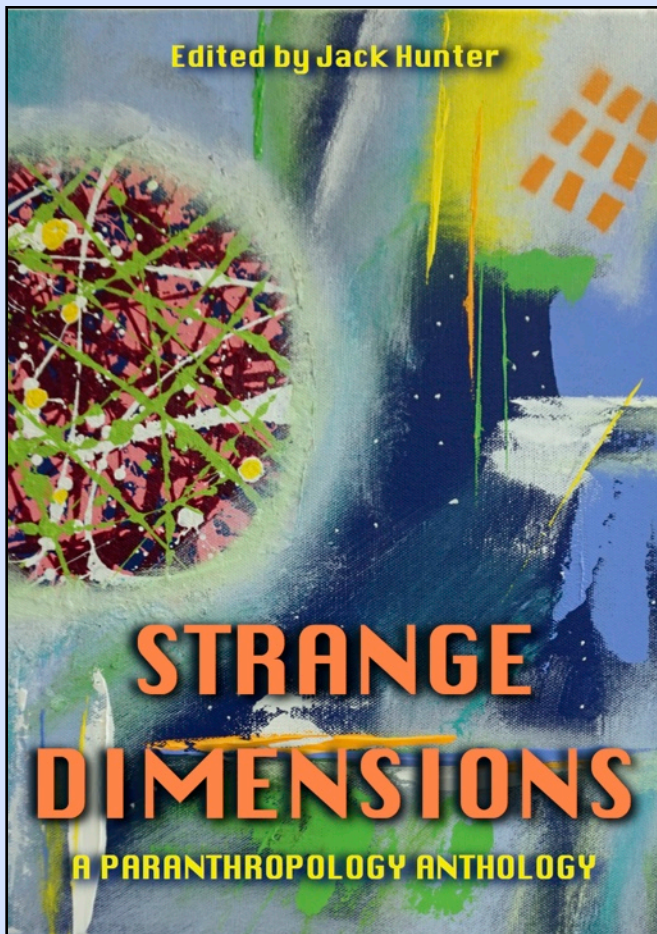
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NEW PUBLICATION



It is from the paranormal's multifaceted nature that the title of this book takes its meaning. Throughout its pages we encounter, time and again, talk of a wide variety of dimensions, levels and layers, from social, cultural, psychological and physiological dimensions, to spiritual, mythic, narrative, symbolic and experiential dimensions, and onwards to other worlds, planes of existence and realms of consciousness. The paranormal is, by its very nature, multidimensional.

"Once again, Jack Hunter takes us down the proverbial rabbit hole, here with the grace, nuance and sheer intelligence of a gifted team of essayists, each working in her or his own way toward new theories of history, consciousness, spirit, the imagination, the parapsychological, and the psychedelic. Another clear sign that there is high hope in high strangeness, and that we are entering a new era of thinking about religion, about mind, about us."

- Jeffrey J. Kripal, author of *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*.

Experiential Skepticism and an Exploration of Mediumship and Life After Death

Elliot Benjamin



Abstract

This article describes a “researcher-based experiential research” approach to an exploration of mediumship and life after death. More specifically, the qualitative research methodology of autoethnography, as used by the author in his Ph.D dissertation and previous post-dissertation research in the above topic, is described, followed by an illustrative description of the author’s more recent related experiential research. The twofold nature of skepticism involving “the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us and at the same time a great openness to new ideas,” a quote taken from a lecture on skepticism given by Carl Sagan in 1987, is the core premise of this essay. Along these lines, another quote from Sagan, this one involving his belief that certain aspects in the field of extrasensory perception (ESP) “deserve serious study” is described, in a context that may shed some light on possibly gaining more understanding of what may take place in communications from some mediums some of the time. This essay advocates that skeptics thoroughly investigate high quality parapsychological research, with the kind of openness that Sagan suggested.

In the inscription to Michael Shermer’s book *Why People Believe Weird Things*, the following quote from Carl Sagan’s 1987 *The Burden of Skepticism* Pasadena lecture is included:

It seems to me what is called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us and at the same time a great openness to new ideas (Shermer, 2002, inscription).

It is in this demanding context of skepticism that I consider myself to be a skeptic when it comes to investigating some of the popular current trends in religion and spirituality throughout the world. The title of my 2012 Ph.D dissertation is *An Experiential Exploration of the Possibility of Life after Death Through the Ostensible Communications of Mediums with Deceased Persons* (Benjamin, 2012), and my approach was a reflexive open-minded agnostic investigation that I believe was entirely consistent with the

above context of skepticism as described by Sagan.

However, an essential ingredient in my agnostic/skepticism investigative research is to make use of my own experiences as part of my research exploration. This can be considered to be an extension of the qualitative research methodology of participant observation (Creswell, 2007). In particular, I used this form of qualitative research in my dissertation in the context of autoethnographic research. Autoethnography was initially developed in the 1970s largely through the efforts of sociologist Carolyn Elis (2004; 2009), and it involves “the interplay of introspective, personally engaged self-reflections with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation” (Chang, 2008, p. 46). The basic idea of autoethnography, and the term I have coined as “researcher-based experiential research” (Benjamin, 2012),² is to complement more traditional quantitative experimental research, as well as more traditional qualitative research that focuses on the experiences of others, with the researcher’s own relevant experiences in regard to what is being researched.

Autoethnographic research allows for the researcher’s deep relevant experiences to be expressed, formulated, analyzed, and evaluated. Needless to say, this enters the subjective territory of the researcher.³ However, with the assumption that the researcher has been thoroughly trained in both research methodology and self-awareness, along with a balancing of more

traditional quantitative and qualitative research approaches to the same research question, I believe that this inclusion adds an extremely valuable dimension to an extensive exploration of what is being researched.⁴

The basic theme of this research methodology is an important part of what philosopher/psychologist William James (1912/1976) described in his theory of “radical empiricism” over a hundred years ago. The following quote from William Braud & Rosemary Anderson (1998) gives a good illustration of what James had in mind:

Any and all sources of evidence, ways of knowing, and ways of working with and expressing knowledge, findings, and conclusions can be brought to bear on the issues being researched. There is an epistemological stance of what William James (1912/1976) called *radical empiricism*—a stance that excludes anything that is not directly experienced but includes *everything* that is directly experienced, by anyone involved in the research effort. Thus, the research participants’ subjective experiences and self-perceptions are treated as valid data, as are the experiences and perceptions of the investigator. There is an important place for intuitive, tacit, and direct knowing; for various arational ways of processing information; and for a variety of forms of creative ex-

pression in conducting and communicating research (p. 241)

MY PREVIOUS EXPERIENTIAL MEDIUMSHIP RESEARCH

To give an illustration of my motivation in utilizing my own research experiences in the context of autoethnography in exploring mediumship for my dissertation research, I am including the following excerpt from the Personal Background section of my dissertation.

My personal background lends itself well to my research question, as I have a longtime intensive interest in understanding the nature of life, whether there is a God, and the question of what happens to us when we die. This was undoubtedly precipitated by the death of my father before I was 2 years old. I refer to my agnostic perspective on the veracity of the possibility of life after death as that of a “spiritual agnostic.” This means that although I do not have beliefs *per se* in the veracity of life after death, I do have a spiritual/philosophical inclination that there is more to life than merely our physical/chemical material bodies, formulated and developed primarily by blind random evolutionary chance patterns through natural selection mechanisms over unfathomably long periods of time. I am also extremely interested and intrigued with the scientific research and findings of parapsychology, and with the possibility of utilizing parapsychological data and quantum physics theory, as well as super-psi and energy field explanations, to furnish scien-

tific models to explain the hypothetical phenomenon of life after death

However, I am very aware of my own inclinations in this regard, and I thoroughly discuss my thoughts and feelings in Part 4, as part of my autoethnographic, heuristic, and intuitive inquiry self-reflections. And I will add that I believe my mathematical and scientific state of mind is an excellent balance for my philosophical/spiritual inclinations; a balance that has enabled me to acquire a penetrating and effective agnostic perspective to explore my research questions (Benjamin, 2012, p. 13).

I summarized the conclusions to my dissertation research in regard to my second research question pertaining to the possibility of life after death being a *bona fide* phenomenon, as follows: Fraud *per se* is not in general a viable explanation of the alleged afterlife communications of the participant mediums who were involved in this research. Thus, in conclusion, the results of my dissertation research regarding my second research question lend themselves most strongly to an interpretation of sensory cues, subjective evaluation, generic statements, and coincidence, while socio-cognitive and fantasy proneness factors appear to have been commonly used by the participant mediums.

A secondary possible interpretation in some instances is that of some form of psychic communications. However, further research in this researcher-based experiential research context in a variety of settings both with mediums involved in

Spiritualism and with independent mediums is needed in order to establish a strong “extended science” experiential basis of knowledge in this elusive realm of inquiry. My conclusion doesn’t mean that there is no afterlife, nor that there are no Spiritualist mediums who are capable of authentic communications via a “spirit world” from people who have died. But it does mean that I have not experienced this for myself as part of my dissertation research (Benjamin, 2012a, pp. 211-212; 2014a, pp. 217, 219).

The following illustrative account from my 2011 individual medium session with Reverend Steve Hermann, which concluded my experiences with mediums for my dissertation, conveys how I experienced a high level of personal involvement in relation to my autoethnographic study of mediumship and the ostensible phenomenon of life after death. In this excerpt, I refer to Steve Hermann as “Medium W” where the “W” stands for “White Crow” and refers to William James’ dictum that to prove that not all crows are black, it is sufficient to find “one” white crow (James, 1896). My personal motivation in engaging in my dissertation research was very much based on wanting to know if my deceased brother Fred could possibly still be “out there,” and this becomes apparent in the course of my session.

Medium W had held my hands to begin with, to help him feel a connection to me, and when half-way through the session I forced myself to convey to him that nothing

he was saying had much personal impact on me and that I needed to feel a connection with a deceased person to feel open to the “spirit world,” Medium W took my hands again and said he would try to make this connection for me.

When he went off on a tangent that was far removed from anything “real” for me, I tried once more to convey to him what I needed and wanted, even offering to tell him about the “coincidental” meaningful example he had happened to use in his morning workshop that had such strong impact on me. There were actually three or four times that I interrupted Medium W and conveyed to him how lacking his communications had been for me...and in which I requested “more personal” information that I could relate to. To his credit, Medium W didn’t want to hear this more personal information, and I knew that I was going way past the boundaries of not feeding the medium “information” by offering this.

