

# Apparitional Experiences: A Primer on Parapsychological Research and Perspectives

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**Summary:** We present here a basic and accessible primer for paranormal enthusiasts on what has generally been learned about apparitions by parapsychologists and psychical researchers since the late 19th century. Topics such as the types and possible characteristics of apparitions, experimental approaches, theories and perspectives, and witness characteristics are covered, and are supplemented with illustrative examples and anecdotes from the published case literature.

*We wish to dedicate this primer to the memory of Dr. Gertrude R. Schmeidler (1912 – 2009), one of the leading female parapsychologists in the field, who, in 1966, had devised an ingenious method of applying the statistical techniques of laboratory tests to the field study of ghosts, apparitions, and hauntings.*

## 1. Introduction

Stories about ghosts and apparitions of the dead have long been the basis for much myth, fantasy, and folklore in human culture. But is there really something to them beyond pure imagination and superstition? According to a Gallup survey conducted in June of 2005, just under one-third of the 1,002 adult Americans surveyed (32%) had answered affirmatively to the question, “Do you believe that ghosts/spirits of dead people can come back in certain places/situations?” (Lyons, 2005). A poll of 808 Americans by CBS News in October of 2005 indicated that just over one-fifth (22%) have seen or felt the presence of a ghost (Alfano, 2005). Slightly higher figures were indicated in a poll of 721 British adults in February of 1998: 40% believed in ghosts, while 37% had seen or felt one (MORI, 1998). In addition, reports of ghosts and apparitions have appeared across many cultures over the course of time (Editors of Time-Life Books, 1988), suggesting that apparitional beliefs and experiences are a persistent and widespread phenomenon.

Experiences that people have had with apparitions are of interest to parapsychologists for three main reasons. First, the process of witnessing an apparition may perhaps involve the use of extrasensory perception, or ESP. If that is so, then this may provide us with a possible reason as to why some people (particularly psychics and mediums) are reportedly able to see or otherwise “sense” apparitions, while others are not. Second, some of the physical phenomena that can be associated with apparitions, such as odd sounds and occasional object movements, may perhaps involve the use of psychokinesis (PK), or “mind over matter.” It could perhaps be the case that the apparition seen was somehow formed through a PK-related process as well. Third, apparitions clearly seem relevant to the issue of possible life after death, and interest in this issue tends to be one thing that parapsychologists have in common with the diverse community of paranormal enthusiasts who have a broader interest of investigating ghosts and apparitions in relation to alleged hauntings. It turns out, however, that there may be more to ghosts and apparitions than just haunts.

We have decided to provide at Public Parapsychology a third installment of our basic primer series – yet another “crash course,” if you will – for paranormal enthusiasts and the general public for the prime reason that there has been much misunderstanding within the paranormal enthusiast community regarding what has been learned in the past about ghosts and apparitions, particularly by parapsychologists. To help guide enthusiasts with their own background knowledge for field investigations, we provide a basic, accessible overview of the current parapsychological research and perspectives. We hope that this primer will help to bridge the gap between parapsychologists and paranormal enthusiasts when it comes to the study of ghosts and their relevance to the issue of survival after death.

## 2. Types of Apparitions

Although the term is often used as a synonym for ghost, it is useful to initially define what we mean by “apparition.” The term *apparition*, from the Latin word *apparere* (meaning “to show oneself”), may be formally defined as:

An experience, usually visual but sometimes in other sense-modalities, in which there appears to be present a person or animal (deceased or living) ... who/which is in fact out of the sensory range of the [witness]” (Thalbourne, 2003).

In other words, it is the experience of the presence of a person or animal – living or dead – that is not actually there, which seems to occur primarily through sight, but at times can seem to occur through the other senses (sound, smell, taste, and touch). This term is a bit broader than the more popular term *ghost* (from the German word *geist* for “mind” or “spirit”), which refers to the apparition of a deceased person, usually in connection with a haunting. Although we will use both terms throughout this primer, we shall primarily use the term *apparition*, given its broader meaning.

There are actually several known types of apparitions that have been documented by psychical researchers and parapsychologists since the late 19th century.<sup>1</sup> They include: crisis apparitions, post-mortem apparitions, deathbed visions, haunting apparitions, and apparitions of the bystander-type. In addition to describing each one below, we provide an illustrative case example of each to help the reader better grasp what each entails.

*Crisis:* As implied by its name, a crisis apparition appears to a witness at a time when the person whose apparition is seen is experiencing a state of crisis, whether it is an accident, an illness, or even the threat of death. A good example of a crisis apparition case is given by Dr. Sally Rhine Feather and author Michael Schmicker (2005) in their book *The Gift*:

A woman and her fifteen-year-old daughter had recently moved to California from their previous home in Washington D.C., where they had left the woman’s father very ill. One day not long after moving, they entered the dining room, and to the woman’s great surprise, there stood her father. “Why Dad, when did you get here?” she exclaimed.

At that point, her daughter turned around to look, and she, too, saw the figure of her grandfather, his hand upraised in a gesture of greeting or perhaps blessing, but he slowly faded away, and they both suddenly realized that he was not really in California in their house. Shortly afterward, they received the news that he had died (p. 254).

In addition to representing a crisis apparition, this case has three other interesting aspects to it. First, it is case where the apparition was collectively perceived, meaning that it was

witnessed by more than one person. Second, the apparition was apparently so real looking to the woman that she actually mistook it for her real father at first. This goes against the folklore-based view that apparitions are often only misty, translucent outlines. Third, the apparition of the man seemed to acknowledge the presence of his daughter and granddaughter, suggesting that it had some degree of intelligent awareness. We shall discuss these aspects a bit more in Sections 3 & 7.

*Post-mortem:* As implied by its name, a post-mortem apparition appears after a person's death, anywhere from several hours to several years after. As an example, we briefly recount a case documented by survival researcher Dianne Arcangel (2005, pp. 70 – 72):

About four months after her son Tommy had been tragically murdered, a woman was out walking Tommy's dog in the daytime and they were passing by the parking lot where Tommy had kept his Jeep when the dog began barking and pulling on the leash. Looking up, the woman saw a young man standing in a blue outfit about 30 feet away, although she could not see him clearly because she was not wearing her glasses. When she finally put them on, she recognized Tommy standing there on the sidewalk and smiling at her, wearing a blue outfit he had bought but never got to wear before he died. She immediately called out to him, and she and the dog began running toward him. But then, the image of Tommy seemed to slowly turn around and glide away, his feet being about an inch off the pavement. Despite how fast they ran, the woman and the dog could not catch up to him, even after pursuing him for three blocks. Then, the woman's sight of her son was abruptly obstructed by some passing schoolgirls, and when she looked up again, the figure of Tommy was gone.

This case has two other interesting aspects to it. Similar to the crisis case, the apparition in this case was apparently witnessed not only by the woman, but also by the dog. It also seemed to suggest an optical effect, as the woman needed her glasses to see the apparition clearly.

*Deathbed Vision:* Near the moment of death, some terminally ill and dying patients have described seeing images of people and places that seem to relate to an afterlife existence, images known as deathbed visions. Reports of such visions have been recorded since the 19th century (Rogo, 1978), and are still occasionally reported today among healthcare and hospice workers (e.g., Arcangel, 2005, pp. 110, 116 – 120).

Among the images described by patients are apparitions of deceased friends and relatives. In the 1970s, Drs. Karlis Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson (1977) had surveyed and interviewed 877 medical doctors and nurses in India and the United States, whose patients had reported seeing deathbed apparitions. In one of the 418 cases they documented, a nurse recounts the deathbed vision related to her by an intelligent 76-year-old female patient who had suffered a heart attack:

[The patient's] consciousness was very, very clear – no sedation, no hallucinogenic history. She was cheerful and confident that she would recover and return to her daughter who badly needed her at home. Suddenly she stretched out her arms and, smiling, called out to me. "Can't you see Charlie [her dead husband] there with outstretched arms? I'm wondering why I haven't 'gone home' before." Describing the vision she said, "What a beautiful place with all the flowers and music. Don't you hear it? Oh, girls, don't you see Charlie?" She said he was waiting for her. I feel she definitely saw her husband (pp. 80 – 81).

During her experience, the woman had a feeling of peace and serenity reportedly come over her. She remained oriented to her surroundings, and was able to talk with the nurse and the family at her bedside during the vision.

