



THE THETA ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER

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The Revival of the Theta Association

For just over 50 years now, the Psychological Research Foundation (PRF) has been actively involved in the effort to scientifically explore the question of life after death. Much of this dedicated effort by the PRF would not have been possible if it were not for the continued support of the countless benefactors who have personally expressed an interest in the research and educational programs of the PRF over the years. To acknowledge the support of these benefactors and keep them apprised of the PRF's ongoing activities, the Theta Association was formed in 1978 as the contributing membership organization of the PRF.

The PRF is pleased to mark the revival of the Theta Association with this inaugural issue of the Theta Association Newsletter, which will be made available on a quarterly basis to all contributing members of the PRF as a benefit of their support. In addition to providing the latest news on the PRF's activities, the Newsletter will provide its readers with interesting and informative articles on various topics related to parapsychology, spirituality, and the issue of life after death. It is also expected to offer a section with letters to the editor, as well as brief reviews of recently published books which may be of interest to readers. In time, and with the proper resources, the PRF will seek to extend beyond the limits of the standard newsletter format by resuming publication of its scholarly journal *Theta*, primarily in electronic form.

For now, we open this inaugural issue of the Newsletter with two full-length articles. It is often said that in order to prepare for the future, we must learn about the past, and so the first article takes a look back through the 50-year existence of PRF for the benefit of readers who may be new to its active history. It also offers a brief glimpse at what lies ahead for the PRF as it now carries onward into the 21st century.

Near-death experiences often immediately come to mind when one asks what occurs as the moment of death approaches. Yet there are several other kinds of near-death phenomena which have been frequently overlooked. One of these involves encounters with apparitions at the bedside of terminally-ill patients near the time of death. Are these simply terminal hallucinations, or do they offer some hint of survival? That is the topic of the second article. We hope you enjoy this first issue!

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*The contributing membership
organization of the Psychological
Research Foundation*
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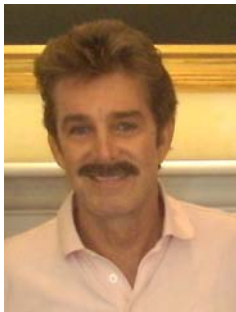
PRF NEWS BRIEFS

New Website for the PRF

In order to broaden its reach through a virtual Internet presence, the Psychical Research Foundation (PRF) announces the recent establishment of its new website. Features currently available on this new site include concise summaries of the PRF's current research projects, links to PRF-related online videos, and downloadable electronic copies of current and past PRF publications, including complete archival issues of the PRF journal *Theta*. The content of the website is being continually updated, and so we invite our readers to check back regularly for more additions.

The new site can be found on the Web at <http://www.psychicalresearchfoundation.com>.

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PRF president Jerry Conser

Jerry Conser Elected to Rhine Center Board of Directors

The PRF is pleased to announce that its current president, Jerry Conser, was recently elected to join the Board of Directors of the Rhine Research Center in a unanimous vote held during an official meeting of the Board in November of 2012.

The Rhine Center, located in Durham, North Carolina, remains to be one of the most active and longest-running research centers involved in the field of parapsychology within the United States. It has had a long historical connection with the PRF through the Center's namesake, Dr. J. B. Rhine, who had helped establish a fund for survival research at Duke University in the 1960s

that would become the basis for the PRF (see the article "The Psychical Research Foundation: Looking Back, Looking Forward" in this issue).

First asked to join the PRF Board of Directors in 1981, Conser has served as president of the PRF since 1986.

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PRF Research Director William Roll in 2005

Memorial tribute held for PRF Research Director William Roll

The Rhine Research Center was the host of a two-day memorial tribute event held to honor the life and work of the PRF's long-time research director, the late Dr. William Roll, who passed away on January 9, 2012 at the age of 85.

Held June 29 – 30, 2012, the tribute was attended by many current and former members of the Rhine and PRF staff who gathered to share their personal memories of Dr. Roll. Also in attendance were Dr. Roll's daughter Lise, his son Tertius, and their families.

A presentation entitled "The Psychical Research Foundation and its Legacy Under William G. Roll" was also given by Bryan Williams as part of the tribute. Williams was one of Roll's last students and collaborators, having worked closely with Roll since 2004, and Roll officially appointed him to be a research associate of the PRF in September of 2008. The supplemental paper to Williams' presentation is currently available to view through the [PRF website](#) (Adobe PDF file).

The Psychological Research Foundation: Looking Back, Looking Forward

BY BRYAN WILLIAMS

Throughout the ages, people have been reporting profound experiences that are suggestive of some form of life after death, such as encounters with apparitions (or “ghosts”) of the dead and apparent communication with deceased loved ones through mediums. Such experiences have long stirred great fascination among the general public, and raise interesting questions about their seemingly mysterious nature: How might we explain these kinds of experiences? Do they fit into our current knowledge about the natural world? And what might they tell us about the essence of humanity? Can some aspect of human consciousness really survive after the death of the body?

It was not until the late 19th century that empirical exploration of these questions really began in earnest, when the Society for Psychological Research was founded in 1882 by a group of scholars from Cambridge University in England.¹ Among their various activities, these early psychological researchers collected and verified numerous accounts of personal experiences related to life after death, and conducted field investigations into cases of reported hauntings and the claims being made by mediums and psychics. Although their investigations uncovered many hoaxes, there were a number of cases that the psychological researchers came across which seemed to pose genuine enigmas.² From this, clear suggestion arose that, despite being limited in quantity, there were some quality cases out there which were relevant to the issue of survival, and which deserved further study.

Over the past five decades, the Psychological Research Foundation (PRF) has sought to carry on the efforts begun by the early psychological researchers of exploring phenomena which seem to bear on the question of life after death. In this article, we’ll take a brief look back at some of the achievements in this effort that the PRF has made throughout its existence, and we’ll glance at what’s ahead for the future as the PRF continues to strive for better understanding of these phenomena.