But I wanted so much to believe that Medium W could be my White Crow Medium, and I truly wanted to attend his follow-up psychic workshop. However, I also knew that what was really happening was that Medium W was “failing” for me in spite of all his eloquence and worldwide fame as a medium.

Then suddenly, after my last interruption, Medium W blurted out something about “Uncle Fred,” and I perked up and immediately asked him to say more about what came to him about this. Medium W

proceeded to say something about “Havana cigars” and how this person was very fussy about his cigars and liked his cigars to be of the best quality (yes my brother was quite fussy about his “cigars” and went through much pains to obtain his Robert Burns Tiparillos). But then Medium W got back to his more generic and removed communications that quickly lost meaning and interest for me. Medium W returned to the same kind of philosophical communications, now focusing on how my wanting specific information from the spirit world as a researcher was not helpful to me which reminded me of his “trance” communications in his “other voice” from one of the previous nights. I had no choice but to decide to conclude my dissertation research and not attend Medium W’s follow-up psychic workshop. The fact that Medium W finally came out once again with saying “Uncle Fred” and followed it up with “Havana cigars” could be explained as mere coincidence or by the triggering of his memory (perhaps unconscious), of what he might have overheard from his morning workshop, mixed with associations of “cigars” with “uncles,” stimulated by my repeated intensive requests for more personal information from him. Stretching things a bit, perhaps one could utilize some kind of telepathy or even access to universal energy fields to explain this, but I do not believe that a personalized afterlife communication interpretation from my brother is warranted here. No, Medium W is not my

White Crow. I have found no White Crows in my dissertation research with mediums.

This is not what I wanted to end up feeling and concluding from the researcher-based experiential component of my dissertation research. But this is my truth. How do I, as an agnostic researcher, experience the exploration of life after death from the communications of mediums? The crux of what I have discovered from my research is that I have not experienced much of anything. That is, I have not experienced much of anything in regard to the alleged phenomenon of life after death becoming more real to me.

Whatever I have experienced can be easily explained by the arguments of skeptics as I have frequently alluded to, and I won’t repeat the details of the skeptics’ arguments here (Benjamin, 2012, pp. 303-305; 2014a, pp. 151-153)

Nearly 3 years after my dissertation research was completed, I engaged in a Mediumship Mastery workshop facilitated by Steve Hermann, who ended up writing the foreword to my *Life after Death* book (Benjamin, 2014a), which is essentially a condensed and updated version of my dissertation. I concluded a description of my experiences in this Mediumship Mastery workshop with the following statement:

Perhaps I need to “raise my vibrations” in Steve’s language, in order to connect to the “spirit world” if a spirit world truly exists. And then again perhaps the skeptics’ interpretation of

coincidence, sensory cues, suggestibility, and subjective validation is all that is going on here. My inclination is that the skeptics are right, but at this point I will open myself to Steve's interpretation that there is an actual spirit world that survives death but that I need to meditate and engage in healing energy work to connect to it. Why? Because it feels "right" to my inner deeper self to engage in this kind of activity. (Benjamin, 2014b, p. 4)

My dissertation experiential research with mediums included my having engaged in a number of individual sessions (known as "readings"), with them, as well as having attended many Spiritualist camp séances, workshops, group sessions, and church services, supplemented by my experiential research with psychics, shamans, stage mediums, and at afterlife conferences (Benjamin, 2012, 2014a). However, based upon what I experienced in my autoethnographic dissertation and post-dissertation research, as described above, the prospect of life after death in the form of some kind of personal consciousness did not appear likely to me. At the same time, I believed that there was justification to consider what has been referred to as "Anomalous Information Reception" and "Living Agent Psi" (better known as "Super-ESP"), as a "possible" partial explanation for what may be transpiring in some communications by mediums some of the time (Braude, 2014; Suduth, 2014; Beischel, 2014). Consequently I

will next examine the case for considering psychic phenomena to be a legitimate area of inquiry for a reflexive open-minded skeptical investigator.

PSYCHIC PHENOMENA AS LEGITIMATE SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY

In 2009 I attended a Soul Survival workshop at Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, as a preliminary part of my informal Ph.D dissertation investigations. One of the speakers was Raymond Moody, who initiated the currently popular study of near-death experience through his world-changing book *Life after Life* (Moody, 1975) nearly 40 years ago. Moody talked about the true meaning of the word "skeptic," dating back to ancient Greece; he explained that it meant having an open mind to alternative conclusions through a heightened and more developed sense of logic. This sounds to me now like it is quite consistent with Sagan's above quote about skepticism. However, as Moody went on to describe his expectation that it may eventually be possible to scientifically "prove" the veracity of life after death and that his research into near-death experience was in this context, I knew I had "skeptical" reservations.

One may "believe" that there is something "anomalous" happening in the communications of some mediums some of the time, as described in a number of essays in Adam Rock's (2014) edited book *The Survival Hypothesis*. However, it appears that it is in all likelihood not possible to "prove" that these communications are coming

from a “spirit world” involving an “afterlife” as opposed to some form of Living Agent Psi (Braude, 2014; Sudduth, 2014). As it turned out, I was given the microphone to ask the last question of the evening, and I asked Raymond Moody why he did not discuss the possible theory of Super-ESP as an alternative to his Life after Death formulation, that related to his near-death experience research. Moody replied that he did not place any stock in parapsychology and that he furthermore considered it to be “bogus” science, explaining that he did not think its laboratory methods were able to give us any real knowledge.

It struck me as hypocritical for Moody to view parapsychology in such a closed-minded and narrow-minded perspective, in comparison with how he had described a true skeptic as being open to alternative conclusions by means of a heightened sense of logic. However, I realize that although most skeptics would certainly disagree with Moody’s belief that near-death experience is related to a *bona fide* phenomenon of life after death (see for example Shermer, 2002, pp. 77-82), most skeptics would agree with Moody in his discounting of psychic phenomena and his belief that parapsychology is “bogus” science (Shermer, 2002, pp. 68-72). However, if we go back to Sagan’s above quote, it is apparent that Sagan is true to his quote when it comes to keeping an open-minded perspective in regard to parapsychology, at least in some areas, that I consider to be a hallmark of being a “true skeptic.” In Sagan’s (1996)

book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* he says the following:

At the time of writing there are three claims in the ESP field which, in my opinion, deserve serious study: (1) that by thought alone humans can (barely) affect random number generators in computers; (2) that people under mild sensory deprivation can receive thoughts or images “projected” at them; and (3) that young children sometimes report the details of a previous life, which upon checking turn out to be accurate, and which they could not have known about in any other way than reincarnation. I pick these claims not because I think they’re likely to be valid (I don’t), but as examples of contentions that *might* be true. The last three have at least some, although still dubious, experimental support. Of course I could be wrong. (Sagan, 1996, p. 302)

Carl Sagan was practicing what he was preaching in regard to what he believed it means to truly be a skeptic, and I very much respect him for this. There is a great deal of research in parapsychology out there, with of course different perspectives regarding its legitimacy and accuracy (see Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Irwin & Watt, 2007; Krippner & Hoffman, 2010; Radin, 1997, 2006; Targ, 2012).⁵ I very strongly believe that this research needs to be extensively studied and taken seriously

by skeptics, rather than simplistically dismissing parapsychology completely as “bogus science” without bothering to discuss some of the most impressive research results in the field, some of which Carl Sagan alluded to as examples.

Furthermore, I believe that our current quantum physics mainstream science-framework is at least consistent with the basic theme of psychic phenomena, i.e. it is “possible” for thoughts to have effects irrespective of distance, as described in the first two claims stated above by Sagan (Bockris, 2004; Hawking & Mlidinow, 2010; Krauss, 2012; Stapp, 2010; Tart, 2009). Related to this, there is a particular scientific speculation that I believe one should also keep an open mind to, about a possible biological human brain mechanism involving “microtubules” that could have the potential to have effects irrespective of distance.⁶ And I will add that an alternative explanation to that of reincarnation per se for Sagan’s third claim that he describes, may very well be in this context of mind to mind influence, although admittedly we would now need to enter even more controversial parapsychology realms, such as for example Rupert Sheldrake’s (1981, 1995) theories about morphic resonance. Of course these are nothing more than speculations at this time, but my main point is that one should at least keep an open mind and seriously study the research in parapsychology that is out there if one is a true skeptic.

GARDNER’S FIDEISM AND BEISCHEL’S AFTERLIFE RESEARCH PROTOCOL

In regard to my openness to continue to explore the possibility of a *bona fide* phenomenon of life after death, as I described above at the conclusion of my Mediumship Mastery workshop, I will say that much of my openness is not entirely unlike the openness to a belief in God that prolific and well-respected skeptic Martin Gardner surprisingly maintained, as described by Michael Shermer:

Fideism refers to believing something on the basis of faith, or emotional reasons rather than intellectual reasons. As a fideist I don’t think there are any arguments that prove the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. More than that I think the better arguments are on the side of the atheists. So it is a case of quixotic emotional belief that really is against the evidence. If you have strong emotional reasons for metaphysical belief and it’s not sharply contradicted by science or logical reasoning, you have a right to make a leap of faith if it provides sufficient satisfaction (Shermer, 2002, p. 276).

Now I would not go as far as Gardner in “believing” in something that is “against the evidence,” but the emotional needs that Gardner refers to is something I completely understand. This is very much why I was

open to Steve Hermann's above advice that "I need to meditate and engage in healing energy work," because it "feels right" to my inner deeper self to engage in this kind of activity. But in regard to evidence that there is "something" going on in some communications by some mediums that cannot be described by our current state of knowledge in science or psychology, I find the research protocol of afterlife researcher Julie Beischel to warrant serious investigation.