This case has two aspects to it that are consistent with other cases of deathbed visions. First, as indicated in the narrative, the woman was not medicated or sedated at the time of her vision, indicating that it was not a drug-induced hallucination. Similarly, most of the patients in

other cases were not found to be medicated, sedated, running a high fever, or in a delirium at the time of their vision (Osis, 1975; Osis & Haraldsson, 1977, pp. 70 – 73), arguing against a medical-related hallucination as the cause for their vision. Second, the apparition seen by the woman was that of a close relative (her husband). Similarly, a majority of the patients (90%) in other cases had seen close relatives (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977, p. 64). We'll return to this second finding in Section 3.

Many patients regard the deathbed apparitions they see as “take-away” figures, meaning that the apparition seemed to appear for the purpose of greeting, inviting, or leading the patient to the afterlife. This apparent purpose of the apparition was noted in nearly two-thirds (65%) of the cases documented by Osis and Haraldsson (1977, pp. 65 – 67). Reflecting on her experience as a hospice chaplain, Dianne Arcangel (2005) openly states: “I have never sat with a dying patient who was not in the accompaniment of an apparition as their time grew near. *No one ever dies alone*” (p. 120, her italics).

*Haunting:* As many paranormal enthusiasts are probably all too aware, most of the apparitions seen at allegedly haunted sites do not take the form of the classic ghost of folklore, instead appearing as shadowy forms, floating lights, and hazy mist-like clouds. It seems that, in most cases, these kinds of apparitions are more likely to have a geophysical and/or psychological explanation (for reviews, see Persinger, 1974, Pt. II; Persinger & Koren, 2001; Roll & Persinger, 2001), and are less likely to be indicators of survival. However, there have been a few rare cases in which apparently well-defined apparitions of deceased human individuals have been repeatedly seen over time in the places where they once lived or worked. One such case is the “Gordy” case, initially investigated in the late 1980s by Dr. William Roll (in Roll & Persinger, 2001, p. 160), which we briefly summarize here:

Soon after moving to a new home with her family, a little girl named Heidi Wyrick had met a man in her neighborhood named “Con,” who invited her to play on a swing. When Heidi asked for permission to do so, her mother asked about Con and Heidi described him as “having blood all over.” Concerned that Con may be a kidnapper or a child molester, Heidi’s parents had the neighborhood searched for the man, but were unable to find him. A short time later, Heidi began speaking of regularly meeting with another man in the neighborhood named “Mr. Gordy” to play on the swing, and her parents figure that Con and Mr. Gordy are the girl’s imaginary playmates. Eventually they discover that an elderly gentleman named James Gordy, as well as a man named “Lon,” had actually lived in the neighborhood many years back, and that Lon had lost his hand in a machinery accident. The descriptions that Heidi gave of the two men were later found to closely match photographs of them (she was also able to correctly pick them out of a random collection of old photos), and Roll could find no normal way in which Heidi could have learned about them prior to her family’s discovery of their identities.<sup>2</sup>

The Gordy case seems to contain a possible parapsychological component, in that it suggests that Heidi was able to somehow psychically perceive the apparitions of people who had once lived in her local surroundings. How might we come to better understand this? We’ll briefly look at some possible theories in Section 7.

*Bystander-Type:* It turns out that apparitions may not only be associated with a haunted location; in rare cases, they may be associated with a person. Rather than being seen in the place where they once lived or worked, some apparitions have been witnessed in close proximity to people who once knew them in life. Dr. Louisa Rhine (1957) had coined the term *bystander-type case* to label these kinds of cases, noting that, “...these cases are suggestive of the haunting cases,

the main difference, however, being that in these the link is a person rather than a geographical location” (p. 39).

An example of an apparition of the bystander-type comes from a study by the late Dr. Ian Stevenson (1995), in which he had interviewed a medical doctor who had once witnessed such apparition while keeping vigil at the bedside of his mother-in-law, who was very ill, in a coma, and near death. According to the doctor:

I was standing by her bed and no one else was in the room. She had an agonal inspiration, and at that moment I had a very clear picture of G. C. [her late husband] standing across from me with his arms outstretched, and he said, “Flora, I’ve been waiting for you.”

I did not really have to look to see that my mother-in-law had died, but the physician in me pushed me to verify that (p. 362).

The doctor stated that the figure he saw of his late father-in-law was “...quite opaque, as he would have seen him in life” (p. 362). He was only able to see the figure from the waist up, but believed that the surrounding furniture had blocked his vision of the rest. Prior to his encounter, the doctor believed that he had only seen his father-in-law once or twice while his father-in-law was still alive, but he was familiar with his father-in-law’s appearance from family photos. However, he had not expected to see his father-in-law at the time of his mother-in-law’s passing, stating that, “I was surprised but comforted by what I saw” (p. 363).

In this case, the doctor was able to see the apparition of a man in close proximity to the man’s dying wife, and thus the doctor was acting as a third person “bystander” witness (hence the term). One might notice that this case seems similar to a deathbed vision, but we should point out that it cannot be classified as one in the strictest sense because the mother-in-law was comatose and did not herself perceive the apparition of her deceased husband.

The case has three other interesting aspects to it. First, as in the crisis case, the apparition that the doctor saw appeared solid. Second, as in the deathbed case, the apparition he saw was of a relative in his family. Third, the doctor reportedly heard the apparition speak, suggesting it had some degree of intelligence. We’ll look more at these aspects in Sections 3 & 6.

### 3. Characteristics of Apparitions

In looking at the various types of apparitions in the previous section, we also got a brief look at some of their characteristics. In this section, we provide a fuller summary of their characteristics, based on previous findings in parapsychology and psychical research (Irwin, 1994, Sect. 8; Roll, 1982, Sect. 2; Tyrrell, 1953/1961, *Apparitions*, Ch. 2).

The first characteristic naturally deals with physical appearance. Unlike the misty and translucent ghost of classic folklore, many apparitions are described by witnesses as being solid looking and life-like. For example in the “Morton Ghost” case, in which the Despard family repeatedly saw the figure of a spectral widow over the course of several years, Rosina Despard had stated that the figure “...was so solid and life-like that it was often mistaken for a real person” (Morton, 1892, p. 321).<sup>3</sup> In a similar fashion, we saw in the crisis case (Section 2) that the woman and her daughter initially took the apparition to be the woman’s real father. In the bystander case, the doctor described the image of his late father-in-law as being opaque and life-like.

While appearing solid, some apparitions can apparently exhibit physical or non-physical features. For instance, some appear to cast shadows and reflections. One curious example of an

apparition casting a reflection is seen in one woman's personal account of a crisis case, which Feather and Schmicker (2005) present in their book *The Gift*:

“My mother lived in California and I lived in Wichita, Kansas. At 9:40 A.M. on February 17, I was sitting in my bedroom at my dressing room table, brushing my hair in front of the mirror. Suddenly the room was illuminated with the strangest light, one I can't fully describe. I then felt a rustle of wind across my shoulders, and a faint sound like the brushing of birds' wings. Then I looked in the mirror.

“My mother was standing behind my chair ... She just stood and smiled at me for a full thirty seconds. I finally said, ‘Mom!’ and rushed for her, but she disappeared, light and all. I was so upset by this that I shook for an hour. When my husband came home for lunch, I told him about it and got myself ready for a phone call that mother was dead ... Sure enough, about one P.M. that same day, the call came that my mother was gone ...” (pp. 261 – 262).

In other cases, apparitions have been seen to appear or disappear in enclosed rooms, or pass through doors and walls (Stevenson, 1982, p. 353; Tyrrell, 1953/1961, pp. 56 – 58). Attempts to touch an apparition have either resulted in the figure apparently eluding the hand to where it is unable to be touched, or the hands simply passing through the figure. An example in which the apparition eludes the witness' hand can be found in the Morton Ghost case, in which Rosina Despard describes her attempts to touch the spectral widow. She noted that, “It was not that there was nothing there to touch, but that she always seemed to be *beyond* me, and if followed into a corner, simply disappeared” (p. 315). This latter statement may be valuable, in that it offers the hint that any non-physical features of an apparition may perhaps relate to distortions in perception on the part of the witness. If this is so, then it may suggest that, despite looking physical, apparitions may be *mental* forms, as well. That is, how the witness perceives the apparition may be partly determined by his or her own mental state at the time.

Although they traditionally represent deceased persons, we see in some cases that apparitions can also sometimes represent people who are still living. An example comes from an account given in a study of cases by Dr. Louisa Rhine (1957):

A little old lady came around every Thursday morning selling eggs from door to door and she always stopped at my house. This Thursday I had to go to town and as I was coming up the little road leading to my house I saw the egg lady standing on the porch. I noted that she was wearing a new pink dress and a sort of little bonnet to match. Just as I spied her, she turned to step off the porch and I called to her to wait and then she just disappeared.

