

Over a Century of Research on After-Death Communication

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Abstract: Unexpected and unsought contact with the dead has been sensed since time immemorial around the world. Serious research on this phenomenon started over a century ago. Ambitious studies done in Britain and France collected thousands of accounts of after-death communication, many of them evidential. Subsequent studies done here and abroad have documented that it is commonplace for healthy, normal people to have such experiences. This paper outlines the work of numerous researchers in this field.

Introduction

In virtually every culture, people tell stories about surviving spirits, benevolent or hostile. Some years ago, in a cross-cultural study of grief and mourning, a team at the University of Minnesota evaluated the "ghost beliefs" of 66 societies including our own. (Rosenblatt, Walsh and Jackson 1976, 51) Only one, the Masai—about which only limited data were available—didn't believe in the existence of spirits as manifestations of specific dead persons. Almost every faith tradition takes a position on what becomes of humans after death, and how the living should relate to their disembodied essences. Mediums arise in virtually every society, no matter how primitive or isolated. But in our Western tradition, serious, scholarly research on spontaneous communications from the dead, received by the living without the help of a medium, probably dates back to the groundbreaking work of the Society for Psychical Research in Britain in the late 19th century. In this paper I will try to touch on the salient contributors to knowledge in this field.

Nineteenth Century Research

In 1850, Catherine Crowe, a Scotswoman who had lived in Germany and had been impressed by publications there on the paranormal, pointed the way for those who would come after. She was a novelist who specialized in books for children but in her 473-page volume, *The Night-Side of Nature, or Ghosts and Ghost Seers*, (Crowe 1850) she laid aside fiction to collect what she presented as accurate reports gathered "from friends, from newspaper accounts, other books, letters, and diary excerpts." (Blum 2006, 15) Her chapter headings referred to "wraiths," doppelgangers, troubled spirits, haunted houses, spectral lights, apparitions, poltergeists and possession. In her discussion of wraiths—her catchall term for many kinds of spirit manifestations—she wrestled with the basic elements of what we have come to call the mind-body problem, touching on biblical references to souls and spirits, moving on to cite a 19th century Parisian magazine article about a child who saw the soul of a woman depart from her body, then offering stories of what we would now call out-of-body experiences and death coincidences. "Science," she lamented in her preface, "has put aside [phenomena of this sort] as beneath her notice, because new facts that do not fit into old theories are troublesome.... If I could only induce a few capable persons, instead of laughing at these things, to look at them, my object would be attained." When in the 1880s, a hardy band of outstanding English intellectuals came together to establish the Society for Psychical Research, they made heroic efforts to do just that.

The results of their early research come down to us primarily in two massive works, *Phantasms of the Living*, (Gurney, Myers and Podmore 1886) first published in two volumes in 1886, and the Report on the Census of Hallucinations, whose almost 400 pages were included in the Society's *Proceedings* for 1894. (Sidgwick, Johnson, Myers, Podmore and Sidgwick 1894) For *Phantasms of the Living*, over 5700 people were asked the question, "Since January 1, 1874, [10-12 years before the question was posed] have you—when in good health, free from anxiety, and completely awake—had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a human being or of hearing a voice or sound which suggested a human presence, when no one was there? Yes or no?" A slightly smaller number were asked, "Since January 1st, 1874, have you ever had a dream of the death of some person known to you, which dream you marked as an exceptionally vivid one...?" (p. 210-211) If the answer was yes, respondents were invited to tell their stories.

When this study began, one of its primary goals was to find evidence regarding telepathy, but a remarkable percentage of the stories soon turned out to relate to death. Edmund Gurney, its author, writing about what he called "true dreams," reported that "by very far the largest class is the class where the truth is death." Out of 149 dreams collected which represented or coincided with a real event, over half (79) represented or suggested death. In a high proportion of cases, "the coincident dream was marked as exceptional in character—at the time, and before the real event was known—by being immediately narrated as such to someone else ... or by being noted in writing." (p. 214) SPR volunteers went to great lengths to verify their informants' stories by soliciting letters from other parties in whom these informants had confided, reading diary entries, checking death notices in newspapers, and the like.