Beischel described the "blinding" of various constituents in her mediumship research: sitters, mediums, sitter-raters, and research investigators, meaning not having access to feedback that could lend itself to skeptical interpretations of mediumship communications (Beischel, 2014). This involved Beischel acting as a "proxy sitter" for all the phone readings, not interacting with the sitters prior to their scoring of the readings, and the mediums only being given the first names of the deceased persons at the start of the readings (Beischel, 2014). Although Beischel may not be unbiased in her research, as she is frequently featured on a prominent internet site as a scientist promoting the belief in life after death⁷, I believe that her research, in the words of Carl Sagan, "deserves serious study," as some of her results indicated the following:

Scores given by blinded sitters to target readings were significantly higher than those given to decoy readings in terms of item accuracy...and overall score...In addition, sitters have chosen

the target reading as their own 76 percent of the time. (Beischel, 2014, pp. 185-186)

MY RECENT EXPERIENTIAL MEDIUMSHIP AND AFTERLIFE RESEARCH

I would like to now illustratively describe my recent experiences at a series of workshops and at a Spiritualist church service, all of which were conducted by Reverend Steve Hermann (see above) at Temple Heights Spiritualist Camp.

My descriptions of these activities are once again given in the context of researcher-based experiential research and autoethnographic research (see above). I attended the following six events conducted by Steve Hermann during the last day of August and first week of September, 2014:

- Sunday afternoon workshop entitled "Reiki, Jesus and Beyond: Healing Mastery and the Aura"
- Sunday afternoon church service
- Tuesday late night workshop entitled "Psychic Surgery and Spirit Operations"
- Thursday late night workshop entitled "Let's Have a Séance: Experimental Trance and Physical Phenomena"
- Saturday morning workshop entitled "Mechanics of Mediumship: Receiving Spirit Communications"
- Saturday afternoon Medium/Agnostic Lunchtime Dialogue¹⁰

However, the individual reflections I wrote soon after the Sunday church service and Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday workshops have been misplaced, and therefore I will be describing what I experienced in these events from my recollections from my present frame of reference. This way of describing my experiences is what Carolyn Ellis (2009) has referred to as “meta-autoethnography,” which she has described as follows:

To connect the past to my life now, I add current reflections, narrative vignettes, and analyses, which I call meta-autoethnographies, that fast-forward these stories to the present. There are occasions in which I revisit my original representation, consider responses, and write an autoethnographic account about autoethnography. My meta-autoethnographic treatments provide opportunities to alter the frame in which I wrote the original story, ask questions I didn't ask then, consider others' responses to the original story, and include vignettes of related experiences that have happened since I experienced and wrote the story and now affect the way I look back at the story. (pp. 12-13).

The following accounts are my meta-autoethnographic reflections for the first four of the six events I attended.

REIKI, JESUS AND BEYOND: HEALING MASTERY AND THE AURA WORKSHOP

I attended this workshop with my “significant other” Dorothy, and it was good to see Steve again and have Dorothy meet Steve. Steve was very friendly to me, and Dorothy and I both appreciated the opportunity to meditate and unwind from how busy and fast-paced we each had been living the past few weeks. Yes we both agreed that the workshop had beneficial healing effects for us, but not anything different from what one could experience at a typical meditation or Reiki⁸ or mindfulness⁹ workshop that has nothing to do with mediums or Spiritualism. Steve did his thing and talked rapidly and enthusiastically about connecting with our “spirit helpers” for healing, but once again I interpreted this as getting in touch with my own deep self resources, and I believe that Dorothy experienced this similarly.

CHURCH SERVICE

Steve had urged me to come to one of his church services at Temple Heights after he read about my disappointing experiences at Temple Heights church services in my dissertation (Benjamin, 2012; 2014a). I did not have high expectations of having much of a different experience with Steve leading the service, but I wanted to at least give it a chance, and therefore Dorothy and I stayed for the Sunday afternoon church service that was scheduled to begin soon after our

“Reiki, Jesus and Beyond” workshop ended. We moved to the more formal church building for the service, and we sat in rows, everyone singing church hymns, followed by most people (including myself and Dorothy) going up to designated healers for what was essentially Reiki healing. Then Steve gave his church sermon in his typical fast-talking charismatic style, and followed up with giving a number of “readings” to selected individuals in the audience.

Steve’s readings appeared very hit or miss to me, full of all what I have previously described in my dissertation and book (Benjamin, 2012; 2014a) and summarized above: sensitivity cues, reading body language, subjective validation, generic statements, and coincidence (Carroll, 2005; Hyman, 2003; Jinks, 2014; Roe & Roxburgh, 2014; Sagan, 1996; Shermer, 2002).

But then Steve chose Dorothy for his last reading, and I must admit that Steve came out with some interesting bits of information. Steve focused on an elderly woman in the spirit world who he said had been very persistent and industrious, had written some books, and that Dorothy was something like her, but not to the same extent. I knew that Dorothy’s aunt would come to her from Steve’s description, and this was certainly the case, as we discussed afterwards. Steve also said a number of things that had no meaning to Dorothy at all, and we ended up giving Steve a 50% hit mark for his performance with Dorothy. Actually, compared to how Steve’s other

readings at this church service looked to me, a 50% hit mark was pretty good and all things considered, both Dorothy and I were impressed with what Steve came up with and I must admit that a part of me was rooting for Steve.

But did this give me any substantial reason to increase my openness to a *bona fide* afterlife interpretation? Even if Steve did accurately pick up something meaningful about Dorothy’s aunt (which is certainly quite debatable, as I think the combined factors of subjective validation and coincidence have at least equal merit here), it is virtually impossible to distinguish between the explanations of super-psi and a *bona fide* afterlife (see above). Yes, it was interesting, and I was glad Steve had some beneficial impact on Dorothy, though it was also apparent to me that Steve very much “wanted” to have this kind of impact on Dorothy, to continue his efforts of persuading me that mediumship and the spirit world was “real.” Nevertheless, Steve’s reading of Dorothy helped me keep an open mind to what I was investigating. But it certainly stopped short for me of anything approaching “evidence” of afterlife communications from a deceased spirit.

As Steve concluded the service, he ended up describing “me” and my book Benjamin (2014a) in the context of my “excellent research” and open-minded agnostic explorations of Spiritualism, and promoted our medium/agnostic lunchtime dialogue that we were planning on doing the following Saturday (see below). I certainly

appreciated Steve keeping his word about promoting my book, and this actually resulted in me selling one of my books a few minutes later. I would have even made a second book sale if I had not been detained by someone Steve sent over to me to convey to me how meaningful the church service reading he gave to her a little while ago had been to her. At any rate, Steve suggested that I bring my books to all the workshops I would be attending over the week, and I agreed to do so.

PSYCHIC SURGERY AND SPIRIT OPERATIONS WORKSHOP

I began my Fall semester teaching with a long evening math class on Tuesday, and then got home and ate a quick dinner and drove to Temple Heights for Steve's late night Psychic Surgery and Spirit Operations workshop, carrying with me my books to sell. I was particularly interested in the "psychic surgery" part of this late night workshop, as I had a great deal of skeptical reservation about this and it was not something I had heard Steve talk much about before and certainly not attempt to perform. However, it turned out that basically Steve did more of what he had done at his Sunday Reiki/Jesus/Healing workshop except that this time a few people chose to lie down on Steve's Reiki/massage table and receive what appeared to me to be a straightforward Reiki treatment⁸ from Steve. This did not look any different to me than what I experienced as Reiki treatments in Steve's Mediumship Mastery

workshop that I had attended in April, 2014 (Benjamin, 2014b).

I find these Reiki/healing sessions to be relaxing and meditative in a good way, but I certainly do not feel any inclination to think they are performed by "spirit doctors" doing "psychic surgery" on me. However, this is what Steve apparently believes, and his charismatic convincing way of explaining things appeared to be influencing most of the people at this workshop to believe this as well.

One rather humorous component of the workshop is that during my meditation I fell asleep. Not just quiet non-intrusive sleep, but I was actually snoring. I could somehow hear myself snore and quickly woke myself up, but when I shared about my meditation experience and mentioned I dozed off, both women on either side of me laughed and said I was snoring. Steve made a joke of it and it was rather funny, but I also realized how tired I was and not able to be fully there. Steve made a pitch for my book and our Saturday medium/agnostic lunchtime discussion at the end of the workshop, but I felt rather embarrassed and people did not seem particularly interested. I began to feel concerned that this whole idea of promoting my book and our medium/agnostic lunchtime discussion at Temple Heights did not look very promising.

EXPERIMENTAL TRANCE AND PHYSICAL PHENOMENA WORKSHOP

This late night Thursday workshop was the workshop I was most anticipating, as Steve's description in the Temple Heights brochure included the following:

"...see, hear, and feel the reality of spirit materializations and physical manifestations. Topics to be explored include: Materializations, Levitation, Ectoplasm, Trumpet and Independent Voice, Transfiguration and Spirit Chemists."¹⁰

Once again my skeptical reservations were in full force, especially from the disappointing experiences I had previously encountered with table-tipping and transfiguration sessions at Temple Heights (Benjamin, 2012; 2014a). Supposedly mediums are able to incorporate spirits of the deceased to take over their facial features so that they look like these former deceased people, which is what is called Transfiguration. I knew that Steve shared some of my own reservations about famous historical figures like Abraham Lincoln and George Washington appearing in a transfiguration, but apparently Steve also believed that all the different manifestations of physical mediumship described in his workshop had the potential to actually take place. And I figured that this time either I would see Steve conducting outright fraud, which I truly did not want to either observe or be-

lieve, or that I would witness something stupendous happen and transform myself into a "believer."

Well neither of the above happened. What happened is that we first sang a bunch of children's songs, commonly done in physical mediumship workshops and something I had previously experienced in one of Steve's workshops (Benjamin, 2012; 2014a), and then Steve talked and talked and talked. Yes that was pretty much it. Steve talked all about how physical manifestations could happen, how he had previously emitted the mysterious physical/mental substance of ectoplasm, how the atmosphere in the room needed to be very open and receptive to the spirit world in order for the physical manifestation effects to take place, etc. Then Steve turned out the lights and sat in the chair and we all watched him, looking for spirit manifestations to take over his facial features. Steve had encouraged us to be light and merry and call out whatever came to us, but people were not saying very much. However, this was actually a relief to me, as at least I could not say that Steve was committing fraud or pretending to manifest spirits. In actuality Steve said that this was a very good group and we had a welcoming spirit atmosphere, but that it takes time for spirits to emerge and that groups often sit in circles every week for long periods of time before they experience physical spirit manifestations. Of course I could picture all the social influence, wishful thinking, subjective evaluation mechanisms at work here,

but I was still very glad that I did not have to conclude that my friend Steve was a fraud.