The earliest origins of the PRF can be traced back to June of 1959, when a symposium on research related to the question of survival was held at Duke University.³ In attendance at the symposium was Charles E. Ozanne, a retired Ohio schoolteacher who received his formal education at Yale and Harvard Universities, and who held a deep personal interest in the issue of life after death. Mr. Ozanne was well versed in the work of the early psychological researchers⁴, and was aware that the effort to resolve the survival question was an ongoing one. However, he held a strong personal conviction that it was a worthy task to pursue, as he argued in an article he once wrote on the topic (see Note 4):



The first point which I should like to make is that the question [of survival] is not only an entirely legitimate one, but is of tremendous importance for the highest interests of man. What must we know in order to determine whether it is worth our while to give serious thought and strong endeavor to any inquiry? Just two things, it seems to me: first, whether the question has enough

evidence in its favor to make it a debatable proposition. We do not, for instance, waste our time discussing how many grains of sand there are in a given pile because the knowledge would not be worth having. Neither do we take the time to argue whether there is a highly developed civilization on the moon, because there is no evidence for it, and what we know about the lack of an atmosphere there makes it impossible that there could be any living creatures. But on both these counts the question of survival qualifies. There can be no doubt as to the enormous significance of the question. If it were once really proved that the human spirit survives death and that actual communication could under certain circumstances take place with those no longer in this life, the change which would be effected in human thought would be overwhelming. The impact of such a conviction on psychology and on our views as to the nature of the mind would be startling. The courage, strength, and hope that would come to men if, in all the struggle of life and amidst its frustrations, we could look forward to progress that was not checked by death, would be of enormous value.⁵

Mr. Ozanne's personal conviction soon motivated him to approach J. B. Rhine, the director of the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke, with the idea of setting up a fund specifically for research on survival, with the supporting grant coming from a small fortune that Mr. Ozanne had amassed himself through some wise investments he had made. Even though Rhine's main interest was studying the psychic abilities and experiences of *living* people, he was not opposed to research on the survival question and he helped Mr. Ozanne establish the Psychological Research Fund at Duke for this purpose in early 1960.

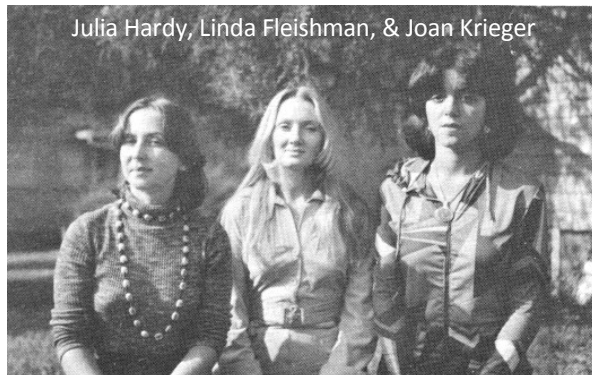
Mr. Ozanne closely followed the planning and the progress being made with the Fund, and by August of 1960, he had decided to supplement it with additional financial backing in order to allow for the incorporation of an independent organization that would be devoted primarily to survival research. And as a result, the PRF formally began operating in January of 1961. Psychologist J. Gaither Pratt, who had been Rhine's assistant at the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory, was selected to serve as the first president of the PRF, and Oxford University philosopher H. H. Price was added to the founding PRF Board as vice-president. William G. Roll, who had been Price's student in parapsychology at Oxford during the 1950s, was made the PRF's first director of research. This great achievement had a solemn moment follow in its wake, however, as it was only four months after the establishment of the PRF that Mr. Ozanne passed away at the age of 95.⁶



Despite the loss of one of its main supporters, effort was made by the PRF in the following years to advance research on the survival question: April of 1963 saw the first publication of a bulletin created by the PRF called *Theta*, which would eventually evolve into a scholarly journal devoted entirely to research on survival.⁷ In addition, a planning conference held by the PRF in the summer of 1965 led to the development of experimental designs that would be used the following year in a PRF project intended to test the abilities of certain mediums, including Irene Hughes, Herbert Beyer, Douglas Johnson, and later in the 1970s, Ann Jensen.⁸⁻¹¹

However, in the midst of this progress, the PRF was faced with yet another sudden turn of events in 1964. Having reached the age for retirement mandated by the university, J. B. Rhine was finally required to leave Duke that year, which resulted in the loss of the space on campus being utilized by the PRF. But in a valiant effort to keep the organization going, William Roll took on the responsibility of moving the PRF into two rooms of his home in Durham, North Carolina.

Fortunately, by the end of the 1960s, the PRF was able to return to Duke as a sponsored program of the university's Department of Electrical Engineering (EE), which came about through the interest shown in the PRF's work by Aleksandar Vesic, the dean of the department at the time. The close affiliation that the PRF held with the Duke EE department helped facilitate collaboration with two professors in the department, William Joines and John Artley, who made valuable contributions to the study of poltergeists.¹²⁻¹⁴ Eventually, the PRF was able to rent three small houses on the Duke campus that would serve as its laboratory, offices, and library. The staff of the PRF was quite extensive in the period leading into the 1970s. Members of the in-house research team included Robert Morris, Jerry Solfvin, Keith Harary, John Stump, Judith Klein, and Joan Krieger. Julia Hardy served as the managing editor for the PRF journal *Theta*, and Linda Fleishman was the PRF's administrator and business manager. Generous support for the PRF's research activities came from PRF board members Frank Auman and Irma Hooks.



