



exploring the
extraordinary

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ABSTRACTS

***Extraordinary Experiences before, during and after bereavement
assisting psycho-spiritual transformation***

Josefine Speyer & Dr Mary Murray

It may be fairly common for people to have Extraordinary Experiences as someone close to them is dying or has died. However, in many late modern societies such experiences tend not to be openly acknowledged. This makes it difficult for people who have these experiences to talk about them. EEs are not routinely taught as part of the bereavement curriculum, and health care professionals, teachers, counsellors and psychotherapists do not learn how to talk with people about them. Given that bereavement and dying are most certainly experiences we all will have at some point, at worst, the lack of acknowledgement of EEs may be damaging to the experient. At the very least, such lack of acknowledgement may exacerbate the sense of isolation and vulnerability that can accompany grief. However, if acknowledged, EEs may have tremendous potential for healing.

In our paper we look at the extraordinary experiences of a small group of bereaved women and men. As well as outlining the nature of their experiences, we consider the effect of these deeply personal experiences on their bereavement, and how they thought and felt about them. All felt the experiences were important and very significant. They also felt the experiences had either changed, confirmed or strengthened their previously held world views regarding life after death, and they had taken profound comfort from this. Seeing the process of bereavement as psycho-spiritual transformation, we consider such experiences in the light of Jung's ideas about integration and individuation.

We also touch on a somewhat unexpected side effect of our study, (and one that we would like to explore further at a later date): the interviews we conducted were a deeply meaningful experience for us both, and had a therapeutic effect on the interviewer. There was a sense of sharing on a spiritual level; as though we entered a shared space of altered consciousness.

By way of conclusion we make some preliminary suggestions about ways in which the experience of EEs amongst the bereaved could be included in the bereavement curriculum for health care professionals, teachers, counsellors and psychotherapists.

**“Whisper of the bones, echoes from an embodied life”:
Communiqué as a process of emotional, psychological and
spiritual growth and education**

Michele Knight

After-death communication between the deceased, the disembodied, and the living, the embodied, not only evidences an ongoing psychosocial relationship and engagement between both parties, it encompasses diverse phenomena. The term communiqué is utilised in this paper to collectively represent the diversity by which after-death communications manifest and occur. Within a bereavement, grief and interdisciplinary context communiqué poses a challenge. This challenge is such that communiqué not only invites the embodied to believe in something they cannot ‘see’, it requires an abandonment of one’s habitual manner of mentally seeing the world and the material universe in which one exists. What impact does this realignment of mind have on an individual’s understanding, knowing and experience of being in the world? What role does communiqué play in meaning-making, in particular, meaning-making of experiences of the disembodied who communicate with the embodied? And how can narrative accounts of these communiqué inform and contribute toward interdisciplinary, pluralistic and transpersonal understandings of the self, spirituality and the non-material universe?

This paper reports findings from a doctoral research study exploring the natures and meanings of communiqué between bereaved adults and the person/s close to them who died. Theoretically and philosophically informed by a number of concepts attributed to the postmodern paradigm, the study utilised a qualitative methodological approach incorporating a heuristic research design. Twenty-two adults, who had been bereaved for not less than six months and whom had experienced communiqué phenomena self-selected to participate in the study. Gender, cultural, social, spiritual, religious and ethnic diversity though not required was nonetheless represented in the sample. The study acknowledges and responds to the need for empirically robust humanistic and transpersonal social science research. It draws from and is informed by the narratives of grieving adults experiencing the returning deceased, events which not only suggest a complementary reality, but which both challenge and invite the bereaved, and others, to reconsider their knowing of and existence within the material and non-material universe.

Mystical Experiences in a new religious movement: A case study

Alice Herron

Using the James-Boisen formula for spiritual experience as 'Discontent and its Resolution' I look at the role of spiritual or mystical experiences in the emergence of new religious movements. Three types of anomalous experience are explored: the mystical experiences of the founder that make him (or less frequently her) believe he has a divine mission to save the world and launch a new movement; the conversion experiences of followers which play a crucial role in the expansion and growth of the movement in its early days; and the numinous experiences of members of the group after the leader dies, which lead them to believe that the founder continues to guide the movement after his death.

I look at more recent research by Oakes suggesting the trauma of losing a mother or mother-figure in late childhood is a common feature in the developmental background of the founders of new religions, and research by Kirkpatrick and others suggesting a difficult relationship with a father is a common developmental feature in the background of followers of these movements. I suggest that membership of a NRM and the mystical experiences that accompany it, can often provide a resolution of these traumas.

Using my own experience as a member of a Hindu-based new religious movement for more than 20 years, I assess whether these various theories apply in the case of the movement with which I was intimately associated from its earliest days in Europe until shortly before the founder's death.