Yes I consider Steve to be “my friend” and I know the feeling is mutual for Steve. I like Steve, and I choose to believe that Steve believes what he conveys to people even though I think it is not true, as I have frequently conveyed to him. Once again Steve tried his best to promote by book and our upcoming planned Saturday medium/agnostic lunchtime discussion at the end of his workshop. However, I felt increasingly uncomfortable; I had the feeling that something was not quite right: with Steve promoting me and my book to this Temple Heights audience of mostly aspiring mediums. But I was less tired at this workshop than I was at the previous late night workshop.

When he began the workshop Steve looked at me and in good humor said “no sleeping”; I was glad that I at least stayed awake for the whole workshop.

**“MECHANICS OF MEDIUMSHIP”
WORKSHOP, MEDIUM/AGNOSTIC
LUNCHTIME DISCUSSION, AND CON-
CLUSION OF MY SERIES OF TEMPLE
HEIGHTS EVENTS WITH STEVE**

The following is the description of my Saturday morning Mechanics of Mediumship workshop, Saturday afternoon medium/agnostic lunchtime discussion, and conclusion of my series of Temple Heights events with Steve that I wrote soon after these events took place.

And the skeptic in me once again takes the lead as my mediumship exploration week with Steve comes to its close. My experience of Steve’s Saturday morning Mechanics of Mediumship workshop was basically similar to my description of my Mediumship Mastery weekend workshop with Steve in Massachusetts a few months ago (Benjamin, 2014b; see above). Steve teaches prospective mediums to develop their imagination and visualizing images, and to have the confidence to convey whatever creative images they are visualizing, as veritable messages from the “spirit world.” He says not to worry if people don’t “understand” these images that people will likely eventually discover that they are accurate. I perceived that what people came up with in our mediumship exercises with one another, a good portion of which could not be subsequently established by the recipients, was not at all impressive as an illustration of either psychic abilities or tapping into the “spirit world.” But once again I will give Steve the benefit of the doubt and conclude that he truly believes what he preaches to people about this being the way to tap into communications from the “spirit world.”

And then we had our lunchtime medium/agnostic discussion. Steve tried his best to promote me, and the atmosphere was initially light and social, in the open dining room of the Spiritualist camp. Steve managed to get four people from our morning group of nine to sit at the dining room table with us, with a fifth person standing

up and suspiciously (as it appeared to me) watching me. Some of the Temple Heights workers were curiously observing our interactions and occasionally chiming in, and it looked to me like some of them had concerns about how appropriate it was for this to be taking place at a Spiritualist camp. This was not what I had in mind, but I did the best that I could to present my agnostic perceptions of my week with Steve, and I took out all of my *Life after Death* books.

The upshot was that we had a discussion that lasted over an hour and a half, which was primarily a dialogue involving me, Steve, and a woman from the morning group who was a very responsive, curious, talkative, friendly, and mystical neophyte medium-in-training. At the very end of the discussion, one of the men from our morning group who was sitting at the table the whole time without saying a word, asked me not to leave yet, and then shared with me his own agnostic perspective to mediumship both his openness to his experiences as well as his doubts and conflicts. I appreciated this, and it was a good ending to my mediumship exploration week.

I believe my experiential exploration of mediumship at least in the context of the mediumship of Reverend Steven Hermann has finally come to its natural end. As I always thought, mediums and prospective mediums are not a good audience to listen to my agnostic approach to studying mediumship, in spite of Steve Hermann's noteworthy perspective of openness to include alternate perspectives of medium-

ship for educational reasons. But I believe that my approach of experiencing mediumship through an open-minded agnostic perspective is an important illustration of an authentic skeptical approach to studying mediumship.

My conclusions from my past week of experiential mediumship exploration have reinforced my conclusions from both my dissertation research as well as from my post-dissertation mediumship workshop (Benjamin, 2014a; 2014b). I lean toward the skeptic perspective of explaining mediumship creative imagination, subjective validation, environmental influence, and placebo effect (see the references listed above). However, some things still whet my appetite to leave a bit of room open for other possible explanations such as Steve's 50% accurate reading of my "significant other" Dorothy at the Sunday church service. Do I know for sure that Steve did not somehow "psychicly" sense from Dorothy the accurate information he conveyed to her? And stretching myself even more, do I know for sure that Steve did not somehow convey a message from Dorothy's deceased aunt? No I do not know anything "for sure."

My best guess is that Steve used his psychophysical sensitivity to Dorothy, whom I am quite sure he had no biographical knowledge of, to come up with his creative images, and interpreted this as a message from the afterlife.

But when I put on my philosopher hat, if all there is to life and the universe are psychophysical perceptions, and we can

trace the origin of the universe to some kind of physical matter in the form of subatomic particles, then where did these first subatomic particles come from? My logical philosophical mind tells me that either these subatomic particles were “always” there, or they came from some kind of “energy,” or they came from “nothing.” Now something coming from nothing implies there was already a “potential” for something to occur (Krauss, 2012); so where did this “potential” come from? Coming from some kind of “energy” leaves the same puzzling questions where did this “energy” come from? Being “always there” contradicts our whole mainstream science framework of the universe beginning some 14 billion years ago with the Big Bang. Thus the philosopher in me is not at all satisfied with the materialist explanation of the universe as I conveyed to the mediums and prospective mediums during my medium/agnostic lunchtime discussion.

And this is essentially why I cannot completely rule out the possibility of some kind of “spiritual intelligence” to explain the formation of the universe; and perhaps if there is some kind of “spiritual intelligence” then it is not impossible that there is some kind of “spirit world.” But this is precisely what the foundations of mediumship are based upon, of course along with the belief in the possibility of receiving communications from this hypothetical spirit world for people who have “left their physical bodies behind.” But where are the lines drawn between my own

logical philosophical interpretation of all this, and my very human need to find meaning both in life and in death? No I do not know anything for certain, including the validity of my own philosophical speculations in consideration of my human subjective needs. But in conclusion, in all I have learned from my experiential study of mediumship, I now consider myself to be an agnostic skeptic, at least at this point in time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I am advocating for skeptics to retain an open mind in regard to research in parapsychology in general, and in particular in mediumship research that involves the kind of controls as described in the research of Julie Beischel (2014). I believe it is important for skeptics to thoroughly study and evaluate this research before concluding uniformly that parapsychology is “bogus science.” Furthermore, I believe that a variety of research approaches in parapsychology and mediumship research is optimal, inclusive of a trained researcher’s experiential research in the natural field setting. It is in this context, specifically as I have described for autoethnographic research, that I am advocating for “experiential skepticism,” where a skeptic may be experiencing (or not experiencing) in his/her observations what he/she is researching, but with the heights of rational and logical thought that follow Carl Sagan’s advice, where skeptics

exercise “the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us” while simultaneously maintaining “at the same time a great openness to new ideas.”¹

NOTES

- 1) See Shermer, 2002, inscription, for this quote, which was taken from Sagan’s 1987 Pasadena lecture: *The Burden of Skepticism*.
- 2) McLeod (2010) has used the term “personal experiential methods” to describe similar research methods to what I am describing.
- 3) See Lawton (1932), Meintel (2007), Emmons & Emmons (2002), and Hunter (2009) for previous researcher-based experiential accounts of mediumship.
- 4) See Benjamin, in press, for a more extended description of how I used autoethnography as a research methodology in my experiential dissertation research on mediumship and the ostensible phenomenon of life after death.
- 5) For more information about peer-reviewed articles on psychic phenomena see :
<http://deanradin.com/evidence/evidence.htm>.
- 6) For information about microtubules see (<http://www.quantumconsciousness.org/penrose-hameroff/quantumcomputation.html>)
- 7) See Victor and Wendy Zammitt’s life after death website at:
<http://victgorzammit.com>
- 8) For information about Reiki see Doi (2000), Rand (1991), and the Reiki sections in my *Modern Religions* book (Benjamin, 2013).
- 9) For information about mindfulness see Kabat-Zinn (1990).
- 10) See <http://www.templeheightscamp.org> for a description of all of Steve Hermann’s 2014 Temple Heights workshops.

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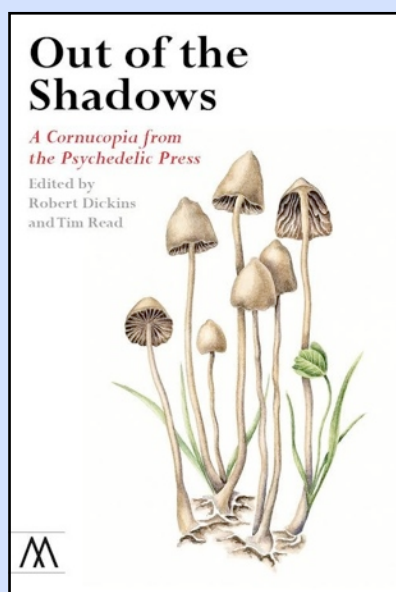
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NEW PUBLICATION



Psychedelic means “mind manifesting.”

It seems likely that psychedelic agents have profoundly influenced the evolution of our most important civilisations and the development of our collective psyche. The use of psychedelics as cultural drivers and creativity enhancers in the modern era has shaped music, art, literature and depth psychology. Psychedelics have acquired a certain reputation and polarise opinion.

- *Are they sacred medicine or a threat to society?
- *Do they lead us towards a deeper truth or immerse us in our shadow?
- *Why are there such formidable barriers hindering scientific research into their possible benefits?

<http://psychedelicpress.co.uk/products/out-of-the-shadows>

Psychedelics and the Future of Religion: A Review of Breaking Convention

Jules Evans



I spent the last few days at a weird and wonderful conference. It was called Breaking Convention 2015, the third conference on ‘psychedelic consciousness, culture and clinical research’ at the University of Greenwich. There, in the regal litoral digs of the university, facing the steel snarl of Canary Wharf, 800 ‘breakeroos’ gathered, dreadlocked witches, underground psychedelic therapists, mainstream scientists, Peruvian shamans and long-haired barefoot beatniks, to attend lectures, open their minds, explore light shows and virtual reality spaces, sign up to workshops on shamanic drumming or psychedelic orgasms, and dance away at the ‘Nite of Eleusis’ after-parties.

The conference was a unique marriage of science and spirituality. You could see chemist David E. Nichols presenting on the molecular structure of LSD-type compounds (while DIY chemists scribbled notes in the audience), then go to see shamans talking about ayahuasca ceremonies, or classicists talking about the rites of Eleusis and Dionysus. How many conferences go from the cellular to the celestial in one session?