Julia Hardy, Linda Fleishman, & Joan Krieger

Two particularly intriguing cases of apparent poltergeist phenomena were investigated by William Roll during this period. In the first case, a number of souvenir objects (such as beer mugs and ashtrays) were mysteriously falling off storage shelves and breaking in a small shipping warehouse in Miami, Florida.¹⁵ In some instances, the objects were found some distance away from the shelves on which they were initially placed, suggesting that they had taken flight to land where they did. Although at first the events were thought to be careless accidents, the warehouse employees soon began to notice their tendency to occur most often in the presence of Julio, a 19-year-old Cuban boy working at the warehouse as a shipping clerk.

To more clearly determine whether the events were anomalous in nature, Roll and PRF president J. Gaither Pratt conducted a "quasi"-experiment in which they placed select target objects on the shelves from which other objects had fallen, in order to see if these target objects would also fall and break at some later time. To maintain a certain level of control over the situation, Roll and Pratt carefully inspected the area around these shelves to be sure that no trickery devices were in place, and they kept a close eye on the activities of Julio and the other employees. At least ten target objects fell from the shelves at times when Roll or Pratt had the warehouse employees under surveillance, and seven of these occurred while they had Julio in sight. The observation that the disturbances of the souvenir objects occurred most often in proximity to Julio suggested that, rather than being due to any kind of "noisy spirit" (as the German term *poltergeist* literally implies), poltergeist phenomena were more likely to be associated with a living person. In particular, Roll and Pratt suspected that they were caused by a large-scale form of psychokinesis (or "mind over matter") that sporadically occurs on an unconscious level, for which they coined the term *recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis* (or *RSPK*, for short).

The possibility that poltergeist phenomena are due to RSPK on the part of a living person was also indicated in the second case investigated by Roll in Olive Hill, Kentucky, about a year after the Miami case.¹⁶ Similar to the Miami case, a number of small fragile objects were moving about and breaking in the home of John and Ora Callihan, and they seemed to occur most often when

Roger, the Callihans' 12-year-old grandson, was around. A close eye was kept on Roger during the investigation, and at least ten objects in the house were disturbed while he was being watched. In one particularly impressive instance, Roll was following behind Roger as the boy went into the kitchen. As he neared the sink, the boy turned around to look at Roll, and at that moment, a large kitchen table located just to the left of Roll suddenly shot up into the air. It rotated horizontally about 45 degrees in midair, and then quickly dropped down onto the backs of the four chairs that surrounded it, with all four of the table legs remaining up and off the ground. Roll had Roger in his direct sight the entire time, and no one had been in the kitchen for several hours prior to the event, suggesting that it was not likely to have been a cleverly-devised trick.

Progress was also being made in the laboratory during this period as the PRF continued its studies of mediums and psychics. Of those participating in the research at this time, the most notable included Noreen Renier, a psychic adept at psychometry (aka., token object reading) who has become well-known for her work with various law enforcement agencies¹⁷; and Sean Lalsingh Harribance, a psychic originally from the West Indies island of Trinidad. Harribance's skills in giving psychic readings to unfamiliar people were extensively tested under increasingly controlled conditions by having him complete tasks that simulated certain aspects of his readings. In one task, he was asked to guess the sex (male or female) of the people shown in a set of randomized photo-cards which were carefully concealed from view.¹⁸ In another task, Harribance was asked to hold objects associated with a person he did not know and give a reading for that person while he or she was located in a distant room.¹⁹ The results were found to be statistically significant overall, with odds greater than 50 to 1 against chance, but even more impressive were the overall results from the photo-card task, which had odds greater than a billion to one!²⁰



Another laboratory-based program carried out by the PRF during the early 1970s was aimed at exploring a phenomenon that would clearly seem to be relevant to survival: out-of-body experiences (OBEs).²¹ In particular, the program was focused toward addressing a fundamental but previously unresolved issue: Does something actually leave the body during an OBE, and is it tangible enough to be detected? To be able to effectively explore this issue from an empirical perspective, it would be necessary to locate a person who was apparently able to have an OBE at will. Fortunately, there was already a member of the PRF who claimed the ability to do this.

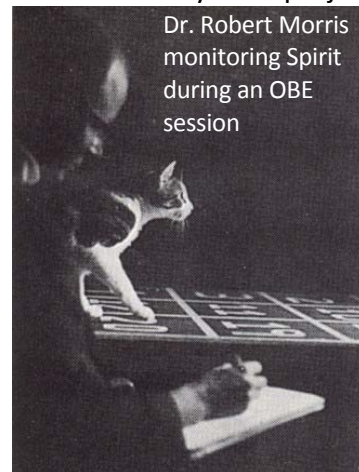
At the time, Keith Harary was more widely known by his childhood nickname "Blue," a nickname he had been given to reflect his admiration of the sky and the water around the national park he often visited as a boy.²² In addition to working with the PRF as a research assistant, Harary had his own extensive history of psychic experiences, which included OBEs. His experience of leaving his body became so commonplace for him that he was apparently able to condition himself to produce the experience at will. As he once personally recalled:

To me [the OBE] was a familiar state of mind I had practiced since childhood. I just relaxed my body as deeply as I could and imagined how it would feel to be someplace else. The more I relaxed, and the more intensely I focused, the more I felt as though I were no longer in my body but mentally present in that other place.²³

During the experimental sessions of the PRF program, Harary was asked to try and leave his body at randomly-determined times and “project” his out-of-body form toward a designated target site located in another laboratory some distance away. Various people, animals, and physical instruments were placed at this target site to see if they could possibly sense or otherwise “detect” the presence of Harary’s out-of-body form at the times he was trying to visit the site. Most of these people, animals, and instruments performed no better than chance during these OBE “detection” studies, but there was one animal which initially seemed to show some intriguing responses. These came from a nine-week-old kitten belonging to Harary, which he had named “Spirit.”