She never came out my gate, she didn't go anywhere, she just wasn't there. I was not more than 50 feet away when I first saw her and there were no bushes or plants to obstruct my vision. Later in the afternoon a knock sounded on my door and when I responded there stood the little egg lady dressed in pink and with her basket on her arm. I told her I was sorry I was not at home when she called about an hour earlier. She looked very surprised but smiled as she answered, “But this is the first time I have been here today. An hour ago I was just leaving the ranch. I was thinking about you and wondering if you wanted some eggs” (p. 22).

In addition, apparitions of the living may sometimes occur in crisis cases, when the person whose apparition is seen is ill or in an accident, but not faced with the threat of death. We shall also see in Section 4 that there have been a few rare cases in which living people have attempted to intentionally make themselves appear as an apparition to people they know.

Some apparitions may seem to exhibit behavior that suggests that they have some degree of awareness of their surroundings (Tyrrell, 1953/1961, pp. 60 – 66). Dr. Harvey Irwin (1994) offers the illustrative example that if a witness “... moves around the room the apparition's head

may be said to have turned to follow these movements” (p. 58). Another interesting example comes from an account by Rosina Despard of an encounter with the spectral widow:

[The widow] crossed the drawing room, and took up her usual position behind the couch in the bow window. My father came in soon after, and I told him she was there. He could not see the figure, but went to where I showed him she was. *She then swiftly went round behind him*, across the room, out the door, and along the hall, disappearing as usual near the garden door, we both following her (Morton, 1892, p. 317, emphasis added).

This account suggests that, rather than simply passing through him, the spectral widow had moved to intentionally avoid Rosina’s father as she exited the room. Rosina additionally noted that the widow would always move to avoid the light, leaving the witnesses unable to tell if she cast a shadow (p. 321). Apparent displays of awareness such as these tie into the issue of whether or not some apparitions are intelligent, an issue we shall discuss a bit more in Section 7.

Although the majority of apparitions have been witnessed by one person, there have been a small number of cases in which an apparition was collectively perceived by more than one witness. As we saw in the crisis and post-mortem cases (Section 2), two individuals may perceive the same apparition at one time. On the other hand, one witness may see the apparition, while another may not; this was apparently the case in the account by Rosina Despard involving her and her father, above.

Some apparitions of the dead tend to be seen in the geographical location where they once lived or worked (as in haunting cases), or around people who knew them in life (as in bystander-type cases). In addition to the Gordy case (Section 2), another example comes from Dianne Arcangel (2005, pp. 18 – 20), who relates a personal account of the experiences that workers at her family’s dry cleaning business have had with the ghost of a man named Dyer. Employed with the business for about 30 years, Dyer worked diligently at his spotting board from morning till night, until his sudden death from a heart attack. Not long after, a female co-worker walked in and saw Dyer working behind his spotting board. She smiled and waved at him, and he waved back. The woman turned to put her things down, and when she turned back to him, Dyer was gone. Several other workers who were employed there later on reported similar incidents, and tenants of the apartment that was later built above the business by Arcangel’s husband also reported seeing the spectral figure of a man resembling Dyer. Her husband noticed that one particular area of the apartment, located directly over the area of Dyer’s spotting board, was constantly cold, even in the summer months. Arcangel says that neither her husband, the later workers, nor the tenants had ever known about Dyer prior to the experiences.

A comparison of four separate survey studies, shown in Table 1, suggests that more (non-haunting) apparitions tend to be of people with close family relation to the witnesses, rather than strangers.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1. Relationship Between the Apparition and the Witness in Apparition Cases (% Cases)**

Study	# Cases	Close Family	Distant Family	Friends	Strangers
Persinger (1974)	193	47	22	18	13
Osis & Haraldsson (1977)	418	61	12	7	21
Haraldsson (1988-1989)	127	53	-	10	11
Arcangel (2005)	596	59	11	-	13
<b>Average Percentage</b>		<b>55</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>15</b>

Values not cited are marked with a dash (-). All values are rounded to the nearest one percent.

In a later survey study, Dr. Haraldsson (1994) stated that nearly half of the figures seen in the 357 apparition cases he gathered were of a relative of the witness. In contrast, 29% of those cases involved the witness seeing the figure of a person unfamiliar to them. Similarly, in reviewing studies that compared apparitions of the dead with those of the living, Dr. Ian Stevenson (1982) had noted that: “No fewer than 78% of apparitions of the dead were perceived by a [witness] to whom the [deceased person] had had strong emotional ties, such as a husband, wife, or fiancé; and among apparitions of the living the percentage of such appearances rose even higher, to 92%” (p. 351).

There is some indication that the farther one gets from a person’s time of death, the less frequently that person’s apparition appears. In other words, sightings of the apparition of a deceased person tend to decline in frequency with increased time from the person’s moment of death. Evidence for this initially surfaced in the late 1880s, when two prominent psychical researchers, Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers (1888-89), had conducted a survey of early apparition cases they had gathered and published in a two-volume case anthology of psychic experiences entitled *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). They observed from these 211 cases that “... the recognised apparitions decrease rapidly in the few days after death, then more slowly; and after about a year’s time they become so sporadic that we can no longer include them in a steadily descending line” (Gurney & Myers, 1888-89, p. 427). A similar decline in apparitional sightings was observed by Rosina Despard in the Morton Ghost case. She noted that from 1882 to 1884 she saw the spectral widow “... about half a dozen times” (Morton, 1892, p. 314), and it was also seen by several other members of her family during that time period. It was reportedly seen frequently throughout the year of 1885 (p. 318). By 1887, Rosina noted that “... we have few records; the appearances were less frequent” (p. 321). She added that from 1887 to 1889, the spectral widow was rarely seen, and then: “From 1889 to the present, so far as I know, the figure has not been seen at all” (p. 321).

The appearance of an apparition can sometimes be accompanied by certain kinds of subjective effects, such as feeling sensations of cold, wind, or touch. In the survey of apparition cases described in his classic book *Apparitions*, psychical researcher G. N. M. Tyrrell (1953/1961) observed that the experience of cold breezes and similar cooling sensations was fairly frequent across witness accounts. For instance, some witnesses gave the following statements: “I ... felt myself grow perfectly cold”; “A cold, shivering feeling came over me”; “The apparition ‘laid a cold hand on his cheek’”; “As if a cool wind was blowing about me” (p. 73). Rosina Despard stated that similar cold sensations were sometimes felt in proximity to the spectral widow of the Morton Ghost case (Morton, 1892, p. 325).<sup>5</sup>

One final characteristic of apparitions is that, aside from being visual, some can be purely auditory, seeming to manifest as sounds reflective of human activity. An example of an auditory apparitional experience can be found in an investigation by Dr. William Roll (1991) of the alleged haunting phenomena witnessed aboard the *Queen Mary* cruise ship, now permanently docked in Long Beach, CA. According to accounts by the ship’s staff and crew, sounds of loud metal impacts, voices, and rushing water are sometimes heard coming from the lower forward compartments near the ship’s bow. However, when the compartments are checked, no one is found in the area, nor is there any sign of damage or a leak. To see if these sounds might represent an objective event rather than being purely subjective, Dr. Roll attempted to record them by leaving a voice-activated tape recorder overnight in the bow. When retrieved in the morning and played back, it was discovered that “... the tape recorder picked up a strange sequence of noises.



You could hear heavy blows of metal, sounds of rushing water and voices, one of which, low pitched and gravelly, was almost intelligible” (p. 58). The recorded sounds were found to be strikingly similar to a description given by the ship’s chief engineer, who heard the sounds on several occasions when he was in the bow area with no one else around. In addition, the nature of the sounds seemed consistent with a tragic event occurring early in the *Queen Mary’s* sailing history, when it had been a military transport during World War II. During an evasion maneuver off the coast of Scotland in October of 1942, the bow of *Queen Mary* had accidentally collided with the British battle cruiser *Curaçoa*, tearing the smaller cruiser in half and resulting in the deaths of over 300 British sailors.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson (1994) offers another example of an auditory apparition in his second survey of cases, which again seems to reflect the activity of a person:

Shortly after our father died, I came to his house with my brother. We knew that there was nobody in the house, and then we heard the old man at his desk. He was walking around, opened the door, and closed it again. Both of us stopped and listened when we entered, and then I remarked: “I guess there is no doubt who is up there.” “No, there is no doubt about it,” my brother replied. Both of us went upstairs; no one was there. We had heard this so clearly. He was 85 years old when he died, and he walked slowly, you know, had the typical old man’s way of walking (p. 3).