These are exciting times for psychedelic research. Rick Doblin, founder of the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), said to the youngish audience: ‘This is the first generation where you can say: ‘I want a career in psychedelics.’ and that’s a reasonable thing to say.’ After a 50-year hiatus, scientific research into psychedelics has restarted, and is finding remarkable results.

For example, researchers at John Hopkins Medical Hospital found that, after three doses of magic-mushroom drug psilocybin, 80% of smokers in a trial gave up smoking and had still given up six months later. The most successful anti-smoking therapy programmes at the moment have success rates of 30-35%. Several other recent studies have found psychedelics to be successful in treating addiction to alcohol, cocaine and heroin.

LSD, psilocybin, ketamine and MDMA have also been found to be effective in the treatment of depression, anxiety and PTSD. An ongoing study at Imperial College has given psilocybin to seven volunteers with chronic depression – four are currently in remission. Several trials have also found psychedelics reduce depression and anxiety

in people with terminal illnesses. Roland Griffiths, lead researcher at the Johns Hopkins psychedelic research project, says: 'A single moderate-high dose of psilocybin can produce substantial and enduring decreases in anxiety and depression in patients with life-threatening cancer diagnosis. There's nothing else like that in psychopharmacology.'

The conference's optimism and energy arose from the sense that the more proof there is of the therapeutic benefits of psychedelics, the more likely they will be legalized for therapeutic use in clinical settings. Attendees spoke of the 'post-prohibition era' as if it was just over the next hill. But David Nutt, former chief drugs advisor to the UK government, warned the conference not to be too complacent, particularly when our government is poised to pass the Psychoactive Substances Bill, banning people's ability to make and sell 'legal highs'.

WHEN PSYCHONAUTS GO PSYCHONUTS

The main barrier to decriminalization is the sense — which I happen to share — that psychedelics are risky, that when you open the door to the unconscious you are dicing with your health and sanity. Ernst Junger wrote to the discoverer of LSD, Albert Hoffman, in 1948: 'These are experiments in which one sooner or later embarks on truly dangerous paths, and may be considered lucky to escape with only a black eye.'

Personally, I had a bad trip on LSD when I was 18 which left me with post-traumatic stress symptoms for five years. Looking back, I was too young, and had no sense of the proper 'set and setting' for a trip. I took it at a techno warehouse party and then went to an after-party where I didn't really know anyone, and intense paranoia ensued. I then didn't speak to anyone about my traumatic experience for several years. Not very smart. The symptoms did eventually pass, but I'm not the same person I was before the experience — I'm more introverted, probably more neurotic, though also perhaps more compassionate and able to help others.

Apparently, I'm one of the unlucky ones: a survey by Johanson & Krebs of 130,000 people found that the 15% of the US population which has used psychedelics have better mental health than the rest of the population, and there was little or no evidence of any long-term psychological problems among them. Roland Griffiths of John Hopkins did his own survey, where 1993 respondents reported distressing psychedelic experiences, and some were hospitalised — though most saw them as good in the long-term. Only 10% of respondents said the negative experiences had long-term consequences. He thinks the experience can be made almost completely safe in a clinical setting.

I would suggest that the reason psychedelics can be so therapeutic is also the reason they can potentially be harmful: they

lead to what Imperial College's Robin Carhart-Harris calls 'ego dissolution.'

As we become adults, our construction of self and of reality is rendered into a stable configuration, an automatic programme that starts running the moment we wake up. Our construction can be bad for us. We may have integrated very negative beliefs or traumatic memories, which have become habituated into unconscious, physical, autonomic and even molecular patterns. Psychedelics dissolve this rigid construction, or bring the automatic to consciousness. They 'lower the threshold of consciousness' as Carl Jung put it, enabling us to re-encounter traumatic or repressed memories, to re-consider habitual or archetypal patterns and choose new patterns, to alter autonomic processes like autoimmune illnesses, perhaps even to intervene in our bodies at the cellular level. We can see the stitching in our reality-construction and we can unstitch and restitch.

That can be liberating. We can have a sense of ego-dissolution into the blissful ocean of our creative unconscious. The unconscious that we meet on psychedelics is more the benign archetypal fairy-land of Jungian therapy than the nihilistic jungle of sexual violence that Freud suggested. We descend into that underworld, and can emerge with a sense of rebirth. In Griffiths' studies at Johns Hopkins, 60% of participants said their psilocybin trip was one of the most meaningful experiences of their life.

But, as Jungian psychologist Scott J. Hill noted, ego-dissolution can also be terrifying — our ego resists dissolution. We are confronted with trauma or darkness, and we can't handle it. We run and hide, and we can keep running for a long time. 62% of Griffiths' participants also said their trip was one of the most difficult or challenging experiences of their life.

That's why it's important to have guides — friends, doctors, nurses, caregivers — to help you through any dark patches. I was impressed with the work of 'psychedelic harm reduction' organizations like Kosmicare, who provide support to trippers at festivals and help them to accept that 'difficult trips are not necessarily bad trips' as Rick Doblin put it. Too often, if someone is having a 'transient psychotic episode' on psychedelics, the reaction of health professionals is to tranquilize and hospitalize them — denying their experience any kind of spiritual meaning or worth, and perhaps even slamming a psychotic or schizophrenic label on them for life. That's a curse. Trying to talk people through difficult phases of trips so they find a therapeutic or transcendent interpretation seems a much, much better approach.

REVEALING SPIRITUAL REALITY?

Psychedelics, then, reveal very interesting things to us about the mind, consciousness, unconsciousness, the ego, and how we can change the ego's beliefs and behaviour. Do



they also tell us interesting things about the nature of reality?

Participants at the ancient Greek rites of Eleusis came away thinking they would ‘die with a better hope.’ Is that, I wondered, why psychedelics decrease anxiety and depression in the terminally ill? Do they come away from the experience with a new belief in the afterlife? I asked Thorsten Passie from Harvard, who has studied how LSD reduces anxiety in those with life-threatening illness. He replied: ‘We didn’t ask them, but I think so.’ I also asked Roland Griffiths, who has undertaken a similar study. He replied: ‘Not everyone

necessarily becomes convinced there’s an afterlife, but quite often they become open to that possibility for the first time. That’s a big change to the total certainty they are facing annihilation.’

Of course, a new experience-based belief in the afterlife is not scientific proof. But it’s interesting. And it’s also interesting that decreased anxiety and an increased belief in the afterlife is a reliable consequence of near-death experiences.

Another common phenomenon in psychedelic experiences is a sense of encounter with spirits, deities, or creatures from another universe or dimension. A survey of

800 psychonauts by Fountonglou and Freimoser found that 46% of ayahuasca-takers reported ‘encounters with suprahuman or spiritual entities,’ as well as 36% of DMT-takers, 17% of LSD takers, and 12% of psilocybin-takers. Similar percentages reported ‘experiences of other universes and encounters with their inhabitants.’

This raises an interesting question for psychedelic academia – how to make sense of these spirits? There was a whole afternoon session devoted to the question of the ‘elves’ or ‘little people’ which takers of DMT regularly report encountering. Interpretations ranged from the purely materialist (it’s a brain-trick), to the Jungian (they’re archetypes from the collective unconscious) to the literal (they’re really real). As the anthropologist Jack Hunter noted, that last assertion is somewhat taboo in academia, which tends to be committed to naturalist materialist explanations. You can be anything in academia, from transgender to post-Lacanian, as long as it’s materialist.

The academics at this conference (David Luke, Dave King, Jack Hunter and others) showed a brave willingness to go over that naturalist barrier and open themselves to the possibility that the discarnate entities they encounter are ‘really real,’ Hunter called this ‘ontological flooding.’

But I think we need to go further than that. We need to recognize not just that there may be discarnate entities out there, but also that not all of them are benevolent. That means opening the door to the spirit-world, but not leaving it wide open to be

‘flooded’ by any and every spirit. Indeed, several of the speakers and participants, including Hunter and the author Daniel Pinchbeck, reported having felt possessed during or after a psychedelic experience – they felt they had been invaded by a spirit which was not entirely friendly (Albert Hoffman had a similar experience on the first ever LSD trip in 1943). We need to know not just how to open the doors of our mind, but also how to close them.

This is the conclusion psychedelic researcher Rick Strassman arrived at, following his landmark study in 1990, in which 60 participants took DMT, and many reported encountering alien or insectoid beings, who were not all benevolent. He said at the conference: ‘How can we tell if these beings are for us or against us? Will we try to weaponize them, or will they try and weaponize us?’ This reminded me of the film *Prometheus*, in which humans search for contact with higher beings, only to discover the higher beings are utterly contemptuous of us.

PSYCHEDELIC CHRISTIANITY?

Strassman concluded: ‘When opening yourself to spiritual worlds, it’s not all love and light. It’s important to know how to protect yourself, how to pray.’ He has ended up going back to his Hebrew upbringing, and to the Bible, for guidance. Certainly, both Hellenic and Judeo-Christian culture developed advanced techniques and practices for the ‘discernment of spirits.’ to pro-

tect practitioners against both bad spirits and their own hyperactive imagination.

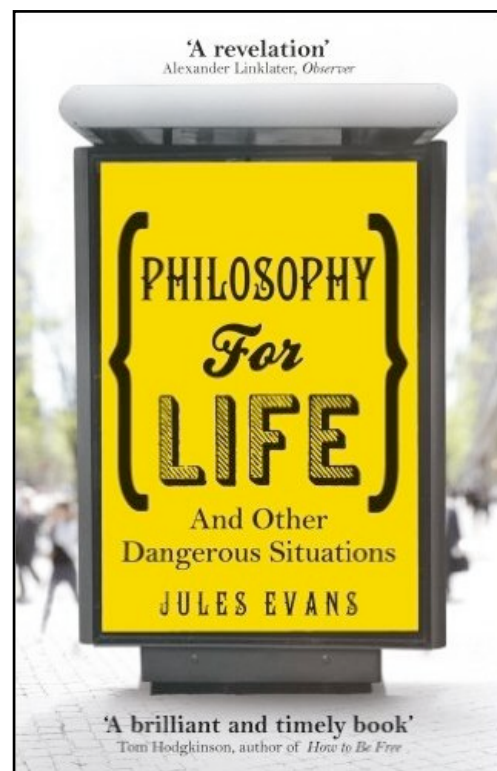
But Strassman's return to our Judaeo-Christian heritage went down like a shit balloon with the New Agers of the conference, who tended to embrace an ABC mentality: Anything But Christianity. You were much more likely to hear enthusiastic discussions of the Maenads, or wicca, or Peruvian shamanism, or sex magick, or Aleister Crowley. The dominant tone was anarchic, liberationist, transgressive, trickster, marginal, counter-cultural.