Reading *Phantasms of the Living* and its companion work, *The Census of Hallucinations*, you are transported to a Victorian world of large families that live in fine houses staffed with maids, cooks and sometimes footmen. Starring in these period dramas are members of Britain's privileged classes. Honorific titles abound: Captain, Major, Doctor, Reverend, Lady and the occasional foreign prince. They all seem to write—and save—lots of letters, often to far-flung parts of the British Empire. Many find time to keep diaries or memo books. Yet their lives are often touched by sorrow. Many of their loved ones die young: as children, young mothers or bold young men. They are thrown from horses while riding to hounds; they die of consumption or in sailing accidents or in military attacks while posted to the Sudan. For agonizing weeks or months, kinfolk or friends wait for letters from India to bring them either good news or confirmation of some cause for grief first hinted at by a paranormal event.

In *Phantasms*, although there are numerous crisis apparitions, many occurring at a time of death at a distance, there are few stories of after-death communication more than a few weeks after death. The same is true for the *Census of Hallucinations*, for which 17,000 people were asked: "Have you ever, when believing yourself to be completely awake, had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression, so far as you could discover, was not due to any external cause?" (p. 33) Unlike *Phantasms*, the *Census* disregarded reports of vivid dreams. It acknowledged "sense of presence" experiences but didn't tabulate them. Like its predecessor, this huge research study reported a remarkable number of death coincidences—far beyond chance—but was short on stories of after-death communication some time after the death of the apparent communicator from beyond the grave. A few stand out. A Brazilian man and his wife-to-be both see his fiancée's mother, dead 7 years, visible only down to her waist. His fiancée collapses in a faint. (p.

309-310) Miss G. visits a cemetery to check whether the graves of two children of Mrs. V., her former lady's companion—herself dead nearly three years—have been well maintained. When she comes home, she sees Mrs. V., dressed in a familiar outfit, standing against a wall of her dining room and hears, "Thank you for going to see my babies." (p. 88-89)

Early Twentieth Century Studies

These strenuous undertakings by the Society for Psychical Research soon inspired a Frenchman to launch a comparable research project of his own. Camille Flammarion, a man of enormous energy, curiosity and invention, joined the staff of the Paris Observatory as an apprentice astronomer in 1858, while still in his teens. A decade later he started making balloon ascents to study the upper atmosphere. Meanwhile, back in the observatory, he made significant observations of single and double stars as well as of the moon and Mars. A founding member of the French Astronomical Society, he established a new observatory at Juvisy-sur-Orge and served as its director until his death in 1925.

In his younger years he was drawn into the circle of the Spiritist, Allen Kardec, but as he grew older he drew a clear distinction between what he sensed was true about psi and what was yet to be scientifically proven. In 1899, Flammarion initiated an inquiry of his own that would, in effect, replicate the SPR's research into contact with the dead and the dying by paranormal means. He arranged for three journals to publish a request for personal accounts to be sent to him of "cases of apparitions and manifestations on the part of the dying and the dead, and of well-defined presentiments...." (Flammarion 2001, 65-69) Unlike the SPR, he welcomed accounts of phenomena involving dreams and other sources of psi communication aside from sight, hearing and touch. The breadth of his inquiry may have been inspired by the wide range of stories he'd already collected informally from friends and acquaintances. In response to the journal notices, Flammarion received 1824 positive responses, selected 786 which he deemed to be especially informative, detailed and reliable, and grouped together stories of similar phenomena independently reported by people in varied circumstances. These included telepathic messages and doppelganger events as well as manifestations from the dying and the dead. He published these in his first major work on the paranormal, published in English in 1901 as *The Unknown*.