#### 4. Experiments with Apparitions in Spontaneous Cases and Field Research

As a way to gain better insight into their possible nature, some parapsychologists and psychical researchers have attempted to experiment with apparitions in a number of different ways. We take a look at some of the more interesting ways in this section.

One of the earliest ways came in the form a quasi-experimental effort made by the correspondents of some psychical researchers, and could be seen as a way to informally explore the folklore-based notion of apparitions as spirits leaving the body upon death. In many respects, it was a form of early survival research done with living persons.

In general, the effort consisted of people attempting to willfully make themselves appear as a spectral figure to an unsuspecting friend in a distant place; in other words, it was an intentional effort by a person to produce an apparition of him or her self that could be seen by others. One of the most detailed accounts of such an effort was given in 1886 by the Rev. Clarence Godfrey, an acquaintance of the prominent psychical researcher Frank Podmore. In a letter to Podmore, Rev. Godfrey wrote of his effort:

Retiring at 10.45 (on the 15th November 1886), I determined to appear, if possible, to a friend, and accordingly I set myself to work with all the volitional and determinative energy which I possess, to stand at the foot of her bed. I need not say that I never dropped the slightest hint beforehand as to my intention, such as could mar the experiment, nor had I mentioned the subject to her ... I endeavoured to *translate myself*, spiritually, into her room, and to attract her attention, as it were, while standing there. My effort was sustained for perhaps eight minutes, after which I felt tired and was soon asleep (in Myers, 1903, Vol. I, p. 688, his italics).

Around 3:40 A.M., Rev. Godfrey suddenly awoke from a dream in which he had seemingly been successful in appearing to his friend. The next day, November 16, he directly received an account from his friend of what she had experienced, which she wrote down as follows:

Yesterday – viz., the morning of November 16th, 1886 – about half past three o’clock, I woke up with a start and an idea that some one had come into the room. I heard a curious sound, but fancied it might be the birds in the ivy outside. Next I experienced a strange, restless longing to leave the room and go downstairs. This feeling became so overpowering that at last I rose and lit a candle, and went down, thinking if I could get some soda-water it might have a quieting effect. On returning to my room I saw Mr. Godfrey standing under the large window on the staircase. He was dressed in his usual style, and with an expression on his face that I have noticed when he has been looking very earnestly at anything. He stood there, and I held up the candle and gazed at him for three or four seconds in utter amazement, and then, as I passed up the staircase, he disappeared. The impression left on my mind was so vivid that I fully intended waking a friend who occupied the same room as myself, but remembering that I should only be laughed at as romantic and imaginative, refrained from doing so.

I was not frightened at the appearance of Mr. Godfrey, but felt much excited, and could not sleep afterwards (p. 689).

Podmore then added:

On the 21st of the same month (says Mr. Podmore) I heard a full account of the incident given above from Mr. Godfrey, and on the day following from Mrs. --- [Godfrey’s friend]. Mrs. --- told me that the figure appeared quite distinct and life-like at first, though she could not remember to have noticed more than the upper part of the body. As she looked it grew more and more shadowy, and finally faded away. Mrs. ---, it should be added, told me that she had previously seen two phantasmal figures, representing a parent whom she had recently lost (p. 689).

Rev. Godfrey made two more attempts to appear to his friend, one successful, and one not. In relating her account of the successful attempt, his friend “... states that she was awakened by hearing a voice cry, ‘Wake,’ and by feeling a hand rest on the left side of her head. She then saw stooping over her a figure which she recognised as Mr. Godfrey’s” (p. 689).

Another way that researchers have experimented with apparitions has been to bring psychics and mediums to an allegedly haunted location to see if they could sense an apparition in the areas where it has been seen (haunt areas), as compared to other areas within the location where no apparition has been reported (control areas). This particular method of experimentation was initially developed and applied by the late Dr. Gertrude Schmeidler (1966), and for that reason, we shall adopt the phrase “Schmeidler’s method” as a shorthand term.

To illustrate, Schmeidler’s method generally proceeds as follows: After interviewing the witnesses living or working in the haunted location, the researcher asks each of the witnesses who reported seeing a ghost to fill out a checklist. On this checklist is a series of words that could potentially describe the ghost’s actions or personality. The witness circles those words that seem to closely match the ghost, and crosses out those that do not match the ghost at all. Then, the researcher gives each witness a floor plan of the haunted location and asks them to mark the areas where they had seen the ghost (the haunt areas). Once this process is completed, the witnesses’ checklists and floor plans are stored in a secure place for safekeeping.

Not long afterward, the researcher brings a group of psychics/mediums to the haunted location at a time when the witnesses are not there. Handing each psychic and medium a blank checklist and floor plan, the researcher asks them to tour the location one by one, sensing for ghosts or anything else unusual. If a psychic or medium receives an impression in a certain area of the location, they are asked to mark that area on the floor plan. If this impression seems to relate to the ghost’s actions or personality, they are asked to circle the related words on the checklist. After all of the psychics and mediums had completed their tour, their floor plans and checklists are also stored in a secure place. Then, on another day, the researcher brings in a group

of skeptics and has them do the same thing, instead asking them to guess on the checklist what the ghost's actions or personality must be like, and to mark any areas on the floor plan that just seemed "spooky" or "weird" to them.

To see if the responses of the psychics and mediums matched those of the witnesses to a degree beyond that expected by chance, Dr. Schmeidler compared them by adapting and applying the methods of statistical analysis commonly used in laboratory experiments on psychic phenomena. A statistically significant result would suggest that the psychics and mediums were somehow able to sense the haunt areas where the witnesses had previously experienced a ghost (the floor plan test), as well as accurately describe the ghost (the checklist test).

Naturally, one must also consider the possibility that the psychics and mediums, rather than sensing a ghost, may have been responding on the floor plan test to cues embedded in the surroundings of the haunt areas. For instance, a haunt area may contain dark hallways or spooky-looking corners that could give the impression that it would be the place where one might find a ghost. Similarly, on the checklist test, the psychics and mediums could have responded based on the stereotypical notions about a ghost that come from imagination, folklore, and superstition. To see if cues or stereotypes could have factored into the results, Dr. Schmeidler also compared the floor plan and checklist responses of the skeptics with those of the witnesses to see if they showed any significant matches as a control comparison.

Human behavior is known to be variable; we all behave differently from each other and patterns occurring in our behavior can often be difficult to spot for that reason. To get around this, psychologists often employ a method known as *meta-analysis* when evaluating their experiments on behavior. For simplicity, we might look at meta-analysis as being a method of statistically combining the results of many behavioral studies grouped together in order to look for an overall pattern across all of their results, rather than looking at each study result individually. Psychic experiences turn out to be no exception when it comes to variability in behavior, and so parapsychologists also often make use of meta-analysis when evaluating the data they have collected over the years.

To examine the overall pattern of performance on the floor plan and checklist tests by the psychics/mediums and the skeptics, Dr. Michaelen Maher (1999), who had once been a student of Dr. Schmeidler, conducted a meta-analysis on five field studies of reputed hauntings conducted from 1975 to 1997 that utilized Schmeidler's method. The results of Dr. Maher's meta-analysis indicated that, across the five studies, the floor plan and checklist responses of the psychics/mediums tended to match those of the witnesses to a statistically significant degree, suggesting that they were generally successful in locating the haunt areas where witnesses had previously seen a ghost, as well as accurately describing the ghost they saw. In contrast, the floor plan responses of the skeptics did not significantly match those of the witnesses, suggesting that they were generally unsuccessful in locating the haunt areas. However, there was a slight tendency for skeptics' responses on the checklist test to show some correspondence with the witnesses' responses, offering a weak hint that the description of the ghost may have been at least partially derived from folklore or imaginative and superstitious stereotypes. In sum, the overall results suggest that the psychics and mediums may have been responding to *something* at the haunt sites within the location, whether ghost or otherwise.

Finally, some researchers have attempted quasi-experiments with apparitions during field studies in order to possibly learn more about their physical composition. One example comes from a field investigation by Drs. Dean Radin and William Roll (1994) of haunt reports coming from the owners and patrons of a popular Kentucky music hall. During their investigation, a

psychic had sensed a rather strong ghost in the basement of the music hall. Upon following her down to the basement, Radin and Roll were able to place a Geiger counter (which measures radiation levels) both “inside” and “outside” the supposed ghost after the psychic was able to corner it in one area of the room. On two occasions, when placed inside the ghost, the Geiger counter sounded an alarm, detecting the presence of radiation. On two other occasions, when taken out of the ghost as a control comparison, the Geiger counter remained silent. But then, before Radin and Roll could repeat the test, a photographer snapped a photo of the room, which (according to the psychic) the ghost had not liked and caused it to disappear into the wall. This intriguing quasi-experiment offers the hint that some ghosts may be radioactive.