I think this snobbery towards Christianity is a mistake – you ignore 2000 years of ecstatic culture and philosophy, and end up in the intellectual and artistic shallows with mediocre ego-maniacs like Crowley or William Burroughs. Psychedelic culture can end up all about transgression, and not about trying to create integrated, wise, safe, moral, prosocial, mainstream cults which last for thousands of years, as Eleusis and Christianity did. You need not just just cultural transgression at the margin of society, but wise cults at the centre. At the moment, we have counter-cultures but no central cult.

I wonder if, in a hundred years, some form of psychedelic Christianity will have emerged, like the Santo Daime church in Brazil, which combines ayahuasca ceremony with Christianity's rituals and emphasis on virtue, love, beauty, forgiveness, humility and rebirth. Is that possible or conceivable?

In any case, the sense I got from Breaking Convention was that psychedelic culture hopes to spread beyond the counter-culture and 'go mainstream.' Imperial's Robin Carhart-Harris said: 'I like the vision of controlled places where people can have controlled psychedelic experiences.' Controlled places to lose control – this is what the best rites are.

Jules Evans runs the Well-Being Project at the Centre for the History of the Emotions at Queen Mary, University of London. He is a co-organiser of the London Philosophy Club, the largest philosophy club in the UK, and gives talks and workshops on practical philosophy around the world. He is the founder of www.thephilosophyhub.com, a project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council. He writes for publications including the Wall Street Journal, The Times, the Spectator, Prospect and Psychologies, and has worked with organisations including the New Economics Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the School of Life, the philosophy school in London. His blog, www.philosophyforlife.org, enjoys a loyal following around the world.



REVIEW:
N.J. UFO/Paranormal Spring Conference April 11th,
at the Hamilton Garden Hilton

T. Peter Park



A couple of weeks ago, on Saturday, April 11th, 2015, I attended the all-day 57th New Jersey UFO and Paranormal Spring Conference at the Hamilton Garden Hilton in Hamilton NJ. The NJ UFO, ET, and Paranormal Conferences have been held twice a year in the Trenton area for 29 years, since 1986, for many years in Bordentown and more recently in Hamilton. The conference was hosted by Pat "Dr. UFO" Marcantillio, founder and President of the New Jersey/Pennsylvania UFO Paranormal Study Group meeting monthly at the Hamilton Township Free Public Library, who has hosted the NJ UFO Conferences for many years, and directed by biomedical engineer Dave Stinnett. A 35-year veteran of UFO field and archive research, Stinnett is active in worldwide UFO studies and in Eastern U.S. ufology, with research interests in ancient Biblical and extra-canonical texts, ancient civilizations, astronomy, physics and other topics relating to the UFO phenomenon. The high point and final presentation of the conference was a screening of an award-winning new documentary film on famous 1975 Arizona UFO abductee Travis

Walton's celebrated weird encounter and its aftermath, with Walton himself personally answering questions about his experience and the film. Stinnett got Walton to speak at the November 2011 NJ UFO Conference, and again this April.

I myself have previously attended the November 2004, April 2006, November 2011, April 2013, and April 2014 Conferences, as a "mental amphibian" equally at home in "mainstream" academic scholarship (as a student of modern European intellectual and cultural history with a PhD in European History from the University of Virginia in 1970), and also in paranormal and Fortean inquiries. I attended this April's conference as an observer, though I have also given talks on various ufological and paranormal topics at some of the earlier conferences. Another observer, whose name and writings may be familiar to many students of the paranormal and anomalous, was sociologically and anthropologically oriented parapsychologist George P. Hansen, author of *The Trickster and the Paranormal* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2001), devoted to his theories of the "tricksterly," "liminal" (socially marginal and boundary-crossing)

character of the paranormal and its marginalization in modern society through German sociologist Max Weber's historical processes of "rationalization" and "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*). Hansen did not speak himself at this conference, but exchanged views on the paranormal and its social & cultural context in lively private conversations with myself and with many other conference attendees. His concept of a "Betwixt & Between" intermediate or liminal zone between opposites as the domain of the paranormal was also invoked by photographer Shannon Taggart in her own conference presentation on the late Michael Jackson as a boundary-crossing liminal figure whose personality, career, and image blurred or crossed a number of oppositions like Life/Death, Child/Adult, Male/Female, and Black/White.

The speakers this April were (in order of appearance) Philadelphia-based UFO blogger Frank Stalter, professional photographer and student of Spiritualism Shannon Taggart, paranormal radio personality Karyn Dolan, audio engineer David Rountree, and abductee Travis Walton. Stalter spoke on "UFO's: There's Nothing New in the World Except the History You Don't Know," Taggart on "Michael Jackson Betwixt/Between," Dolan on "Crossover Cases When UFO's and Paranormal Phenomena Coincide," and Rountree on "Hauntings: Science and the Paranormal," while Walton concluded the day's and evening's program by presiding over the screening of independent filmmaker Jenni-

fer W. Stein's 90-minute documentary *Travis: The True Story of Travis Walton*. Before and after the conference's formal programs, participants also relaxed, socialized, and exchanged paranormal and personal views and experiences at a party on Friday evening the 10th at Dave Stinnett's friend and conference co-organizer Patty Maxwell's house, and at a concluding dinner Saturday night at Mastoris Diner-Restaurant in nearby Bordentown. At Patty Maxwell's Friday night's party. I got to chat briefly with Travis Walton, and also with a couple of women abductees whose eerie experiences were described at length, under pseudonyms, in historian and abduction researcher David Jacobs' *Secret Life* experiences that I felt may well have played a role in their becoming sensitive "free spirits" aware of "something more" to life rather than "bourgeoises" enmeshed in the quotidian and mundane! (Or were they already somewhat "liminal" to begin with?)

Frank Stalter, owner since 2009 of "The UFO Partisan" blog devoted to UFO's, history, and astronomy, was the conference's first speaker, on the theme of "UFO's: There's Nothing New in the World Except the History You Don't Know." Stalter first became interested in space late during the Gemini program and all through the Apollo moon missions, and first became interested in UFOs during the flap of the early 1970s, with the 1973 Pascaguola, Mississippi abduction of fishermen Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker being the most famous case of those days. He watched many cable tele-

vision UFO documentaries over the following years but began to take an active interest in the phenomenon after the publicity surrounding astronaut Edgar Mitchell's appearance at the National Press Club in the spring of 2009. About six months after Mitchell's appearance, Stalter started his own blog, "The UFO Partisan."

Stalter developed a particular interest in UFOs during the Truman presidency, and started exploring the Web. He enjoyed some beginner's luck, finding items of interest on the Internet that the established UFO community had overlooked or undervalued. These finds included a specifically documented White House meeting regarding the July 1952 Washington D.C. UFO sightings, the interest taken in UFOs by two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus Pauling, and the solution to the April 1964 Socorro (New Mexico) landing case, found to be a hoax. Stalter has heavily researched the very curious founding of the commercial titanium industry in December 1948, a year and a half after the alleged Roswell UFO crash.

Stalter's talk focused mainly on UFO sightings, and high-level serious government interest, during the Truman administration, 1947-1953. Stalter repeatedly insisted that there is indeed plenty of physical evidence for UFO's, in the form of radar sightings, citing Stanford University Peter Sturrock (one of the few eminent scientists openly interested in UFO's) who declared "Yes radar is physical evidence." He likewise also reiterated that he has lots of faith

in UFO witnesses. Discussing the July 1952 Washington, D.C. visual and radar sightings, he noted that this was the closest that UFO's ever came to landing on the White House lawn. Experienced radar operations there at the time, he emphasized, definitely identified the "unknowns" over our nation's capital as real physical flying objects, and not as ground clutter or atmospheric weather effects, inspiring real concern among our highest military. Of particular interest, Stalter noted, was a special September 3, 1952 meeting of the 80-member inter-service and inter-agency National Security Resources Board to discuss defense of the capital, attended by President Truman himself, according to the Truman Library website. The U.S. Air Force and the Air Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC), Stalter revealed, were the official behind-the-scenes catalyst for Robert Ginna and H.B. Darrach's famous April 7, 1952 *Life* magazine article "Have We Visitors from Outer Space?," arguing for the definite reality and probable extraterrestrial origin of the "flying saucers."

Coming closer in time from the Truman administration to the present, Stalter named Gordon Cooper and Deke Slayton as American astronauts who have reported seeing UFO's, in addition to Edgar Mitchell's 2009 National Press Club interview. The twice Nobel Prize-winning (Chemistry 1954, Peace 1962) chemist and peace activist Linus Pauling (1901-1994), Stalter emphasized, was intensely interested in UFO's, and wrote a lengthy, de-

tailed UFO research project proposal. Stalter also discussed the debunking of the famous April 1964 Socorro NM UFO landing by Pauling's good friend and regular correspondent the physicist Stirling Colgate (1925-2013), President of New Mexico Tech in Socorro from 1965 to 1974, endorsing Colgate's view that the incident was a prank conducted by a couple of college students and that the "UFO" was a balloon. Stalter concluded and climaxed his presentation with his account of the very curious exponential growth of the titanium industry beginning in December 1948, a year and a half after the Roswell crash, after a previously negligible and very gradually growing production of the metal so vital for the modern aerospace industry. Comparing the sudden accelerated post-1948 growth of titanium production to the government-run forced-draft acceleration of atomic research in the Manhattan Project, he cautiously suggested that we might well have here an actual case of reverse engineering from alien technology sparked by the Roswell crash, trying to duplicate and mass-produce the metal of the downed "saucer"! Perhaps a bit more cautiously, he also ended his talk by noting that Clarence "Kelly" Johnson, the founder of Area 51, the Groom Lake secret aircraft development center for the Government, was also himself a UFO witness.