Before each experimental session, Spirit was placed into a small wooden enclosure that had an array of individually-numbered squares set across the floor. The kitten was allowed to freely roam throughout the enclosure during the session and its behavior was closely monitored by the researchers. Particular attention was paid to how often the kitten “meowed” and how many of the numbered squares it walked across during the course of the session. Meanwhile, in another laboratory, Harary continually relaxed and was asked at random times to try and “project” his out-of-body form toward the room where Spirit was located.

The sessions with Spirit produced rather striking results: Throughout the sessions, Spirit had meowed a total of 37 times. However, at the times when Harary was attempting to visit the room in his out-of-body form, Spirit became significantly quieter, not even meowing once! Moreover, the kitten became less active during these attempted “visit” periods, crossing an average of 0.21 squares in the enclosure, as compared to an average of 3.5 squares during other periods. These indications of Spirit becoming much quieter and much less active suggest that the kitten was apparently responding to something at the times that Harary was trying to project himself to the room in his out-of-body form.



The first shift in the PRF presidency came abruptly with the sudden death of J. Gaither Pratt in November of 1979. Psychiatrist Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, who became the PRF vice-president in May of 1979 following the resignation of H. H. Price, assumed the role of acting president for a short time until University of Wisconsin mathematician Thomas N. E. Greville was chosen to be the second president of the PRF.

The PRF was able to remain affiliated with the Duke University Department of Electrical Engineering up until the time of the death of Aleksandar Vesic in 1982, at which time it was relocated to an office in the Methodist Center in Chapel Hill (near the University of North Carolina), where it remained throughout most of the early 1980s. It was during this time that William Roll was called upon to investigate the poltergeist disturbances reportedly occurring in the Columbus, Ohio home of John and Joan Resch. Among the disturbances, large pieces of furniture were being displaced and various lights and electrical appliances were mysteriously malfunctioning. Although there didn’t seem to be any apparent cause for them at first, it was soon noticed that the disturbances most often occurred around Tina, the Reschs’ 14-year-old adopted daughter.

Upon initially examining the situation, Roll did not find the case to be very promising. During a lengthy vigil by the media to try and observe the disturbances, a TV news crew had

captured film footage of Tina trying to simulate a disturbance by pulling down a nearby lamp. Some of the reported occurrences during the first few days of Roll's visit also seemed like they could have been staged. But not long afterward, Roll witnessed a small number of disturbances that he could not easily dismiss as being fraudulent. Among them, an empty teacup that Roll had placed on Tina's nightstand had moved from its place while he was watching Tina mop up some water she had spilled in her room. Hearing the sound of it land, Roll turned to find the teacup lying on a pile of clothes in Tina's closet, twelve feet from where he had first placed it on the nightstand. Tina's hands had been occupied with mopping at the time of the incident, and a bed stood between her and the nightstand, so it was not possible for her to have grabbed the cup and thrown it without Roll noticing. Roll later described this and other poltergeist disturbances apparently focused around Tina in greater detail in his 2004 book *Unleashed*.²⁴

The PRF again became affiliated with academia in 1986 when its facilities were moved to West Georgia College (now known as the University of West Georgia) through the efforts of Myron ("Mike") Arons, the chair of West Georgia's psychology department at the time, and current PRF president Jerry Conser (who succeeded Greville in 1986). Through support provided by the PRF, William Roll was appointed Professor of Psychology and Psychical Research by the college, and he actively taught courses in parapsychology up until the time of his retirement in 2000.

During his time at West Georgia, Roll became particularly active in field research, conducting investigations into reported cases of hauntings through the auspices of the PRF.²⁵ Roll found that, in many of these cases, the reported haunting activity (which included apparitions, temperature changes, strange sounds, odd smells, electrical disturbances, and occasional object movements) was likely due to the presence of unusually high magnetic fields at the alleged haunt site. Such fields, which can be potentially hazardous to one's health during long-term exposure, may have altered the perceptions of the people inhabiting the allegedly haunted location by affecting their brain activity. In addition, such high fields could have induced strong physical effects in the objects present within the location, causing them to abruptly move or malfunction. This suggested that many reported hauntings were likely to have an ordinary physical basis to them, rather than being the work of spirits of the dead.



William Roll taking magnetic field readings during a haunt investigation

There were, however, a few cases of notable exception. In one such case, known as the "Gordy" case, Roll was asked by a family in Georgia to look into the haunting occurrences being experienced primarily by the family's young daughter. Shortly after moving into their new home, the girl had encountered two men in her neighborhood who befriended her, and who had never been seen by anyone else. She described both men as being solid and life-like, with each having their own unique physical appearance. Eventually, through a series of documents, the girl's mother was able to learn that the two men, who by then were both deceased, had lived in the neighborhood many years ago. In addition, solely based on her descriptions of them, the girl was able to correctly pick out the two men from random collections of portrait photographs. Try as he might, Roll was unable to find any plausible way in which the girl could have learned about the two men before her mother had verified their identities. This suggests that there may have been a

possible parapsychological component to the girl's experiences, and that the apparitions of these two men she encountered may have represented some persisting (or surviving) aspect of their personalities.²⁶ This further suggests that there may be a small proportion of haunting cases which are relevant to the issue of life after death, and thus deserve further investigation.

It is a testament of his dedication to the PRF that Roll loyally held the position of research director right up to the time of his passing in January of 2012. Following the tradition that he started, the PRF is now moving forward with several new research projects in its continual quest to explore the issue of life after death.

One of these projects involves a new kind of OBE "detection" study which is designed to explore the issue of whether or not something really does leave the body during an OBE. Conducted in collaboration with the Rhine Research Center in North Carolina and the Monroe Institute in Virginia, the objective of this particular project is to monitor for any possible changes in weight that may occur during OBEs by carefully weighing selected participants on a custom-built scale before, during, and after their attempts to leave their bodies using techniques they learned through programs offered at the Monroe Institute. Pilot sessions for this project began in September of 2012 and are currently on-going, with preliminary results to be reported sometime in the near future.