## 5. Experiments with Apparitions in the Laboratory

Perhaps the ideal way to experiment with a ghost would be to bring it into the laboratory, where its physical and psychological aspects could be studied under controlled conditions. While it is clearly not possible to do so, some parapsychologists have attempted the next best thing: to artificially produce an apparition that can be experienced by a witness in the lab. To do that, parapsychologists have made use of a custom-built chamber called a *psychomanteum*.

The psychomanteum (Greek for “theater of the mind”) is a darkened room that is designed to induce apparition-like experiences through the process of scrying (gazing into a reflective surface). Its origins derive from Greek mythology, in which people would often journey to special locations (such as the oracle at Delphi) to hold audience with the gods through visions seen in reflective pools of oil or water. Sometimes, they would also see images of their deceased ancestors within those reflective visions. Dr. Raymond Moody (1992; Moody & Perry, 1993), a psychiatrist with a deep interest in Greek history, adopted the idea and created his own modern-day version of the psychomanteum in the early 1990s as a technique for bereavement and grief counseling.

Dr. Moody’s technique generally proceeded as follows: The witness would first be asked to select a deceased friend or relative with whom they wished to have a visionary reunion in the psychomanteum. Prior to the actual session, extensive discussion was held between the witness and Dr. Moody about the deceased person, their relationship with the witness, and the witness’ motivations for wanting to have a reunion with that person. The witness shared photographs and objects that had once belonged to the deceased person, and discussed their significance to help them remember and reconnect with that person. Towards dusk, the witness was shown into the psychomanteum, and was instructed to relax in a comfortable chair while gazing passively into a large mirror hanging on the wall a few feet across from the chair, which was angled upward to reflect the darkness. After some time had passed, the witness was brought out of the psychomanteum and discussion was held about what he or she had experienced while mirror-gazing. According to Dr. Moody (1992), about half of the people who underwent his psychomanteum technique reported seeing apparitions of the dead in the mirror.

Other researchers using the psychomanteum have had varying degrees of success in producing reunion experiences. Drs. Dean Radin and Jannine Rebman (1996) report that just over half (four, or 57%) of the seven witnesses who spent time in their electronically-monitored psychomanteum had sensed the presence of a deceased person. They found that variables in the surrounding environment (e.g., magnetic fields, radiation, and temperature) that they had monitored during the witnesses’ experiences were significantly related to changes in the witnesses’ physiology (e.g., heart rate, skin temperature, and brain waves), suggesting that some

apparitional experiences may result from complex interactions between mind-body states and physical variables in the surrounding environment.

Dianne Arcangel (1997) had a strong degree of success, with 58 of her 68 participants (85%) having a reunion experience. Fifty-five of them reported a visual apparition as part of their experience. Dr. Arthur Hastings and his associates at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in California had 27 people participate in their psychomanteum study (Hastings et al., 2002). Of these, 13 (48%) described a reunion experience, which mostly came in the form of a mental conversation they had with the deceased person, which some witnesses said was akin to telepathy. Although none of the witnesses had reported seeing a full-blown apparition of the deceased person in the mirror, they did see a variety of visual images, including lights, dark human-like figures, animals, flowers, landscapes, and faces. An account by one of the witnesses illustrates the kinds of images seen:

Feeling deep grief at the beginning; black robed figures coming toward me; black spinning ball with trailing energy moving clockwise in mirror; unidentified faces in the mirror; energy streaming out of mirror into space in front of me. A foot (light skin then changed to dark skin). Hand and faint formulations of a human (?) shape (Hastings et al., 2002, p. 217).

The effects of a reunion experience upon a person's grief is illustrated by an account given by one witness who sought contact with his sister, who had died nearly three decades earlier:

Yes, I did sense her presence – a body state more than anything, though a couple of times it seems like I heard her voice. I got the message that I have been holding this experience of her pain, my resentment that she had to suffer so much, and my sadness that she is gone for 27 years. Though I have worked in therapy around the grief issue, I didn't know that the resentment was so strong (p. 218).

In sensing her presence, the witness further stated that he had had the impression of his sister holding him as he experienced sadness over her loss. Generally, Dr. Hastings and his associates have found that witnesses show significant reductions in their grief following their time in the psychomanteum, as compared to before.

Dr. William Roll (2004) held a series of psychomanteum workshops with 41 people who sought a reunion with deceased friends and relatives. Using an approach similar to Dr. Moody's, Dr. Roll helped the people through their grief by discussing their deceased relatives and friends and handling their objects before having each person sit in a psychomanteum facility built into the basement of his home. Despite only nine of the 41 people (22%) experiencing a reunion, the workshops seemed to help the people reduce their grief and unresolved feelings toward the deceased person, consistent with the findings of Dr. Hastings and his associates. Dr. Roll found that people who previously reported having a survival-related experience (such as an apparition or a near-death experience) had a tendency to report strong reunion experiences.

Devin Terhune and Matthew Smith (2006) used the psychomanteum to explore the effects of suggestion on the occurrence of apparitional experiences. They randomly assigned 40 people into one of two groups: a suggestion group and a non-suggestion group. The suggestion group was told that they might experience anomalous sensations (including seeing an apparition) while in the psychomanteum, while the non-suggestion group was told that they may only experience unusual bodily sensations or perceptual distortions while gazing into the mirror. Analysis revealed that the suggestion group had reported significantly more visual and auditory apparitions than the non-suggestion group, possibly indicating that the experience of an apparition may be influenced

by such things as suggestion and rumor. In a similar fashion, some people may be more likely to report haunt experiences in a particular location when told beforehand that the location is supposedly haunted (Lange & Houran, 1997).

## 6. Characteristics of Apparitional Experiencers

We took a brief look in Section 3 at some of the various characteristics of apparitions. But what about those of the people who see them? Are there any physiological, psychological, or personality characteristics common among witnesses that may perhaps tie into their ability to experience an apparition? Some parapsychological studies are beginning to suggest that there might indeed be a few.

One possible characteristic is that people who have a strong imagination or a frequent tendency to fantasize may be more likely to experience an apparition. This possibility was initially researched in the early 1980s, when psychologists Sheryl Wilson and T. X. Barber (1983) studied a select group of women who had a “fantasy-prone personality,” meaning that they exhibited a strong capacity for imagination and that they often engaged in fantasy throughout their daily lives. Rather than being the mere mental images of ordinary daydreaming, many of these women’s fantasies are rich experiences involving multiple senses and are often described as being “as real as real” (p. 352). Based on their study, Wilson and Barber estimate that about 4% of the people in the general population may have a fantasy-prone personality.

Wilson and Barber (1983) found that 73% of these female fantasizers had reported previous experiences with apparitions, some of which resembled deceased people they had known. They note:

For instance, one subject, who was feeling guilty for not trying to stop her family from cremating her dead grandmother, saw a striking apparition of her grandmother (a figure radiating a brilliant light) who communicated telepathically that she was happy, safe, and not angry. Another subject also saw her deceased grandmother, who told her correctly where her missing Will could be found (p. 363).

Some of the women reported encounters with haunting apparitions in places that they had just moved into. Some knew beforehand that the residence was rumored to be haunted, while others did not and came to the conclusion that their residence was haunted.

A few parapsychologists have attempted to follow up on Wilson and Barber’s finding in field investigations. In a case investigated by Teresa Cameron and Dr. William Roll (1983), five people working at a Virginia radio station reported seeing an apparition in the vicinity of the station’s long inner hallway from late 1980 to early 1981. Although they each saw the apparition at separate times, they all seemed to describe seeing the same one: a male figure, partially obscured in shadow, about six feet tall and 180 to 200 lbs., who was dressed in a brown or dark-colored suit. Their similar descriptions seemed to resemble that of a former sales manager who had worked at the station up until 1977, and had died several months after leaving the station. Of these five people, two were noted to have shown a rather high degree of fantasy-proneness.