Stalter was followed by Brooklyn-based photographer Shannon Taggart exploring "Betwixt/Between: The Curious Life and After-Life of Michael Jackson," describing

the "King of Pop" as a liminal figure blurring binary oppositions like Life/Death, Child/Adult, Black/White, Male/Female, and Good/Evil. Ms. Taggart is a photographer, researcher and Programmer-in-Residence at the Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, N.Y., whose photographs have been exhibited internationally and published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Discover*, *Reader's Digest*, *Psychology Today*, *Prevention*, and *New York Magazine*. She has worked since 2001 on a photography project on the religion of Spiritualism, frequently visiting the Spiritualist colony at Lily Dale in upstate New York, and has also photographed Vodun ("voodoo") ceremonies among Haitian immigrants in Brooklyn.

Shannon Taggart began to contemplate the curious life and afterlife of Michael Jackson, and probing his oppositions-blurring liminal character, after photographing a number of Spiritualist mediums who reported channeling the spirit of the King of Pop and supernaturally materializing physical "apports" of Jackson memorabilia. Basing herself on the work of cultural anthropologists Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) and Victor Turner (1920-1983), and on discussions with her friend George Hansen, she examined Michael's ambiguous dead/alive status, exploring him as the ultimate liminal figure, one blurring a number of binary oppositions.

Exhibiting and explicating a copy of Hansen's diagram of binary oppositions in *The Trickster and the Paranormal*, also used in Hansen's March 2014 Gettysburg College

"Exploring the Extraordinary" conference talk on the "Betwixt and Between" intermediate zone generating the paranormal, she showed how Jackson's life, career, and image blurred the normal binary oppositions of life/death, child/adult, Black/White, male/female, good/evil, human/non-human, and reality/fantasy. In blurring, transcending, or transgressing all such oppositions and inhabiting a kind of "betwixt and between" intermediate zone, she argued, Jackson showed clear parallels with the gods, saints, and shamans of the past, indeed was himself a modern shaman. He was clearly a psychic, himself reporting paranormal experiences, such as a premonition of Princess Diana's death, conversations with Liberace's spirit, and visions of ghosts. She played a video of Jackson's "moonwalk" in his "Billy Jean," the song that marked his transformation into a superstar a "moonwalk" performance where he struck me as bearing an uncanny resemblance to the "slenderman" figure of the last couple of years' on-line paranormal urban legendry!

Ms. Taggart was followed, after the lunch break, by paranormal researcher and radio personality Karyn Dolan, speaking on "Crossover Cases: When UFO's and Paranormal Phenomena Coincide," discussing the frequent overlap of UFO encounters with other weird, paranormal, or anomalous phenomena such as ghosts, poltergeists, and mystery animals (Bigfoot, etc.) Ms. Dolan, the former spouse of ufologist Richard Dolan, author of *UFO's and the National Security State* (2 vols., 2000, 2009) and

AD: After Disclosure: The People's Guide to Life After Contact (2010), herself hosted the popular internet radio show, "Through the Keyhole," on the Paranormal Radio Network from 2007 to 2012, and served as Media Relations Director for the International UFO Congress in Laughlin, NV during that time. In 2015 she returns to the airwaves as co-host of *Beyond the Edge Radio's Creature Features*, with Eric Altman. Ms. Dolan has spoken at conferences and events across the country on topics ranging from the Roswell UFO events to the Amityville Horror haunting, and has written articles for *Spirit Digest* magazine, *Fate* magazine, and the Women of Esoterica blog.

Ms. Dolan's talk stressed the complexity and ambiguity of many paranormal phenomena, which often seem to blur clear hard-and-fast categories of "UFO," "alien abduction," "ghost," "mystery beast," etc., with more than one strange thing going on. Contact with other-worldly beings can be terrifying, she emphasized, partly because we don't understand it and partly because it can change one's entire world-view in an instant. Encountering any such experiences or phenomena is transformative, making us more tolerant, less judgmental, she noted which, I suspect, may perhaps have saved some of the people I myself met at the conference and accompanying festivities from becoming "bourgeois" yuppies or housewives, careerists or shopaholics, all too easy pitfalls for "flatlanders" totally immersed in the mundane and quotidian! Many UFO reports, Ms. Dolan felt, do have

mundane explanations like swamp gas, the planet Venus, etc. Paranormal researchers, she noted, are not primarily looking for physical evidence, as there usually is not much physical evidence.

There is no single unified method for studying the paranormal yet, Ms. Dolan argues. Study of paranormal phenomena has included scientific efforts with EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena), infrared photography, etc., and also the use of clairvoyants, sensitives, and psychics. Study of the paranormal includes subfields like cryptozoology (the study of reported anomalous animals like Bigfoot, Yeti, Nessie, sea serpents, chupacabras, "Thunderbirds," Black Dogs, mystery big cats, etc.), geobiology (the study of ley lines and earth energies), and cereology (the study of crop circles and "saucer nests.") She mentioned interference with broadcasting or sending, and possibly government interference with research on ley lines. Ufologists, she noted, want to be taken seriously, to end the cover-up and publicize possible advances in technology.

There has been too much compartmentalization in UFO research in the past, Ms. Dolan felt. As illustrations of her belief in the overlap of various types of paranormal and anomalous phenomena straddling categories, she cited the Skinwalker Ranch in Utah, the alien ghosts (as well as alien bodies) reportedly seen at Roswell NM, the alien abductees who have frequently developed psychic abilities, the Men in Black (MIB) often reported in connection with UFO encounters, UFO's sighted along with

winged flying humanoids like the 1966-67 Point Pleasant W.Va. "Mothman" studies by John A. Keel in his classic *The Mothman Prophecies*, and the pterodactyls (prehistoric flying reptiles) also reported from Point Pleasant. Discussing the Point Pleasant phenomena studied by Keel in the 1960's, she noted Men in Black encounters along with "Mothman," and Keel's experiences with tapped and interfered telephones even at home in New York. Like Keel, she claimed (perhaps not too accurately) that there were never had been any Native Americans in West Virginia, the red men allegedly seeming to avoid the area of the 20th century "Mothman" manifestations in pre-Columbian times for some unknown reason. Likewise, she noted, Utah's Skinwalker Ranch area was marked by cattle mutilations, huge wolves, Bigfoot encounters, UFO's, orbs, a curious sky-portal, and incidents where unattended unpacked groceries were repacked a few minutes later.

Ms. Dolan's most curious and interesting paranormal case, however, was the poltergeist haunting with suggestions of computerized time-travel experienced in 1984-1985 by English hypnotist Ken Webster and two housemates in Meadow Cottage in the village of Dodleston, Broxton Hundred, Cheshire, described in Webster's 1989 book *The Vertical Plane* and in a chapter of Ross Hemsworth's *The Dead Are Talking* (2007). Webster received messages in Middle English on his computer, purportedly from one "Tomas Harden," who described himself not as a ghost but as a flesh-and-blood

Englishman living in Meadow Cottage in the 16th century, and accused by his contemporaries of witchcraft for his "light box," as he called the computer! Webster and "Tomas" enjoyed two years of seemingly time-crossing communication through the computer, along with another person or entity on the computer calling himself "Lucas." Webster and his housemates also observed 6-toed footprints in Meadow Cottage.

The conference's next-to-last speaker was Hackettstown NJ audio and acoustics engineer David Rountree, author of *Paranormal Technology: Understanding the Science of Ghost Hunting* (2010), with "Hauntings: Science and the Paranormal," attempting to link paranormal phenomena like hauntings and EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomena) to advanced frontier concepts of physics, particularly to "wormholes" in space-time. Rountree represents himself as receiving his Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering in 1973, while serving in the U.S. Air Force, and his Masters in Electronic Engineering in Digital Signal Processing in 2007. However, George Hansen informed me after the conference that there apparently have been some questions about his military service and his educational credentials. Such "tricksterish" ambiguity and deceptiveness, as Hansen himself has often stressed, is very common among people intensely involved in the paranormal, whether as zealous proponents or aggressive skeptics. Rountree's primary focus since 1998 has been EVP research, employ-

ing his background of audio engineering and psychoacoustics. In 2005 he linked electromagnetic fields (EMF) as the primary source of EVPs, while in 2010 he discovered that paranormal-related EMF was an emergent phenomenon. This has led him to develop a wormhole hypothesis associated with a paranormal event horizon.

Mr. Rountree began his research into the paranormal professionally in 1976 and has investigated cases scientifically from Rhode Island to Key West, Florida. He has experimented with both scientific and metaphysical techniques in studying unexplained occurrences. Over the course of his research he showed that EVP was not related to sound by the use of a Bell Jar, a vacuum pump, a Shure dynamic microphone and a TEAC A-4010S Reel to Reel recorder. Due to several encounters of a very negative nature from 1985-87, Mr. Rountree made the decision to concentrate on the scientific research concerning the phenomena, and not the metaphysical aspects of the events. The 1985 encounter is the subject of his book, *Demon Street USA* (2014), co-authored with chemical spectra analyst and marketing manager Robbie Lunt. In 1992 Mr. Rountree formed a new organization, Scientific Paranormal Investigative Research Information and Technology (S.P.I.R.I.T.), and began a long and painstaking process of collecting, building and focusing a battery of hi-tech instrumentation to concentrate on laboratory and field experimentation to search for the cause of paranormal phenomena. By 1998

his focus of research had narrowed to phenomena specific to "Hauntings." David Rountree is a professional member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the Audio Engineering Society, the International Frequency Sensor Association, and is also affiliated with the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. He was recently invited to join the Mathematics Association of America.

Rountree's talk, in contrast to Ms. Dolan's inter-disciplinary, humanistic approach, heavily emphasized "hard science," of admittedly rather "far-out" and speculative kind, involving space-time "wormholes" and the use of sophisticated technology, as might be expected from an engineer. He began paranormal research in 1976 at the Rhine Research Center at Duke University, with William Roll and Hans Holzer. He focused especially on "Raudive Voices," as EVP were then called, after Konstantin Raudive (1909-1974), a Latvian-born parapsychologist and student of Carl Jung who pioneered in studying these sound phenomena which he believed were produced by the spirits of the dead. Rountree eventually concluded that these "voices" were not so much sounds as products of electronic forces, finding that EVP were still available through vacuums in bell jars, as vacuums obviously cannot transmit sound, but do transmit electromagnetic fields. Around 2002, he began arguing that EVP were electromagnetic forces (EMF), with audio and EVP wave-forms always invariably matched.