A second on-going project, which began its pilot phase in April of 2013, is aimed at developing a better understanding of what goes on inside the brains of mediums and psychics while they are attempting to apply their psychic abilities during readings. To do this, this project seeks to closely examine the brain wave activity of certain psychics and mediums using computer-based quantitative electroencephalography (or QEEG, for short). Digital analysis and imaging of the collected QEEG data may help shed light on whether there may be any brain wave patterns specifically linked to psychic functioning, and reveal any ways in which the brains of mediums and psychics may differ from those of ordinary people.

Other projects that the PRF currently has planned include a closer empirical examination of apparition-like visions experienced through a special mirror-gazing technique, and a long-term effort to continue William Roll's field investigations of reported haunting and poltergeist cases. Additional details about all of these projects may be found on the PRF's website: <http://www.psychicalresearchfoundation.com>.

Many unanswered questions still remain about what may happen in the period beyond death, and for the past 50 years, the PRF has been in continual pursuit of the answers, thanks to the dedication of William Roll and the many other people who have been a part of the PRF staff in that last half-century. With its virtual presence on the Web and a developing research program, it is hoped that the PRF's pursuit will carry on as the 21st century continues to lead science toward more data with which to address the question of survival.

References & Notes

¹Gauld, A. (1968). *The Founders of Psychological Research*. New York: Schocken Books.

²A recent historical account of the early psychical researchers' activities that is lay-reader accessible can be found in the book *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death* by Deborah Blum (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

- ³Several of the papers presented at this symposium were published the following year (1960) in the issues comprising Volume 24 of the *Journal of Parapsychology*.
- ⁴Mr. Ozanne's familiarity with the psychical research literature is evidenced by an article he once wrote that presented his personal views on the survival question, which was later reprinted in the PRF journal *Theta*. See Ozanne, C. E. (1981). A layman looks at psychical research. *Theta*, 9, 2 – 7.
- ⁵Ozanne, *ibid.*, p. 3.
- ⁶Stacy Horn, author of a book about the history of the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory entitled *Unbelievable* (New York: Ecco Books, 2009), had put up a post on her blog in July of 2009 which gives additional details about Mr. Ozanne, his connections to the Duke Lab, and the events that led to the eventual founding of the PRF. This post is still accessible (as of August 2013) on her website: <http://www.echonyc.com/~horn/unbelievable/?p=775>.
- ⁷The name *Theta*, from the first letter of the Greek word *Thanatos*, meaning "death," was adopted by the PRF for the bulletin because it seemed to aptly refer, in a concise and convenient way, to the scope of the subject matter that would be the primary focus of the bulletin (and later, the journal).
- ⁸"Planning Conference for Research with 'Mediums.'" *Theta* No. 10, Summer 1965. pp. 1 – 2; "Foundation Begins 'Mediumistic' Project." *Theta* No. 12, Winter 1966. pp. 1 – 2.
- ⁹Roll, W. G. (1966). Parapsychological studies of two mediums. *Theta* No. 15, 2 – 3; Roll, W. G. (1971). Free verbal response and Identi-Kit tests with a medium. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 65, 185 – 191.
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- ¹⁵Roll, W. G., & Pratt, J. G. (1971). The Miami disturbances. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 65, 409 – 454. See also Chapters 9 and 10 in Roll, W. G. (1972/2004). *The Poltergeist*. New York: Nelson Doubleday, Inc./Paraview Special Editions.
- ¹⁶See Chapter 11 in Roll, W. G. (1972/2004), *ibid.*
- ¹⁷The details of Noreen Renier's work with law enforcement can be found in her book *A Mind for Murder: The Real-Life Files of a Psychic Investigator* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, 2008). She gives a brief account of her participation in the PRF research in Chapter 4 of the book.
- ¹⁸Stump, J. P., Roll, W. G., & Roll, M. (1970). Some exploratory forced-choice ESP experiments with Lalsingh Harribance. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 64, 421 – 431; Roll, W. G., & Klein, J. (1972). Further forced-choice ESP experiments with Lalsingh Harribance. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 66, 103 – 112.
- ¹⁹Roll, W. G., Morris, R. L., Damgaard, J. A., Klein, J., & Roll, M. (1973). Free verbal response experiments with Lalsingh Harribance. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 67, 197 – 207.
- ²⁰A more detailed summary of the tasks performed by Harribance and their results can be found on pages 7 – 10 of the article "The Psychical Research Foundation and its Legacy Under William G. Roll: Past Findings and Future Directions," which is available on-line [at this link](#) (Adobe PDF file).
- ²¹Morris, R. L., Harary, S. B., Janis, J., Hartwell, J., & Roll, W. G. (1978). Studies of communication during out-of-body experiences. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 72, 1 – 21.
- ²²Harary, K. (2005, November/December). Mind games: My journey through the psychic wilderness. *Psychology Today*, pp. 74 – 85.

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²⁴Roll, W., & Storey, V. (2004). *Unleashed – Of Poltergeists and Murder: The Curious Story of Tina Resch*. New York: Paraview Pocket Books.

²⁵Concise summaries of several of the haunting cases investigated by Roll during this period can be found on pages 154 – 163 of Roll, W. G., & Persinger, M. A. (2001). Investigations of poltergeists and haunts: A review and interpretation. In J. Houran & R. Lange (Eds.) *Hauntings and Poltergeists: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 123 – 163). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

²⁶Additional details and further discussion of the Gordy case are available in a case study article, which is available on the PRF website [at this link](#) (Adobe PDF file).

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Deathbed Phantasms: Mere Terminal Hallucinations, or Harbingers of the Afterlife?