In another case, the late Dr. Karlis Osis (1986) had investigated the apparitional sighting of a young businessman named Leslie, who had died in a plane crash. Following his sudden death, a distant relative of Leslie had sent out a mental appeal to his discarnate spirit, asking him and his infant son (who had died from drowning the year before) to appear before his deeply grieving mother as a sign of comfort and survival. Two nights later, between 1:00 and 3:00 A.M.,

Leslie's mother suddenly awoke to find someone standing at the foot of her bed. Looking up, she was startled to see Leslie standing there with his infant son:

There he was, Leslie, with the baby, and he was holding the baby's hand ... they were at the foot of the bed. They looked at each other. I was wide awake then. They were content; they were happy that they found each other, that they were together now. And they were letting me know that it is so; I got that feeling (p. 181).

Leslie's mother apparently became so lost in her experience of seeing them that the external world around her seemed to fade away. By her account:

They were solid. There was like grayness around, like a gray cloud around them. I would say there was a mist in the whole room, nothing you could touch, just the grayness all around. But they were solid, both of them. The room was dark; electric light was coming from outside through the venetian blinds .... but I didn't need light to see them. There is a lot of traffic around my area. No matter what time you got trucks and buses. Not one sound then, all was excluded at that moment, everything, as though the world had stood still. And there was nobody but us three in the world (p. 181).

The experience was quite brief, estimated at about 15 seconds total, and then the two figures seemed to recede into the distance and fade away. Despite its brevity, the experience had a profound effect on Leslie's mother, evoking feelings of both elation and sadness within her.

Several months after her experience, Dr. Osis (1986) administered some psychological tests to Leslie's mother to see if he could possibly uncover any mental or personality factors that might have been related to her experience. Among these was a test of her imaginative ability. In asking her to imagine various mental images, Dr. Osis learned that Leslie's mother was able to vividly imagine them in her mind's eye, suggesting that she had a strong imaginative capacity.

Related to the mental capacity for imagination and fantasy is the capacity for absorption, which is the tendency to focus one's attention so strongly to the point where one can mentally immerse oneself completely in their direct experience, to the exclusion of all others. In other words, it is the tendency to completely lose or absorb one's self in mental experience, while effectively blocking out the external world and the things occurring in it. A familiar example of absorption might be getting caught up in a good book or movie.

Along with fantasy-proneness, absorption might be a characteristic of some witnesses. This is clearly suggested by the account given by Leslie's mother, in which the external world seemed to fade during her experience, and this suggestion was further supported by the results of Dr. Osis' (1986) tests with her. Furthermore, in a recent study, Alejandro Parra (2007) surveyed 650 undergraduate students at a university in Argentina about apparitional experiences and possible psychological factors. Of these students, 67 had reported at least one encounter with a crisis apparition. Compared to other students who have never had such an encounter, these 67 students showed a significantly higher level of absorption, as well as fantasy-proneness.

Some studies have begun to suggest that people who encounter apparitions tend to have a certain type of personality profile. As part of her psychomanteum study (Section 5), Dianne Arcangel (1997) had asked each of her 68 participants to fill out a personality assessment questionnaire known as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) once they had emerged from the psychomanteum chamber. Her results indicated that people having a reunion experience while in the chamber showed a strong tendency to have a personality that emphasizes feelings over logical thoughts, and intuitions over sense-perception, with approximately 96% of these

“intuitive-feeling” participants having a reunion experience (see also Arcangel, 2005, pp. 108 – 109). Dr. Arthur Hastings and his associates attempted to follow up on Arcangel’s finding in their own study by giving the MBTI to each of their 27 participants before the psychomanteum session. In a similar fashion, they found that 20 of the participants had intuitive-feeling personalities, as well as a rather high level of absorption (Hastings et al., 2002).

Other studies have begun to suggest that there may be a physiological factor involved in apparitional experiences, having to do with a witness’ brain functioning. Based on previous neurological research, Canadian neuroscientist Michael Persinger (1974, Pt. II, p. 81; 1988) has proposed that certain brain structures located deep within the temporal lobe, namely the hippocampus and the amygdala, are the most electrically unstable regions of the brain. As a result, these two structures are electrically sensitive and may be prone to experiencing neuroelectric “mini”-seizures.<sup>7</sup> The hippocampus and the amygdala have important behavioral functions, in that they are the prime brain structures involved in memory and emotion, respectively. Previous neurological research suggests that when these two structures are directly stimulated with electric pulses, they can sometimes evoke brief, vivid memory-like images of people and places, as well as generate strong negative emotions such as fear and apprehension (Gloor, 1990; Gloor et al., 1982; Halgren et al., 1978; Weingarten et al., 1977).

Persinger (1988) has proposed that the unstable electrical activity of these deep temporal lobe regions may be influenced by the presence of a neurochemical known as melatonin, which is thought to have chemical properties that may be helpful in preventing the occurrence of seizures. The secretion and circulation of melatonin in the brain is usually regulated by the day-night cycle, with an increase in melatonin occurring during the night hours. However, there is also some evidence to suggest that its regulation can be altered by changes in the Earth’s magnetic field (Persinger, 2001; Reiter, 1993). Persinger (1988) proposes that at times when the geomagnetic activity is high, melatonin levels may decrease through such an alteration, effectively increasing the instability of the deep temporal regions and thereby increasing the likelihood of a neuroelectric mini-seizure. If this mini-seizure occurs in the area around the hippocampus and amygdala, it may briefly evoke a memory-like image of a person that can be subjectively experienced as an apparition. In support of his proposal, Persinger (1988, 1993) found that reports of apparitions tend to occur on days when the geomagnetic field activity is significantly high as compared to surrounding days, and at night hours when melatonin levels are at their peak (leading in principle to the greatest amount of alteration by magnetic field activity). Persinger (1988) suggests that this process may be more likely for post-mortem apparitions that appear not long after a person’s death, as the brain’s neurochemical processes may be further altered by the effects of grief and bereavement, and the deceased person may be more often in the person’s memory (leading to the increased likelihood of that person being the one seen as an apparition if the hippocampus is electrically stimulated by a mini-seizure). In addition, British researchers H. P. Wilkinson and Alan Gauld (1993, p. 306) independently compared their own apparition accounts with geomagnetic data and their finding was notably in line with the idea that apparitions tend to occur on days of higher geomagnetic activity.

Persinger’s proposal that magnetic fields may affect brain activity in the temporal region in a way that may contribute to an apparitional experience received further support from a study that he and his associates at Laurentian University had conducted with a middle-aged man who reported experiencing an apparition and haunt phenomena in his West Canadian home. When the temporal lobe region on the right side of his brain was exposed to complex magnetic pulses with a strength of 10 milliGauss, the man reported suddenly experiencing brief “rushes of fear” and odd



sensations, which were followed by his sighting of a visual image that seemed to resemble the apparition that he had seen in his home. Sharp spikes in brain wave activity over the man's temporal region were observed on an electroencephalograph (EEG) in conjunction with his experiences (Persinger, Tiller, & Koren, 2000). For additional discussion of magnetic fields and their possible relation to apparitional and haunt phenomena, we refer the reader to our first primer (Williams, Ventola, & Wilson, 2007).

## 7. Some Theories and Perspectives on Apparitions

Finally, we take a brief look at some of the theories and perspectives offered by parapsychologists on apparitional experiences. While apparitions are widely seen, they do not seem to be easily explained by one all-encompassing theory, something that may be due to variations in experience. Specifically, we look here at three main theories and perspectives: survival, place memory, and hallucination.

Survival, of course, is the idea that an apparition may represent an aspect of a person's personality or consciousness that lingers after death. The prime issue that arises with this idea is, what would constitute clear evidence for survival? Conceivably, one might think that apparent displays by an apparition that would suggest it may possess some degree of intelligence or conscious awareness, such as showing displays of purposeful action or an intent to communicate with the witness, would provide a good evidential basis for survival. However, this view remains debatable, as one must also carefully consider the purposeful actions, intentions, and desires of the living witness, which may be just as strong (if not stronger) as those of the deceased person's, confounding the issue of whether or not a conscious intent on the part of the deceased person was clearly shown.

To illustrate this, let us take the example of a post-mortem apparition of man who appears to his grieving wife a few days after his death. In addition, let us say that the man had died suddenly in an accident, without having the chance to say good-bye to his wife and to tell her that he loved her. From the deceased man's viewpoint, the desire to communicate these messages would seem to offer good motivation for him to appear before his wife as an apparition and relay them to her. If the wife then saw the man's apparition and did receive these messages through his actions, one might argue that this shows a conscious intent on his part to communicate, and may therefore suggest that his consciousness has survived death. However, we must now also consider the intentions and desires of the witness. The grieving wife, clearly distraught that she was unable to speak to her husband before his death, may have a strong inner desire to see him again, a feeling that may predispose her to seeing his apparition. She may also have a very deep wish to know that he is alright, further suggesting a strong desire on her part for him to give some kind of sign that he is indeed alright. When she finally sees the apparition of her husband and it appears to relay the message to her, it would bring her some inner comfort.