In the years that followed, Flammarion continued to receive letters from people recounting their paranormal experiences and turning to him for reassurance that the spirit survived after death. He drew on stories he'd received from thousands of correspondents to create his crowning three-volume work, *Death and Its Mystery*. (Flammarion 1922-1923) The first volume focused on premonitions and other kinds of clairvoyance; the second, subtitled *At the Moment of Death*, dealt not only with what the SPR labeled death coincidences—manifestations of someone dying at a distance perceived within 12 hours before or after death—but also with manifestations that had appeared as much as several days earlier; the third of the trilogy, *After Death*, covered manifestations experienced anywhere from a few minutes to 30 years after the death of the apparent communicator. In closing, Flammarion, a man not given to false modesty, proclaimed, "The object of this work has been attained. The evidence embodied in it is based on accounts which I have been amassing for more than half a century.... [They] prove that there is no death.... An intelligent force rules all. The soul cannot be destroyed.... These conclusions are in conformity with ... the esoteric traditions common to India, to Egypt, to Persia, to Greece, to the Hebrews, to the Essenes, to Cabalism, and to the alchemists of

the middle ages.... Present scientific methods have brought practical confirmation and the beginning of an explanation." (Flammarion 1923, 346)

Here we have probably the high water mark for confident assertion that psi phenomena prove both the existence and the survival of the soul—or "the spirit" or "consciousness" or whatever those of us more given to tentative expression may choose to call it. Researchers in the years that followed tended to back off from Flammarion's bold conclusions. Nonetheless, these early studies by Flammarion and the SPR provide a baseline for all that has come since. In this talk I'll try to touch on some of the most important ADC research that has been reported since Flammarion declared the whole question of survival settled.

The Nineteen Twenties through the Nineteen Sixties

Back at the Society for Psychical Research, spontaneous experiences of apparent contact with the dead have never ceased to be a matter of interest, and accounts of them have continued to appear in its publications. In 1923, dozens of such stories, along with stories of telepathy not related to death, were published in the SPR's *Proceedings*. In 1962 they were reprinted and, for the first time, issued as a book under the lengthy title, *Phantasms of the Living: Cases of Telepathy Printed in the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research during Thirty-Five Years*. Bound together with this work was an abridged, but still bulky version of Edmund Gurney's original 2-volume study, *Phantasms of the Living*. (Sidgwick 1962) A brilliant woman, Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick, had both prepared the abridgment of the Gurney magnum opus, first published as a book in 1918, and had brought together the later accounts for publication in the SPR's *Proceedings*, along with her comments and analysis. Mrs. Sidgwick, informally known as Nora, had taken primary responsibility for writing the text of the Census of Hallucinations, though her name came last on its list of authors, which was headed by her husband, Professor Henry Sidgwick. Mrs. Sidgwick, also the SPR's best statistician, later became principal of the first women's college established at Cambridge. (Blum 2006, 177)

In the mid-1930s, J. B. Rhine started making parapsychology respectable by focusing on extrasensory perception and studying it under controlled conditions. I mention him primarily because of his wife, Dr. Louisa Rhine, who for many years was his colleague at the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory. Publicly, the Rhines disavowed any interest in issues of survival or — Heaven forbid! — contact with the dead. On the side, rumor has it, they dabbled in séances with at least one medium. In 1948, they started collecting accounts of spontaneous events — things that "just happened" — which seemed to involve the paranormal. Ordinary people who had heard of the lab sent them letters describing unusual experiences they'd had. During the early Sixties, Louisa reported on the 178 cases in the Duke collection which involved spontaneous psychokinesis. (Rhine, L.E. 1963) Many of these were classic examples of death coincidences. Often they involved clocks that stopped or pictures that fell at the time a loved one died at a distance. And toward the end of her book, *Hidden Channels of the Mind*, (Rhine, L.E. 1961) she ventured to describe what she called "puzzling physical effects" from the dying and the dead. She recounts the extraordinary story of a young American tail gunner during World War II who was flying back from a bombing mission. He and all the rest of the crew aside from the pilots were asleep. In his sleep, this young airman saw his long dead mother standing on a wingtip; she was calling his name and alerting him to danger. He woke, startled, to find a German fighter plane flying directly

above his bomber, not visible to the men who were flying the plane. Thanks to the gunner's warning from his mother, the crew managed to elude the German's attack.