BY BRYAN WILLIAMS

Encounters with apparitions (or “ghosts”) of the dead can occur under a variety of contexts. Of course, the most familiar – and the most stereotyped – is within the context of a haunting, where the apparition of a deceased person is continually seen in a place that the person once inhabited in life. Some spontaneous encounters with apparitions occur within the context of a crisis situation, where a person’s apparition is seen at the time that he or she is in the midst of a crisis or a traumatic experience.¹ Other encounters may occur in the moments after a person has died.² But probably less well-known are the instances in which an apparition has appeared to a person at or near the moment of death.³ A typical example of this kind of appearance (in its most basic form) is the following account, given by a New York physician attending to a dying man at the turn of the last century:

It was about four o’clock, and the dawn for which he [the patient] had been watching was creeping in through the shutters, when, as I bent over the bed, I noticed that his face was quite calm and his eyes clear. The poor fellow looked up into my face, and, taking my hand in both of his, he said: ‘You’ve been a good friend to me, doctor. You’ve stood by me.’ Then something happened which I shall never forget to my dying day happened; something which is utterly indescribable. While he appeared perfectly rational and as sane as any man I have ever seen, the only way that I can express it is that he was transported into another world, and although I cannot satisfactorily explain the matter to myself, I am fully convinced that he had entered the Golden City – for he said in a stronger voice that he had used since I attended him: ‘There is mother! Why, mother, have you come to see me? No, no, I’m coming to see *you*. Just wait, mother, I am almost over. I can jump it. Wait, mother.’ On his face there was a look of inexpressible happiness, and the way in which he said the words impressed me as I have never been before, and I am as firmly convinced that he saw and talked with his mother as I am that I am sitting here.

In order to preserve what I believed to be his conversation with his mother, and also to have a record of the strangest happening of my life, I immediately wrote down every word he had said...His was one of the most beautiful deaths I have ever seen.⁴

⁴, p. 73, italics in original

An important thing to note in this account is that, according to the attending physician, the dying man “...appeared perfectly rational and as sane as any man I have ever seen,” which, on the surface, suggests that the man was not in a terminal delirium or a drug-induced state at the time, and was therefore not responding to a pathological hallucination.

Reports of these “deathbed visions” stretch all the way back to the early days of psychical research, but it was the pioneering efforts of psychical researchers such as Ernesto Bozzano⁴ and James Hyslop⁵ that helped draw broader attention to these experiences and encourage other researchers to begin compiling and systematically studying them. In his study, Hyslop noted that individuals who are dying have a tendency to see apparitions of deceased people rather than those of the living, which suggested to him that deathbed visions were supportive of the possibility of life after death. Physicist and psychical researcher Sir William Barrett also made an important posthumous contribution with his 1926 book *Death-Bed Visions*, in which he also recognized the tendency for dying individuals to see apparitions of the dead.⁶

Even toward the present time, it seems that encounters with deathbed apparitions have not faded away, and are still reported by a considerable number of people. In the late 1950s, researcher Karlis Osis had conducted a preliminary survey of physicians and nurses in the U.S. who had cared for 35,540 terminally ill patients. Of these patients, 1,318 of them had seen a deathbed apparition, and 884 had a related vision of the afterlife.⁷ Collaborating with Icelandic researcher Erlendur Haraldsson, Osis expanded this survey a decade later to include interviews of physicians and nurses in India and the U.S. The results of this second study indicated that, in spite of obvious cultural differences, there was a reasonable degree of consistency with Osis’ first survey, in that several fundamental characteristics of the apparitional experiences were the same – including the tendency for the dying patients to see apparitions of the dead, rather than those of the living.⁸ (Additional characteristics will be discussed below.)

More recently, in her book *Afterlife Encounters*, researcher Dianne Arcangel stated that, in her previous and extensive experience as a hospice chaplain, “I have never sat with a dying patient who was not in the accompaniment of an apparition as their time [of death] grew near.”^{9, p. 120} She further added that terminal patients seem to experience deathbed apparitions and other afterlife-related visions so commonly that “...hospice staff and volunteers consider [afterlife encounters] a signal that death is drawing nearer and increase the frequency of their visits.”^{9, p. 110}

At the very least, the consistency of these deathbed visions across the generations suggests that something of interest is going on here. While the exact content of the experiences has varied across cases, studies of case collections tend to indicate that they have some interesting characteristics, which may be best illustrated through anecdotal accounts.

As with apparitions seen in other contexts¹⁰, apparitional figures appearing at the deathbed can often look solid and life-like. In some rare cases, however, only certain parts of the figure have been seen, as in a deathbed case examined by the late researcher Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, in which a young woman witnessed an apparition of her grandmother standing before her dying grandfather’s bed. As the young woman generally recounted of the experience:

Granddaddy called me to give him a drink of water. I failed in my attempts to lift him enough to wet his lips. The disease had reduced his once tall, strong stature to [that of] a frail, weak invalid. I called

mom at work to ask for help, but she told me it would have to wait until dad [the young woman's stepfather] returned from work at noon.

Shortly thereafter I heard granddaddy calling out to his wife, Hazel. Grandmom had died nine years prior [on October 13, 1956], so I thought he must be losing his mind. I ran down the hall to make another attempt to help him. The room was filled with a warm, bright light. He spoke to grandmom, who was standing at the foot of his bed. Neither of them acknowledged my presence. She was there but a brief moment, and when granddaddy laid back down, his soul escaped with her. He died with a smile on his face.^{11, p. 360}

When Stevenson asked her for more details about the experience, the young woman recalled that the vision of her grandmother was in "...a very bright white light and that her face is there and I see her hands. I can see an image of arms but I don't see clothing. She is either in all white or the white light is so bright I can't see the clothing."^{11, p. 360}

In many deathbed visions, any sounds or utterances that seem to emanate from the apparition are usually only heard by the dying patient. But in some cases, other witnesses have heard them, as well. One example of this comes from a case in the collection of spontaneous psychic experiences sent over the years to the Rhine Research Center in North Carolina. As the woman who sent in the experience stated in her letter:

My aunt, who helped raise me, was dying of a cerebral hemorrhage. We had all been up for five days and nights with her. The candles were flickering, and she was in a coma. I went to get a cup of tea and my husband remained in the room with her, saying the rosary at her bedside.