Finally I suggest that delusional experiences are at the heart of any religious movement and that these experiences are largely of a benign nature. They offer psychological benefits to many members of these organisations, at least initially, by successfully resolving the earlier problems in their lives.

Inner knowing and spiritual knowledge: An investigation into the construction of religion and unstructured spirituality.

Dr Jenny Hallam & Candice Sunney

In recent history it has been observed that people's engagement in religion has decreased but there has been an explosion of interest in spirituality. The sudden growth of spirituality in society has not been reflected within psychology. This marginalisation of spirituality has been attributed to a number of factors such as the rise of experimental methods and a measurement paradigm which precludes the study of highly subjective spiritual experience.

This paper uses qualitative methods to explore the construction of spiritual identity, spirituality and religion within a specific group of people who practice non-institutional, unstructured forms of 'earth energy' spirituality. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants (2 females and 1 male aged between 65-70 years old). All participants engage a form of non-organised spirituality which is characterised by world travel, moving objects from area to area and being present in an area to align the 'earth's energy'. A synthesis approach to discursive analysis (Abell & Stokoe, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997) is utilised to explore the ways in which spiritual experience is constructed within the interviews.

The analytic approach employed in this paper incorporates what Edley and Wetherell (1997) term 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches to discourse analysis. In line with a 'top down' approach the analysis explores the discourses (systems of meaning) which enable and constrain the ways in which spirituality is spoken about and the subject positions available to the speaker. Following a 'bottom up' approach the analysis attends to how language is actively used to construct of experiences. Thus a synthesis approach to discourse analysis enables an examination of the social construction of spirituality without losing sight of the wider cultural contexts which shape spiritual practice.

The analysis presented in this paper investigates ideological dilemmas centring on organised religion and spirituality. Religions - both western and eastern - are constructed as a form of guidance and external control. By contrast, spirituality is constructed as increased connectedness which allows access to spiritual knowledge through inner knowing. This exploration of religion and spirituality contributes to an understanding of peoples' spiritual and religious experience and the possible importance of spirituality to a particular group of people. Furthermore, the use of qualitative methods in this analysis contributes to methodological debate pertaining to the possible use of qualitative methods within parapsychology and the study of anomalous experiences.

The Importance of Extraordinary Experiences for the Adoption of Heterodox Beliefs

Dr Gerhard Mayer and René Gründer

The importance of extraordinary experiences for the process of adopting a heterodox belief system or an alternative religious world view is often neglected in the existing research literature. Scholars of religion commonly lay stress on the process of religious conversion characterized by different stages (e.g. Rambo). Extraordinary experiences are, thereby, included as potential internal catalysts (e.g. mystical experiences or near-death experiences), but only among others. The particular quality of the extraordinary experience remains largely unconsidered. With regard to new pagan movements, the emphasis lies often on the so-called “Coming Home Experience” – a narrative convention which seems to characterize accurately the emotional experiences and psychical dynamics coming along with the process of becoming a pagan. Another commonly used explanation for the establishment of heterodox beliefs, e.g. in the case of contemporary magical practitioners, is the thesis of an “interpretive drift” (Luhmann), i.e. a successive and slow change in the world view by interpreting events and experiences in an alternative (heterodox) frame of meaning. In our paper, we emphasise the personal extraordinary experiences of strongly subjective evidence as an important factor in the process of becoming a magical practitioner and adopting a heterodox world view. Our examination is based on the interview data of three field studies with neoshamans, contemporary magicians, and German heathen (Ásatrú), conducted in German speaking countries. First, we outline different functions of extraordinary experiences regarding the process. Second, we reflect on the process of converting the personal extraordinary experience into a narration (framing). In this context, the German differentiation between *Erlebnis* (experience in the sense of a pure individual impression) and *Erfahrung* (social form of experience, based on shared knowledge) is a useful tool. Finally, we address the methodological problem regarding the possibility of the reconstruction of factual/objective ‘paranormal’ events as potential catalysts of extraordinary experiences. This gives rise to the question of the validity of narratively embedded and processed extraordinary experiences.

And then what?:
How to assimilate Extraordinary Experiences, and why
Keith Beasley

This paper explores what the Religious Experiences Research Centre (RERC, Lampeter) calls the 'fruits' of extraordinary experiences. i.e., their value to us as evolving human beings. In particular it will examine not so much the extraordinary experience itself but the period after, be it of hours, days or longer, during which we assimilate that experience; or not. In it I propose a 'two-facet' model for transcendence that offers an explanation as to how we assimilate and then benefit from our extraordinary experiences.

Key to my hypothesis is the idea, generally agreed upon at the First EtE Conference (York, 2009) that, rather than a dualistic view of the extraordinary (something is either 'ordinary' or 'extra-ordinary') it is more useful to consider a spectrum of experiences from the mundane to the profound: with many degrees and variations of experience in-between.