Another important mid-Twentieth Century investigator whose work has bearing on ADCs is Karlis Osis. In 1961, the Parapsychology Foundation published his monograph, *Deathbed Observations by Physicians and Nurses*. His work is almost unique in that its focus is on dying people who perceived what seemed to be the spirits of relatives and friends who already were dead. What is more, his informants—understandably—were not the *targets* of communication, in this case, the dying, but doctors and nurses who had observed them in their final moments. In 1959, Osis's team mailed a questionnaire to a stratified random sample of 5,000 physicians and 5,000 nurses practicing in the United States; 640 questionnaires were returned, reporting a total of over 35,000 observations of dying patients. Of these patients, 1,318 saw apparitions and 884 reported visions. Follow-up research was done on 190 cases of particular interest and the data were analyzed statistically from many points of view. In time Dr. Osis would come to call this ambitious effort "the pilot study." During 1961-64, he conducted a further American study in five Eastern states. Then he took on a younger colleague, Erlendur Haraldsson, who already had traveled extensively in western Asia and India; together they conducted a third survey, this time in India. In summarizing their scrupulously analyzed findings about deathbed experiences in their 1977 book, *At the Hour of Death*, Osis and Haraldsson observed that although "the finer details of otherworldly imagery seem to vary with the patient's background [,] such major features as bright, saturated colors, peace, harmony, and extraordinary beauty seem ... to prevail regardless of whether the patient is a Christian, Hindu, Jew, or Muslim." (Osis and Haraldsson 1977, 39)

Valuable but less well known than the Osis-Haraldsson deathbed studies is a slim volume called *Apparitions and Precognition: A Study from the Point of View of C.G. Jung's Analytical Psychology*, (Jaffé 1963) which apparently was first published in German in the late Fifties. It's based on letters that were written to a Swiss magazine in response to a request from its editor. (Shades of Camille Flammarion's first requests in France half a century earlier!) In 1954-1955, the *Schweizerischer Beobachter* ran a series of articles on prophetic dreams, coincidences, premonitions, apparitions and the like. The editor invited readers to report similar experiences of their own. To his amazement, the magazine was deluged with over 1200 letters, containing about 1500 accounts. The editor finessed his way out of the avalanche by turning it over to the distinguished Swiss psychologist, Carl Jung. Jung, in turn, pleading advanced age and other preoccupations, passed the letters on to Aniela Jaffé, a Jungian scholar with an interest in the field.

Again and again, the stories recounted here recall stories told earlier in the monumental works of the SPR and Flammarion. Jaffé herself remarks on this, while drawing on folk motifs and Jung's own teachings regarding archetypes to find underlying meanings in sets of parallel stories. To her credit, she chooses to discard a small number of the accounts submitted as less than authentic. "After reading more than a thousand letters," she writes, "and comparing them with verified reports from other sources, a criterion forced itself upon my mind: fictions and fabrications are never typical, nor are they simple. On the contrary, most of them are atypical, complicated and exaggerated." Good Jungian that she is, she goes on to say that "the lack of archetypal features seems to be a criterion of the improbability of the 'experience.'" (Jaffé 1963, 181-183) Her comments underline the universality of after-death communication, described no matter the time or place, in very similar ways.

The Nineteen Seventies through the Early Nineties

In 1971, a five page article (Rees 1971) appeared in the *British Medical Journal* which broke new ground in the study of after-death communication. Perhaps its author, W. Dewi Rees, had himself been inspired by an article on "Mourning in Japan" (Yamamoto, Okonogi, Iwasaki and Yoshimura 1969) that had appeared two years earlier in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*. This earlier article, written by a Japanese-American psychiatrist, reported on the experiences of 30 Tokyo widows whose husbands had recently died in car accidents; an impressive 90% of them had sensed the presence of their late partners afterwards. However, as Dr. Yamamoto pointed out, Japan's two religions, Buddhism and Shinto, both assume the presence of the deceased, at least some of the time. The strong implication of this study was that, when bereaved people, especially widows, were "given permission" to admit they had sensed contact with the dead, they were very likely to do so.