All of a sudden, he ran down the stairs past us, appearing pale and visibly shaken. When we could finally get him to talk, he said that while he was praying, my aunt seemed to come out of the coma and started flailing her arms around in the air, holding them wide open as if she were trying to reach someone, and crying, "Mom! Oh, Mom."

My husband felt a breeze, and suddenly a little woman stood next to him, less than five feet tall with a plaid shawl over her head, wringing her hands, and my husband saw tears running down her face. Although he heard nothing from the woman, *he did hear the rustle of her dress*. She was in black. He said that he prayed hard that he could muster the strength to get out of the room. When able, he rushed out and down the stairs.

He described the experience to relatives at our house, and another aunt said, "Well, that was her mother. She has been dead since 1910." When we went back upstairs, Mom was dead with a peaceful smile on her face.^{12, pp. 266-267, emphasis added}

In some cases, the dying patients apparently saw the apparitions against background visions depicting the "other-worldly" realms of the afterlife. In their 1977 book *At the Hour of Death*, Osis and Haraldsson cite an account given by a nurse treating a 76-year-old woman who had suffered a heart attack:

[The woman'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 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.^{8, pp. 80-81}

In a summary of his earlier preliminary survey, Osis cited another case involving a 60-year-old woman suffering from intestinal cancer:

All of a sudden (the doctor reports) she opened her eyes. She called her (deceased) husband by name and said she was coming to him. She had the most peaceful, nicest smile, just as if she were going to the arms of someone she thought a great deal of. She said, "Guy, I am coming." She didn't seem to realize I was there. It was almost as if she were in another world. It was as if something beautiful had opened up to her; she was experiencing something so wonderful and beautiful.^{13, p. 1}

As intriguing as they are, it's important to note that cases of deathbed visions cannot be expected to carry a lot of value on their own as evidence for life after death from a scientific perspective because of their purely anecdotal nature as personal accounts. But this does not mean that we can't learn anything from them, however.

For instance, one thing that may be noticeable from the personal accounts presented so far is that in each one, the dying patient has witnessed an apparition of someone he or she was related to. It turns out that this pattern holds for the majority of the deathbed visions examined in the studies conducted by Osis and Haraldsson.^{7,8} In his preliminary survey, Osis found that of the deathbed apparitions seen, 90% were relatives of the dying patient, with most of them being close relatives (i.e., parents, siblings, spouses, or children). Similarly, over half (around 60%) of the deathbed visions in Osis and Haraldsson's subsequent interview study involved close relatives of the dying patient. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, this pattern is consistent with other kinds of apparitional experiences.

Table 1. Relations Between Apparitions and the People Witnessing Them (% Cases)¹⁴

<i>Study</i>	<i># Cases</i>	<i>Relatives</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Strangers</i>
Osis & Haraldsson (1977) – Deathbed Visions	418	60	7	21
Persinger (1974) – Crisis & Postmortem Apparitions	193	47	18	13
Arcangel (2005) – Crisis, Postmortem, & Haunting Apparitions	590	58	-	13
Haraldsson (2012) – Crisis, Postmortem, & Haunting Apparitions	449	51	9	24
Average Percentage		54	11	18

Comparing the apparitions seen in deathbed visions (Osis & Haraldsson's study; second row in Table 1) with those seen in three other contexts (Rows 3, 4, & 5), it can be seen that the apparitions are relatives of the person seeing them in approximately half of the cases.

In addition, several of the apparitions were reported by the dying patients to be a "take-away" figure, meaning that the apparition's apparent purpose for appearing was to greet and help lead the dying patient away to the afterlife (but not always with the patient's consent). Some of the personal accounts presented in this article certainly seem suggestive of this.

Some of the most important findings to emerge from these studies of deathbed visions concerns not the apparitions, but the patients themselves. In some of the personal accounts presented here, it has been noted that the dying patients appeared to be rational and clear-headed when they encountered the deathbed apparitions. The studies conducted by Osis and Haraldsson seem to further confirm that, according to the attending physicians and nurses, the dying patients' experiences were not likely to have been influenced by medical factors such as

medication, high fever, and symptoms of illness. Nor were there any indications that the patients' experiences were significantly affected by demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, & education) or by psychological factors (e.g., stress, desires, & expectations). In other words, these findings suggest that the dying patients in these cases came from all walks of life, and that they were not medicated, delirious, or seriously ill at the time they saw the apparition, nor were they under stress or expecting to see one when it occurred. In the eyes of Osis and Haraldsson, this seemed to lend considerable credence toward the possibility of life after death.

Another intriguing aspect of some deathbed visions that some people have considered to be supportive of the possibility of life after death is when a dying patient sees the apparition of a deceased person at a time when the patient is unaware that the person has already died.¹⁵ One detailed example of this comes from Eleanor Sidgwick in the annals of psychical research, following an account given in the late 19th century by an Irish colonel concerning his wife and a family acquaintance. His account is as follows:

Some sixteen years since Mrs. ---- [the colonel's wife] said to me: "We have some people staying here all week. Do you know anyone I could get to sing with the girls?" I suggested that my gunmaker, Mr. X., had a daughter with a fine voice, who was training as a public singer, and that if she, Mrs. ----, liked, I would write to X., and ask if he would allow her to come down and spend a week with us. On my wife's approval I wrote, and Miss X. came down for a week, and then left. As far as I know, Mrs. ---- never saw her again....Miss X. did not come out as a singer, but shortly after married Mr. Henry Webley, and none of us ever saw her again.