In theology and psi studies, for example, the term 'transcendent' is usually applied only to experiences that are numinous, ineffable or otherwise obviously of a different nature to conventional, rational, consciousness. In normal usage however, 'to transcend' means 'to rise above: to surmount: to surpass: to exceed: to pass or lie beyond the limit of'.¹ Thus whether or not an experience is transcendent or not depends upon our starting point: what 'limit' we decide upon. Taking this idea, and embracing something of the 'Integral Theory' of Ken Wilbur², I define and describe a 'mental transcendence', wherein we accept the possibility of rising above conventional mental constructs (such as dualism) whilst staying within our rational mode of thinking. Such acceptance, I contend, opens our minds to further transcendent experiences with both mental and numinous facets. The concept and practice (from psychoanalysis and mindfulness studies³) of 'Critical Acceptance' is also discussed. This suggests that if we commit to an acceptance process and work through it, so we may feel long-term benefits. These may take the form of an ability to fully engage more deeply in the day-to-day reality of life, with consequent greater sense of fulfilment. This 'transcendence process' as I call it, is seen to equate directly to the healing processes so often urged by wisdom traditions and psychotherapists alike.

¹ Chambers English Dictionary, 1990.

² Wilbur, K. (1996) *A Brief History of Everything*, Dublin: Gateway, 2001.

³ Kabat-Zinn, J. (2005) *Coming To Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, London: Piatkus, 2005.

To illustrate these hypotheses, this paper includes accounts of a number of first-hand transcendent experiences and their effects. My emphasis is on the practical value of the transcendence and assimilation process, in helping us to acknowledge and dissolve our mental blocks and thus enabling healthier, happier individuals.

"I Know What I Saw": Extraordinary experiences with UFOs.

Dr David Clarke

A study by folklorist William Dewan suggests that around 25% of the US population report a personal experience with "anomalous lights" or UFOs. A 1998 opinion survey in the UK found 2% reporting direct experience with UFOs/ET life, but little if any research has been conducted into this aspect of anomalous/extraordinary experience. As consultant to The National Archives for the ongoing transfer and public release of UFO files created by the Ministry of Defence, I have had a unique opportunity to sample, collect and study examples of this type of anomalous experience reported by members of the public and the armed forces to official agencies since 1950. My paper will discuss these as examples of "personal experience narratives" and memorates recognised and collected by folklorists. I will also scrutinise official policy towards such reported experiences drawing upon the content of the MoD files released by The National Archives.

Therapeutic emotional labour, emotion management and ethics in the work of mediums and psychic practitioners

Sarah Metcalfe

Mediums and other psychic practitioners are now the driving force behind lucrative commercial sectors where their work has become visibly diverse and globally accessible over recent years. Authenticity of extra-sensory abilities is thematic for much academic debate surrounding after death survival but also structurally determines how these practitioners vocationally interact. Not only is it important asserting credibility against the masses of other practitioners trying to attract business but acceptance also allows the spiritualist medium to contextualize the stigma of their own phenomenological experiences (Hazelgrove, 2000). This signifies that this type of work or 'gift-giving', being contextually varied, is guided by shared, subjective and structural, factors.

Mediums and psychics partake in a form of managed embodied social interaction where practitioners feel emotionally uplifted and even physically exhausted by the process of giving readings. Directing this work are requirements to provide energetic, sometimes entertaining, and meaningful or rather 'proof' full performances, in relation to this need for authenticity (Goffman, 1959). Primarily, bereavement research emphasizes the therapeutic focus, and positive receipt, of these consultations (Wallis, 2001; Walter, 1999; 2000) but others stress addictive involvement (Shepherd; 2009) and even detached responsibility towards clientele (Mayer, 2008). Conflicting outcomes are therefore an integral part of this work. Despite this and the possible humane implications that this may have, limited, if any, agonistic sociological theoretical research exists, to conceptualize the emotive nature and ethical delivery and receipt of these services.

This paper will introduce doctoral research which intends using Hochschild's (1983) concepts of 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour' to examine the ethical, therapeutic and normative aspects of individuals participating in these non-mainstream spiritual and relational services. Using these frameworks allows exploration of actual emotional experience versus managed displays, social implications, and issues of identity and power and status dynamics. It is proposed that 'the paramount sociological issue is not whether or not these beliefs and practices (religious, scientific, or occult) are verifiable scientifically but what it is that members hold to be real and what the social consequences of these convictions and resulting actions are' (Jorgensen and Jorgensen, 1982: 382).

Pilot qualitative data was gained between July and August 2009 consisting of 18 unstructured interviews with clients recruited through a self-created, participant focused, Face book site.