Rees was a general practitioner working in Wales. He set out to interview virtually all the widows and widowers in his district—all those healthy enough to be interviewed—and found that half the widowers and 46% of the widows had sensed some kind of after-death communication from their departed mate. But he didn't stop there, he asked lots more questions and reported their answers in a dozen statistical tables and charts. Contact experiences, he found, were usually perceived as helpful and pleasant. Those who had them were *not* particularly depressed or socially isolated. Instead, they were more likely to have had longer marriages, happier marriages, and marriages with children. Furthermore, though ADCs were most likely to occur within the first year after a partner's passing, sometimes they recurred for years, even decades, and even after the widowed spouse remarried.

Rees's work seems to have inspired physicians and social scientists scattered around the Western world to follow his lead. In the years that followed, articles appeared reporting similar studies in the United States in California (Kalish and Reynolds 1973) Arizona (Balk 1983) North Carolina (Olson, Suddeth, Peterson and Egelhoff 1985) and at an unnamed "Midwestern university," probably in Ohio (Meshot and Leitner 1993). While two of these related to people who had lost a life partner, the other two dealt with young people who had lost a parent or sibling. Andrew Greeley, the distinguished sociologist, novelist and Catholic priest, used data from a poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago to document that 42% of Americans at least once had felt that they "were really in touch with someone who had died," while the proportion of widows reporting contact with the dead "at least once or twice" was 64%, (Greeley 1989, 59) very nearly two-thirds. Studies done in Iceland (Haraldsson 1988) Sweden (Grimby 1993) and Norway (Lindstrom 1995) revealed comparable patterns of contact experiences among the bereaved. The SPR and Flammarion had led the way in describing the *nature* of after-death communication, but Rees and the many who followed in his footsteps moved on to document *how remarkably common* such experiences are. Indeed, Rees' brief article went still further. It documented that people who experience ADCs should not be judged out of hand to be unhealthy. It is people who have bonded deeply with a loved one who are most likely to sense contact with that spirit after death.

Which brings us, believe it or not, to the subject of Elvis Presley. Sometimes people bond emotionally to a public figure they've never known personally. I once interviewed a very psychic woman whom I'd known for years and discovered that she'd

found herself depressed and unaccountably weepy for three days before the sudden deaths of two public figures—in her case, before the assassinations of Indira Gandhi and Anwar Sadat. Elvis Presley's appeal touched millions deeply; he was beloved not just for his talents as a performer but for his spontaneous warmth and generosity to ordinary people. In 1987, Raymond Moody wrote *Elvis after Life: Unusual Psychic Experiences Surrounding the Death of a Superstar*. In it he reported that folks that Elvis had never known, had dreams or visions that predicted his death; others, on the day he died, sensed his presence before they learned of his passing. Still others told Moody about experiences they'd had years after Elvis' death in which this hero of theirs came to them to give them guidance or support. In one vivid story, Moody tells about what happened to a young woman who had dated the singer and had sometimes talked with him about death. One rainy day he'd impulsively given her a jacket of his. After Elvis died, his jacket started acting up, often falling to the floor of the closet where she'd hung it—once when she was looking straight at it. A couple months later, she saw one sleeve move up and down slowly by itself, every now and then for at least 10 minutes. Finally she had a dream that she felt explained what Elvis had been trying to tell her. "Remember how we used to talk about death?" he asked her in the dream. "We wanted to know whether we would live after we die. I've been trying to get through to you through the jacket.... I want to let you know that we do live after we die." (Moody 1987, 74-81)

The Guggenheims and What Has Come After

In 1996, a book appeared that ignited new interest in experiences of apparent contact with the dead. Its title was *Hello from Heaven!* In it, Bill and Judy Guggenheim reported on an ambitious seven year project in which interviewers collected over 3,300 accounts of such experiences from 2,000 informants from all 50 American states and 10 Canadian provinces. (Guggenheim and Guggenheim 1996, 19) Most if not all of these interviews were conducted over the phone. It was Judy Guggenheim who coined the term "after-death communication," first used in *Hello from Heaven!*, and now widely used to describe these phenomena. Though the book alludes to near-death experiences and the contributions of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, it mentions virtually none of the prior research I've been discussing here. Instead, it supplies thumbnail descriptions of 353 ADCs sorted into categories like Hearing a Voice, Feeling a Touch, More Than a Dream, and Symbolic ADCs, and it devotes one chapter to evidential ADCs, typically cases where the perceiver learned in a vivid dream where valuables left behind by a loved one could be found.