Where do these EMF signals come from?, Rountree asked. The paranormal is very localized, he found, the environment altering dramatically in a very small area. The EMF causing EVP is emergent information coming from somewhere else. Rountree thus relied on Einstein-Rosen Bridges or "wormholes" connecting remote points in space-time to explain EVP, stressing his observation of a variety of environmental changes in a small localized area, and citing Stephen Hawking's belief that "wormholes" are everywhere around us. A wormhole is a short-cut between distant points in space and time, Rountree noted, and leaves a dramatic signature. He noted finding time speeding up in a small area or volume, and brief bursts of intense localized gamma radiation in places of intense paranormal activity, as in haunted or poltergeist-afflicted houses, suggesting that such intense gamma ray bursts may explain what he considered the high rate of cancer deaths among paranormal researchers. He also suggested that researchers investigating hauntings or poltergeists should check for radioactivity, to warn owners and residents of such houses about possible health hazards.

Turning to wider paranormal questions, Rountree discussed Ray Moody's finding that people with near-death experiences (NDE's) often develop new talents or gifts. He mentioned he subject of the world's 10 "Vile Vortices," the sites of numerous unexplained disappearances, noting that these "Vortices" are all located in a regular

alignment around the globe. He speculated about exotic matter, with a negative mass, that annihilates regular matter on contact. Rountree likewise touched on the topic of intertwining double helices, such as the DNA double helix underlying the genetic code, and the phenomenon of vortices in smoke.

The conference's climax and final presentation was 1975 UFO abductee Travis Walton's screening of Jennifer W. Stein's 90-minute commentary *Travis: The True Story of Travis Walton* on his abduction and its aftermath. Arizona logger (now lumber mill manager) Travis Walton's November 1975 abduction near Snowflake, Arizona is one of the most famous abduction stories known to the public, next to New Hampshire couple Barney & Betty Hill's September 1961 "Interrupted Journey," and was described by UFO historian Jerome Clark as one of "the very few alleged alien abduction cases with some corroborative eyewitnesses." It was the subject of Paramount Pictures' 1993 drama, *Fire in the Sky*.

As most paranormal researchers know, Walton, then 22, was working with 6 other young men in a logging crew in Arizona's Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest near Snowflake on November 5, 1975 when he was stricken by a brilliant beam of bluish-white light from a glowing disc-shaped craft, hovering over a forest clearing, that he and his crew had driven over to investigate, initially thinking it was a forest fire. Walton's co-workers fled in panic, then found him nowhere to be seen upon re-

turning to the scene, and were accused of foul play in his disappearance by suspicious law-enforcement authorities. Walton turned up 5 days later in a small nearby town, confused and distraught but with fleeting memories of humanoid entities. He was later subjected to several polygraph tests, including one on November 15, 1975, evaluated for APRO (Aerial Phenomena Research Association) director James Lorenzen by University of California (Berkeley) engineering professor and UFO researcher James Harder (1916-2006). Walton was mercilessly harassed for years (along with his co-workers) by *Aviation Week and Space Technology* editor and zealous UFO skeptic Philip Klass (1919-2005), determined to discredit him at all costs. Walton's 1975 logging crew co-worker Steve Pierce recalled his own years of what he described as vicious hounding by Klass at the November 2011 NJ UFO conference where he spoke along with Walton, in Pierce's first public appearance after years of desperately seeking anonymity and shunning publicity.

Filmmaker Jennifer W. Stein, Executive Producer of Onwings Productions and Director of Main Line MUFON serving the "Main Line" suburban Philadelphia PA UFO research community, graciously allowed the Conference to screen her new 90-minute documentary on this case, which recently won two EBE awards at the Open Minds film festival in Scottsdale, Arizona. *Travis: The True Story of Travis Walton*, produced by Jennifer W. Stein and by Pennsylvania artist and film & video producer Bob

Terrio, was three years in the making. Walton attended the screening and took questions from the audience. Ms. Stein herself, whom I myself once met and talked with at the November 2011 conference, where I first "came out" as a "mental amphibian" to her, George Hansen, and a couple of others, was presiding that weekend over another screening of her film in Los Angeles.

The film featured all of the still living members of the original 1975 logging crew, including Walton himself, along with interviews with UFO researchers James Harder and Stanton Friedman, both long-time champions of Walton's story. Friedman, a nuclear physicist turned ardent UFO researcher, called Philip Klass the greatest late 20th century propagandist. Friedman and other film interviewees described Klass as very well connected to top government and military circles, with a mysterious slush fund of money from unknown sources. Klass conducted a long-time personal vendetta against Travis Walton though he never contacted Walton himself, and perhaps contributed through his character assassination to the suicide of physicist, UFO researcher, and outspoken 1969 Condon report critic James E. MacDonald (1920-1971). The FBI apparently considered Klass not in full possession of his mental faculties, with what they considered his near-paranoid harassment and defamation of UFO witnesses! The film likewise discussed the apparent close top-secret government connections of astrophysicist Donald Menzel (1901-1976), America's foremost UFO

debunker in the 1950's and 1960's, and Klass's extensive correspondence with Menzel. Perhaps the most interesting part of the film was the description of the greatly enhanced growth rings found in trees cut down at and near the original 1975 encounter site, possibly stimulated by radiation from the UFO. In the question and answer period following the screening, Walton expressed his own belief that we are being gradually conditioned by the UFO's and their makers in an educational program to broaden our mental perspectives about Humanity's place in the universe, a hypothesis similar to that of UFO researchers like Jacques Vallee and Leo Sprinkle.

As I've noted, the conference's formal programming was followed that evening, as in the case of many previous NJ UFO conferences in the area, by a group dinner at Mastoris popular Diner-Restaurant in nearby Bordentown. There we all got a chance to relax, socialize, and exchange further paranormal and personal views and experiences, as we likewise did at the party the previous evening at Dave Stinnett's friend and conference co-organizer Patty Maxwell's house.

T. Peter Park is an historian, a former librarian, and a prolific Fortean commentator on anomalous phenomena. According to Chris Perridas, Park is "a foremost Fortean authority on H. P. Lovecraft and the cultural impact his writing has had on our culture through folklore."

ABSTRACTS:
‘The Emerging Field of Paranthropology’:
Panel at 58th Annual Parapsychological Association/39th
Annual Society for Psychical Research Conference, Univer-
sity of Greenwich, 18th July 2015



Methodology of Doing Psi Research in Other Cultures and the Effect of Cultural Beliefs -
Serena Roney-Dougal, Psi Research Centre (Chair)

Taking a parapsychology experimental procedure and adapting it to the culture in which one is working is tricky and takes time. The experimenter needs to live for a sufficiently long period of time with the participants in order to begin to appreciate their perspective and gain their confidence. The experimental methodological rigour needs to be maintained whilst one works within the participants' cultural experience. In my research in India with Yogis and Tibetans it took two years to create a procedure with which the participants were comfortable. An example from the Yogic research: in the first year the students scored in the psi0missing direction. Discussions with them revealed that compliance is very important for students with a teacher. They knew that the hypothesis was that the swamis would score better and so they had unconsciously attempted to comply with this. Bringing this unconscious factor into the open resulted in chance scoring by the students the following year - an improvement on the psi-missing.

With the Tibetans, the methodology was similar to their practice of mirror Mo divination. However the targets had to be specially prepared for them as appropriate for their life experience which was without radio or television. Therefore static targets of Tibet were too uniform. However, even though the Tibetans were now living in India, some of the targets were outside of their life experience. For example, one monk during the session saw a flower filled meadow. When he was viewing the four pictures one was of a rock pool. He had never seen the sea. He explained that these were underwater flowers, e.g. Sea anemones, and he immediately identified this as the target, since it was the closest to his meadow!

Two More Sessions with Amyr Amiden, a Brazilian Claimant Medium - Stanley Krippner,
Saybrook University

In 1994, I was a member of an interdisciplinary team that spent eight days studying Amyr Amiden, a Brazilian claimant medium. During 20 sessions, 97 possible anomalous events were observed, 91 of which were rated "apparent anomalies" on the basis of a 5-point rating scale filled out by 3 members of the team. When the mean ratings per event were correlated with physiological and geomagnetic

readings, 2 of the 10 correlations were statistically significant: elevated diastolic blood pressure and elevated geomagnetic activity (using the geomagnetic index for the Southern Hemisphere). My follow-up visit the following year was marked by additional apparent anomalies as was an additional visit in 2014. One of the most unusual apparent anomalies was the sudden appearance of a pair of linked metal rings. Brazilian culture in general and Amiden's family background in particular were felt to be conducive to his behavior.

Exploring the Apparently Psi-Conducive But Methodologically Elusive Nature of Ritual Psychedelic Use - David Luke, Greenwich University.

Field reports from explorers, anthropologists and ethnobotanists have long since attested to the apparent psi-inducing properties of shamanic plant psychedelics, such as the Amazonian decoction ayahuasca and the mescaline-containing cacti San Pedro and peyote. After reviewing the literature an initial experimental precognition under the influence of ayahuasca, nevertheless a number of methodological issues became apparent from conducting the study that may account for the findings. Taking into consideration problems identified with the test protocol a new experimental design was developed and was planned for use with participants under the influence of San Pedro cactus in a ritual context, however the implementation of the second protocol was hampered by cultural rather than internal design factors and an alternative solution was sought by testing the protocol in principle using just one participant, with encouraging findings. The process of, and problems associated with conducting and developing experimental field research with participants utilizing plant psychedelics in a ritual context are discussed and proposals for future research are put forward.

A Brief History of Paranthropology - Jack Hunter, University of Bristol.

A brief overview of the fields of transpersonal anthropology, the anthropology of consciousness, and the most recent development in this lineage, paranthropology will be presented. It will outline the contributions of these fields to the development of a new approach to the investigation of so-called non-ordinary realities which emphasises the need for ethnographers to participate in the transpersonal practices and experiences of their fieldwork informants. In the words of Edith Turner, the anthropologist must learn 'to see at the Native sees' in order to truly grasp the experiential foundations of religious and spiritual belief, and escape from the hegemonic dismissal of alternative ontologies. This talk will explore the limitations of traditional anthropological approaches to the study of religion, which often fall short of providing a satisfactory account of the richness and complexity of ethnographic reality, and will offer suggestions for ways to overcome such problems.

Paranthropology