Weighing the motivation on both sides, one might argue that the inner motivation of the man's wife to see his apparition may have been just as strong as the motivation of the man to appear to his wife in order to communicate, thus making it uncertain as to whose motivation may have actually precipitated the appearance of the man's apparition. The man may have wanted to appear to his wife to send a consoling message, but at the same time, the wife may have equally wanted to see his image as a way to console herself, separate from the man's own intentions, leading her to see a hallucination of her husband. From this perspective, it not clear to tell whose desire or intention (the man's or his wife's) was the precipitating factor in the appearance of the

man's apparition before his wife. With that confound, we do not have a clear-cut basis for saying that this example illustrates that the man's consciousness has survived death. (Mind you, it *does not* completely rule out the latter possibility, but at the same time, it cannot be taken as strong supportive evidence for it.) Thus, the case for survival is not often an easy one to make.

When it comes to cases of purposeful intention on the part of an apparition, there are generally two sides to the evidential coin within parapsychology. On one side, we have the confounded cases. In surveying her vast collection of reported cases of psychic experience, Dr. Louisa Rhine (1960) found 258 cases that seemed to involve communication attempts with the living by deceased persons. In 181 of these cases, the motivation seemed about equal for the deceased person and the living witness. The motivation by the deceased person seemed to be stronger in 43 cases, and in 30 other cases, it seemed much stronger. In referring to these much stronger cases, Dr. Rhine stated:

Although there seemed to be instances in which the action could much more reasonably be ascribed to the [deceased person] than the [witness], at the same time the [witnesses] in each case would have had some degree of interest in the news, even if ... it would only have been the interest of an acquaintance in the death of a neighbor. On this account, although the cases of this group gave a high probability of influence from the deceased, they do not entirely rule out the alternative of production by the [witness] (p. 19).

In other words, we are still faced in these cases with the confound we illustrated above; while the deceased person's motivations seems quite strong, we also cannot neglect consideration of the witness' motivations.

We also have the case by Dr. Karlis Osis (1986) that we described earlier (Section 6) where Leslie's apparition had appeared before his grieving mother a few days after his death. We might recall that one of Leslie's relatives had made a plea to him to appear to his mother as a way to comfort her. If we assume that Leslie did so in response to the relative's plea, as well as to comfort his mother, then it might seem that Leslie showed some degree of intelligent motivation to appear, possibly suggesting survival on his part. However, we must also recognize that his mother was deeply in grief (having recently lost both her son Leslie and her infant grandson), and thus she may have had a strong motivation to see her son and grandson again, perhaps leading her to have a vivid bereavement hallucination of them. Again, we are faced with a similar confound as our above illustrative example.

Yet, on the flip side of the coin, there may still be a small number of cases where the deceased person's motivations seem strong, while those of the living witness seem weak or even nonexistent. As an example of such a case, the late Dr. Ian Stevenson (1982) referred to a case initially described by psychical researchers Edmund Gurney and Frederic Myers (1888-89, pp. 422 – 426). In this case, a woman who just moved into a rented room in a house suddenly saw the apparition of a man who had died three years earlier, and whose widow had died in the house the day after the woman had moved in. The woman had never known the man or his widow, and thus she apparently had no conscious intent or reason to see the man's apparition. However, if we assume that the man had appeared in the house in order to help guide his dying widow to the afterlife (i.e., we assume it was a kind of "take-away" post-mortem apparition), then there would seem to be an intelligent or conscious intention on the part of the man to appear as an apparition in the house, and this might point in the direction of survival. We also have the other case by Dr. Stevenson (1995) that we looked at in Section 2, where the doctor saw the apparition of his father-in-law, which apparently spoke and thus seemed to exhibit an intent to communicate.

We might also look at this issue of survival in relation to haunting cases. Traditionally, the phenomena reported to occur in an allegedly haunted house, such as voices, footsteps, and occasional object movements, are attributed to an “intelligent” ghost that is presumed to reside in the house. If this traditional view has any merit to it, then one might expect to see phenomena that seem to reflect an intelligent or purposeful intent (such as voices, communication through raps, and wall writing) occur more often in haunting cases with apparitions than in haunting cases without them. To test this, Drs. Carlos Alvarado and Nancy Zingrone (1995) compared the haunting phenomena occurring in 89 cases that had apparitions with 83 cases that did not have apparitions. While overall the apparition cases generally had more reported haunt phenomena than the non-apparition cases, they did not significantly differ in terms of seemingly intelligent or purposeful phenomena. This suggests that, while the amount of phenomena occurring in a haunted house may be somewhat dependent on whether or not an apparition has been reported in the house, the occurrence of seemingly intelligent or purposeful phenomena in the house may not be clearly indicative of the presence of an “intelligent” ghost.

In sum, the case for survival is unclear, and still seems open. If additional cases like the one referred to by Dr. Stevenson (1982) are able to surface, we might be faced with more evidence with which to better weigh the issue of whether or not apparitions represent some form of survival after death.

Well-defined haunting apparitions, like those seen in the Gordy case (Section 2), seem to suggest a lingering “trace” or “memory” of a person in the area where he or she once lived or worked. In fact, the origins of the idea that a place might somehow retain a “memory” relating to people or events from the past can itself be traced back to the early days of psychical research (Roll, 1981). Among the four theories she offered to possibly account for the cases of haunting apparitions documented by the Society for Psychical Research, Eleanor Sidgwick (1885) had mentioned one theory

... which I can hardly expect to appear plausible, and which, therefore, I only introduce because I think that it corresponds best to a certain part of the evidence .... It is that there is *something in the actual building itself* – some subtle physical influence – which produces in the brain that effect which, in its turn, becomes the cause of [an apparition] (p. 148, emphasis added).

Similarly, Edmund Gurney (in Gurney & Myers, 1888-89) wrote that some apparitions repeatedly seen over time in a certain location suggested to him

... not so much anything associated with the popular idea of “haunting,” or any continuing local interest on the part of the deceased person, as the survival of a mere image, impressed, we cannot guess how, or we cannot guess what, by that person’s physical organism, and perceptible at times to those endowed with some cognate form of sensitiveness (pp. 417 – 418).

In other words, he thought that haunting apparitions might represent an image from the past that somehow became “imprinted” into the surroundings of the location, and that might later be perceived by psychics and mediums.

The Italian psychical researcher Ernesto Bozzano (1920) offered a similar approach to the haunting apparition. Referring to Bozzano’s approach, the Oxford philosopher H. H. Price (1939) wrote:

Now it has often been suggested that such apparitions are due to some sort of localised trace or vestige or impress left in the matter of the room. These traces would be the quite automatic result

of the emotions or other experiences of some person who formerly inhabited the room, much as finger-prints result automatically from our handling of a wine-glass or a poker. Thus on this view the apparition is not a *revenant*, as popular superstition supposes – not a deceased personality revisiting the scenes of its former experiences nor yet an “earth-bound” spirit lingering on in them – but is something more like a photograph or a cinematograph picture. (The physical trace would correspond to the photographic negative; and it would be as it were “developed” when anyone with a suitable mind and nervous system [e.g., a psychic] enters the room.) This is what Signor Bozzano calls “the Psychometrical Theory” of Haunting. For in psychometry [i.e., the process of obtaining psychic information about a person by handling a personal object belonging to them] too we seem to find that a material object retains traces of the past experiences of a person who was formerly in physical contact with it (p. 324, his emphasis).

From this, Professor Price (1939, 1940) developed and proposed a concept that he called “place memory” to account for haunting apparitions. Referring to this concept, he wrote:

Instead of stretching our ordinary notions of sense-perception, we could stretch our ordinary notions of *memory*. We could say that memory is not just a property of living organisms, as we ordinarily think; but that it, or something essentially like it, is a property of every point in physical space (Price, 1940, p. 384, his emphasis).