This book has special significance for me because the year after it appeared, I met Judy at a meeting of the Society for Scientific Exploration where she was a featured speaker. I myself had been widowed 14 years before and soon after my husband's death, had started sensing my late husband's presence in a long list of ways. What's more, three solid rational people that he'd known had confessed to me that since his death they, too, had sensed him. I was no mystic. I'd always thought of myself as an agnostic. Besides, by this time I was a published author and a college professor, so I started keeping a log of all the mysterious things I perceived and, eventually, started reading widely in the field. In 1996 I started drafting a book of my own on contact experiences. But when I met Judy Guggenheim and learned about *Hello from Heaven!* briefly I wondered if the Guggenheims had said it all.

Well, not exactly. The past decade has seen an upsurge of interest in the paranormal and particularly in contact with the dead. The John Edward series and the current TV program *Medium*, the movies *Ghost*, *What Dreams May Come* and *The Sixth*

Sense, have been among the best in the lot, more informative and convincing than the multitude of knockoffs that clutter the media nowadays.

Anyhow, after that SSE meeting, I took heart and soon two articles of mine on after-death communication (Wright 1998, Wright 1999) appeared in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, followed by my book *When Spirits Come Calling* (Wright 2002) I've been writing and giving talks on the subject ever since. My work in the field has had two salient features. First, I've tried to remind my readers of the historical and cross-cultural context for study of contact with the dead. Second, having had a variety of contact-with-the-dead experiences myself, I've done long, in-depth, tape recorded interviews with over a hundred people who've had ADCs of their own, interviews that explored *the perceiver's own background* as well as whatever he or she had perceived. I've never delegated the task of interviewing to anyone else and I've avoided interviewing anyone with whom I hadn't already established some kind of connection that would engender trust. Most commonly this has involved face-to-face contact. What expertise I may have acquired in this field has been supplemented by hundreds of less structured talks with ADC experiencers who've sought me out informally to confide in me. Lately, the data I've collected about the personal backgrounds of perceivers have led me to formulate theories about the kinds of family backgrounds that heighten receptivity to all kinds of paranormal messages. (Wright 2006)

No review of recent work on paranormal messages from the afterlife would be complete without enthusiastic mention of our colleague in the Academy, Dr. Louis LaGrand. Lou is an accomplished scholar and a certified grief counselor, a distinguished service professor emeritus from the State University of New York. He's been teaching and writing about counseling the bereaved for over 25 years. Since 1998, he has authored four books: *After Death Communication* (LaGrand 1998), *Messages and Miracles* (LaGrand 1999), *Gifts from the Unknown* (LaGrand 2001), and *Love Lives On* (LaGrand 2006). His work has been translated into Spanish, Russian and Chinese. Unlike some of us, Lou is not on a mission to prove the reality of survival. Instead he views ADCs as part of a mystery to be honored and made use of in a different way. He guides the bereaved to find in their extraordinary experiences reassurance that love does indeed live on. Sensing the continuing presence of their loved ones can strengthen the living to move on in a healthy, optimistic way.

Finally, it's a pleasure to note here the recent book by Dianne Arcangel, *Afterlife Encounters*. (Arcangel 2005) Given Dianne's long experience as a psychotherapist and hospital chaplain, her understanding of these phenomena and how they affect the people who perceive them is up close and personal; her scholarly background is equally impressive. This book supplies many fresh accounts of personal experiences illuminated by her knowledgeable comments. What's more, Dianne reports on a five-year international survey she conducted to study the effects of ADCs on their perceivers with respect to their levels of comfort and grief. Forms containing 22 questions were distributed at public events as well as over the Internet. More than twice as many women as men responded. Of the 596 respondents who reported having had "an apparitional encounter," 98% found them comforting. Dianne Arcangel's new book is a valuable contribution to the literature of the field. Perhaps its title—*Afterlife Encounters*—will have the most lasting impact. It's a fine new term to describe the common experience of spontaneously sensing contact with the dead.

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- A bibliography listing other works by Wright can be found at her website <www.sylviahartwright.com>
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