Six or seven years passed away, and Mrs. ----, who had been long ill, was dying, in fact she did die the following day. I was sitting at the foot of her bed talking over some business matters that she was anxious to arrange, being perfectly composed and in thorough possession of her senses; in fact, she was right, and my solicitor, who advised that the step she wanted to be taken was not necessary, was wrong. She changed the subject and said, "Do you hear those voices singing?" I replied that I did not; and she said: "I have heard them several times to-day, and I am sure that they are angels welcoming me to Heaven; but" – she added – "it is strange, there is one voice amongst them I am sure I know, and cannot remember whose voice it is." Suddenly she stopped, and said, pointing straight over my head: "Why there she is, in the corner of the room; it is Julia X.; she is coming on; she is leaning over you; she has her hands up; she is praying; do look; she is going." I turned but could see nothing. Mrs. ---- then said: "She is gone." All these things I imagined to be the phantasies of a dying person.

Two days afterwards, taking up the *Times* newspaper, I saw recorded the death of Julia, the wife of Mr. Webley. I was so astounded that a day or so after the funeral I went up to ---- ---- and asked Mr. X. if Mrs. Webley, his daughter, was dead. He said: "Yes, poor thing, she died of puerperal fever. On the day she died she began singing in the morning, and sang and sang until she died." In a subsequent communication Colonel ---- adds: "Mrs. Julia Webley died on February 2nd, at six or thereabout in the morning, 1874. Mrs. ---- died February 13th, 1874, at about four in the evening. I saw the notice of Mrs. Webley's death on February 14th. Mrs. ---- never was subject to hallucinations of any sort."^{16, p. 92}

In the section of her book describing deathbed visions like this one¹⁷, 19th century author and social commentator Frances Power Cobbe had called them "Peak in Darien" visions because to her, they seemed to offer wondrous hints about the afterlife.¹⁸ Bozzano⁴, Hyslop⁵, and Barrett⁶ also took special note of "Peak in Darien" cases in their early studies of deathbed visions. But apart from the possibility of survival after death, it's also possible that the dying patient may have become aware of the death of the person through ESP, which manifested in the form of a visual

apparition. Regardless of the modality involved, “Peak in Darien” cases seem to add an element to deathbed visions that becomes difficult to account for through conventional explanations such as mere pathological hallucination – something more complex seems to be involved here.

It may be of interest to note that deathbed visions seem to share some characteristics with another kind of experience in which people close to death sometimes see others who are known to be dead: near-death experiences (NDEs). Researcher Emily Kelly at the University of Virginia’s Division of Perceptual Studies once performed a study specifically of NDE cases in which the person who was near death reported meeting deceased individuals as part of the NDE.¹⁹ Similar to deathbed visions, Kelly found that in NDE cases of this type:

- 1.) most of the deceased individuals who were seen during the NDE tended to be relatives of the person seeing them;
- 2.) the NDE is more likely to contain one or more background aspects that are suggestive of an “other-worldly” realm (such as bright light or seeing a tunnel);
- 3.) psychological factors, such as expectation and desire, do not always influence who is seen during the NDE (e.g., during an NDE, a person doesn’t always see who he or she had hoped to see)

The central differences between deathbed visions and NDEs involving encounters with deceased people include the following:

- 1.) NDEs are often instigated by trauma and sudden health problems, whereas many terminal patients are not faced with these life-threatening situations when they have their deathbed vision.
- 2.) NDEs can include more encompassing experiential elements such as out-of-body experiences and life reviews; these are lacking in deathbed visions.
- 3.) NDEs often take place while a person is unconscious, whereas people who experience deathbed visions are awake and alert.

Although it is not clear by any means, perhaps further comparison of deathbed visions with NDEs may find that deathbed visions are a much lesser form of NDE, only lacking the richer subjective factors that NDEs tend to have, and without the traumatic onset. More in-depth study needs to be done to shed more light on deathbed visions and any relation they may (or may not) have to NDEs, and perhaps reveal more about the relevance both kinds of experiences may have on the question of life after death.

References & Notes

¹See, for example, the numerous apparitional case reports described by psychical researchers Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers, and Frank Podmore in their classic two-volume work *Phantasms of the Living* (London: Trübner & Company, 1886).

²See, for example, the accounts of apparitional encounters compiled in the book *The Departed Among the Living: An Investigative Study of Afterlife Encounters* by Icelandic researcher Erlendur Haraldsson (Guildford, UK: White Crow Books, 2012).

- ³For examples of other contexts, as well as further discussion of encounters with apparitions, see Williams, B., Ventola, A., & Wilson, M. (2009). *Apparitional Experiences: A Primer on Parapsychological Research and Perspectives*, which is available for download in Adobe PDF format on the Psychical Research Foundation website.
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- ¹⁴Percentages in this table are rounded values derived from data presented in the books by Osis & Haraldsson (Note 8), Arcangel (Note 9), Haraldsson (Note 2), and Persinger, M. A. (1974). *The Paranormal: Part I – Patterns*. New York: MSS Information Corporation. Cases involving extended family members and religious or unidentified figures are excluded.
- ¹⁵Greyson, B. (2010). Seeing dead people not known to have died: “Peak in Darien” experiences. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 35, 159 – 171.
- ¹⁶Sidgwick, E. M. [Mrs. H.] (1885). Notes on the evidence, collected by the Society, for phantasms of the dead. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 3, 69 – 150.
- ¹⁷Cobbe, F. P. (1882). *The Peak in Darien*. London: Williams & Norgate.
- ¹⁸The name “Peak in Darien” comes from a poem by John Keats, which describes the wondrous moment when Spanish explorers on a mountaintop in Darien (in modern-day Panama) witness the sight of the Pacific Ocean for the very first time.
- ¹⁹Kelly, E. W. (2001). Near-death experiences with reports of meeting deceased people. *Death Studies*, 25, 229 – 249.