In other words, according to Price’s concept, memory extends to places in such a way that one might be able to “remember” the past memories that are a part of a certain location. At first, this concept might seem a bit counter-intuitive, but to better grasp it, we might consider another form of place memory with which we are probably all familiar: When we re-visit a place that we once frequented in the past and have not visited in a long time (such a favorite hang-out from high school), we may immediately begin to reminisce about the good times we had there in the past. Here, you are remembering *your* personal memories of the place. In Price’s concept, the limits of memory extend a bit farther, to the point that when we enter a place, we might be able to (psychically) “remember” the memories of *other people* from the past. When manifested psychically, these experienced memories of others might take the form of haunting apparitions. An apparition of a deceased person that is seen in the place where or she lived or worked, and that matches that person’s appearance, would represent an externalized place memory, according to Price.<sup>8</sup>

Other psychical researchers, such as Tony Cornell (2002), have similarly made reference to the “stone tape theory” of hauntings. As Cornell wrote:

The reader may recall that this theory was put forward some time ago as the cause of recurrent visual and auditory paranormal phenomena in old buildings. It suggests that there is a mechanism whereby emotions of the living become absorbed and retained by the fabric of a building. Thus, so the theory goes, these recordings ... lie in wait for whatever it is that causes them to be replayed for an individual who is sensitive to their continued presence (p. 391).

Cornell goes on to point out that the difficulty with this theory is in working out the precise mechanism by which these impressions of the past are retained. That admittedly is where researchers now have to focus their efforts in order to determine the value of place memory as a theory for haunting apparitions.

Physician and parapsychologist Pamela Heath (2004) has suggested that place memory may be initially formed by living people through a psychokinetic (PK) process, where the minds of living people experiencing emotional events may interact with the matter in the surrounding environment of a certain location. In line with this idea, a number of PK studies by

parapsychologists have found evidence to suggest a possible influence of mind upon matter (Bösch et al., 2006; Radin, 2006, Ch. 9). In addition, Dr. Heath's suggestion may receive some preliminary support from laboratory studies of applied PK efforts by psychics, in which the PK effect seem to "linger" around for a short time before dissipating, or in which the effect seems to extend to the surrounding environment (Williams & Roll, 2006). Additional research on this topic may provide us with better insight into the theoretical plausibility of place memory.

Lastly, we consider apparitions as hallucinations. Typically, the term *hallucination* is seen as having a negative connotation, implying a pathologically induced experience. However, there is a more neutral meaning to the term, referring to an experience that seems just like an ordinary sensory experience, but which did not directly result from signals received from our body's sense organs. In this sense of the word, apparitions may represent sensory-like hallucinations that may be a product of the witness' own neurological and/or psychological making. Neurologically, some apparitions may possibly arise from magnetic field stimulation of the brain's temporal lobe (Section 6), producing hallucinatory sensations that, without any clear sensory source, may be attributed to a ghost. Psychologically, some apparitions may arise through certain mental states that may potentially alter one's own perceptions. These states can include suggestion (e.g., merely suggesting that a location may be haunted could cause one to be more attentive to one's surroundings), and perhaps even a mild altered state of consciousness produced in a pre-sleep state or through magnetic stimulation.

This is only a small sample of the many theories and perspectives on apparitions that have been offered over the years, and it seems, depending on the case, each is potentially applicable. Future research may perhaps tell us more about which, if any, could be more applicable than the others.

## 8. Conclusion

While our effort was not meant to be a complete and thorough overview, we have tried to cover a lot of ground throughout this primer about what parapsychologists and psychical researchers have learned about ghosts and apparitions since the 19th century. We hope that it is clear from our effort that, contrary to some claims, there has indeed been a great deal of research – past and present, beginning and ongoing – regarding a number of aspects of the apparitional experience.

So what could paranormal enthusiasts possibly take away from all this may be useful in their own field investigations? On the basis of our overview, we offer a few tips:

- 1.) Despite the efforts so far by parapsychologists and psychical researchers, there is still much to be learned about ghosts and apparitions. Paranormal enthusiasts can be quite helpful in this regard, and can potentially contribute to the efforts. We recommend that, in documenting reported cases of apparitions, paranormal enthusiasts be as thorough as possible, noting specific details such as the type of apparition, the characteristics it seems to display (according to the witnesses), the conditions at the time it was seen (e.g., place, time, activities of the witnesses), any possible patterns related to its appearance (e.g., does it only appear at certain times of day, or in a certain area?), etc. We further recommend that these details be thoroughly recorded in a timely manner; keeping a detailed log book is always a valued effort, and documentation through audio or video recording can be quite helpful so that details are not lost to memory and can be double-checked later on for clarification and follow-up.

2.) In considering possible ways to account for apparitional experiences, we recommend that paranormal enthusiasts pay attention to the personality and psychological state of witnesses, being alert for characteristics related to those discussed in Section 6. In relation to this, we further recommend that paranormal enthusiasts carefully consider the psychological state of the witness, being respectful of his or her needs and wishes. Since apparitional experiences often tend to be spontaneous in occurrence and seem out of the ordinary, they may be disorienting or even frightening to some witnesses. In the case of crisis or post-mortem apparitions that occur soon after death, the witness may be in a state of grief or depression. In such cases, it is suggested that the investigators either have a mental health professional accompany them during the investigation of the case, or be able to refer the witness to the appropriate professional should it seem necessary.

With still so much to be learned, we leave this primer open-ended, with the hope that efforts from both parapsychologists and dedicated paranormal enthusiasts may continue to open new doors to better answers, and thus shed more light on the nature of ghosts and apparitions.

## Notes

1.) For some readers unfamiliar with the history of parapsychology, the distinction between “psychical research” and “parapsychology” may be a bit unclear. Parapsychology actually owes its roots to psychical research, which formally began in 1882 when a group of scholars associated with Cambridge University in England had formed the Society for Psychical Research, which was devoted to the serious study of various psychic phenomena, including telepathy, clairvoyance, psychometry, mediumship, and hauntings. Parapsychology arrived on the scene in the 1930s when Dr. J. B. Rhine and his colleagues had formed the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory in order to study psychic phenomena via controlled experimental work. A few recent books offering some accessible overviews of the history of parapsychology and psychical research for the interested reader are those by Dr. John Beloff (1993), Deborah Blum (2006), and Stacy Horn (2009). In addition, a useful list of additional print and Internet sources has recently been compiled by Dr. Carlos Alvarado (2009).

2.) In the early 1990s, the popular television show *Unsolved Mysteries* had aired a segment that profiled this case and Roll’s investigation of it. A two-part streaming video clip of this segment can be found on the popular Internet video website YouTube – Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRmMd8j14rE>, Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2y1gIdmMjY&feature=related>.

3.) The “Morton Ghost” case, documented by 19-year-old medical student Rosina Despard, is a classic in psychical research in that offers another good example of a haunting apparition. We previously alluded to this case in our second primer (Williams, Ventola, & Wilson, 2008), and refer the reader to that primer for a brief and convenient summary.

4.) Aside from the data of Persinger (1974) and Haraldsson (1988-1989), the results shown in Table 1 were calculated from data presented in Appendix Table 2 of Osiris and Haraldsson (1977, p. 218), and the Appendix of Arcangel (2005, p. 284, 291). Cases in which the apparition was of a spiritual, historic, or unidentifiable figure are excluded.

5.) For additional discussion of cold sensations in relation to apparitions and haunt phenomena, see our second primer.

6.) In the late 1980s, *Unsolved Mysteries* had aired a segment on the alleged haunting of the *Queen Mary* and the investigation of it by Roll and British psychical researcher Tony Cornell. A two-part streaming video clip of this segment can be found on YouTube – Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3jNQ3-bwov8&feature=PlayList&p=2D339D598D5D8B14&index=14>, Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDEeVkjBsrY&feature=PlayList&p=2D339D598D5D8B14&index=15>. A sample of Roll’s recording of the unusual sounds in the bow area can be heard in Part 2.

7.) It should be made clear here that these “mini”-seizures are not like the kind of seizures that tend to come to mind when people think about epileptic seizures. Those type of seizures, involving body convulsions, repetitive movements, and the like, are associated with *grand mal* epilepsy, and only occur when electrical discharges in the brain reach the areas associated with muscle and body movement. We are not referring to that particular kind of seizure; rather, we are referring to a kind known as *complex partial seizure* (CPS), which involves small electrical

discharges that can naturally occur in the brain due to slight structural and neurochemical changes, as well as other factors. There is some evidence to suggest that CPS may occur from time-to-time even in the brains of healthy people (Persinger & Makerec, 1987; Roberts et al., 1990), and that they are generally unconscious of it when it does occur. Sometimes CPS discharges might be capable of briefly altering perceptions in a way that may contribute to apparitional experiences, as we note in text.

8.) We should add that H. H. Price should not be confused with Harry Price, the famed British ghost hunter from the 1930s; they are *two different people*.

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