Participants were from six UK and international domains including Spain, Finland, USA (California and Dallas), Canada and New Zealand. Findings illustrate that these consultations are having both positive and negative impacts upon users. They are support driven and uplifting in nature but also prompt addictive behavior. It was also shown that they direct life trajectories and even impinge upon client identities. This contradicts claims that these consultations are primarily bereavement focused and have a solely therapeutic basis. Fundamentally, it is argued that consumption of extra-sensory knowledge should be assessed as a potential life directive (counseling focused) (Lester, 1982), rather than just an occasional or prolonged response to bereavement.

This paper highlights the benefits of using online social networking for researching diverse extra-ordinary phenomena. The author seeks to develop complex knowledge of social theories of emotion and apply effective ethnographic methods in order to develop this theoretical analysis. This will include further client focused research as well as with practicing mediums, psychics and leading figures in spiritualist organizations. She may also attend a mediumship training course and develop mediumistic abilities.

Talking With the Spirits: An Experiential Exploration of Contemporary Trance & Physical Mediumship

Jack Hunter

Anthropological approaches to the study of spirit mediumship groups, and related practices, have usually tended to focus on social-functional interpretations; arguing that spirit mediumship groups function as a means to enable female practitioners to protest against their traditional roles as “mothers, wives and sexual partners” in oppressive male-oriented societies (Skultans, 1974; Lewis, 1971). Such approaches, however, have failed to address the experiential core of these groups: members believe that they are able to make direct contact with the world of spirits, whether through communicating with spiritual entities channelled via entranced mediums, witnessing ostensibly paranormal phenomena in the context of séances, or through falling into trance themselves and experiencing direct communion with the “numinous”. The experiential element cannot be removed from an analysis of mediumship, as it represents the primary motive for séance attendance as the members themselves perceive it, to ignore it would be to detrimentally reduce the complexity of the phenomenon. This paper will detail the experiences of an anthropologist exploring this experiential component while conducting fieldwork for his undergraduate dissertation (Hunter, 2009). The fieldwork itself was conducted at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, a centre established specifically with the aim to promote and develop trance and physical mediumship. The fieldwork methodology was one of immersive participant observation informed by the work of Edith Turner (1993; 1998; 2001), who has advocated the necessity of complete immersion in ritual if its functions and effects are to be adequately understood. In an attempt to understand the role of experience for the members of the group, participant observation was carried out in séances and mediumship development sessions as a means to gain an appreciation of the types of experience encountered by both sitters and mediums. Interviews and questionnaires were also employed as a method for achieving an insight into the subjective experiences of sitters and mediums regularly attending séances at the Lodge. This paper will present the research findings and describe the experiences of the researcher while engaged in the field. The importance of participation and its benefits for the researcher exploring experiential aspects of mediumship groups will be the central theme of the presentation.

***The Awakening Letters: Exploring the Mediumship of Lady
Cynthia Sandys***
Dr Fiona Bowie

Lady Cynthia Sandys (1898-1990), born Cynthia Mary Trench-Gascoigne, was a non-professional medium who for more than 60 years 'channelled' letters from deceased family members and acquaintances. Although her mediumship was an essentially private affair, Lady Sandys did publish, together with the editorial help of novelist and friend Rosamond Lehrmann, two pamphlets, *Letters from our daughters: Part 1 Sally* and *Part 2 Patricia* (College of Psychic Studies, Occasional papers nos.1 & 2) and two edited selections of the letters: *The Awakening Letters: Varieties of Spiritual Experiences in the Life after Death*, Jersey: Neville Spearman (1978), and *The Awakening Letters: Volume Two* Saffron Waldon, Essex: C.W. Daniel (1986). The freshness and intimacy, detail and variety of activities described in these communications make them extraordinarily interesting to researchers into the afterlife. While some of her immediate family remain sceptical as to the origins and content of the 'letters', the themes addressed and descriptions of post-mortem existence that emerge are consistent with data from other sources, including Theosophical and Spiritist literature, NDEs and Interlife accounts from hypnotic regression, as well as other channelled material.

Lady Sandys daughter has kindly given me access to the complete archive of 'letters', and this talk/paper contains a preliminary account of the range and content of the material, some examples taken from the unpublished letters, with discussion of ways in which these extend and complement our understanding of the post-mortem landscape, and some suggestions as to how we can read such material methodologically through a process of 'cognitive, empathetic, engagement'.

Discerning Spirit: Phenomenological Art

Ann Davies

In normal circumstances an artist's sketch of a six year old could be said to be reasonably common. However, what if the child had died eight years before the sketch was drawn by an artist who was a stranger to the child, the child's family, and who did not draw the portrait from a photograph?

From my research into phenomenological art I have found that paranormally produced drawings and paintings have been in existence, under the umbrella of Spiritualism, since the mid nineteenth century firstly in America, and then in Britain, when the religion was founded. As an artist and accredited spiritualist medium I have been creating artworks paranormally since the early 1980's and have worked worldwide specialising in spirit and psychic art.

The example of paranormally produced art, which I will expound upon for this paper, is that of a drawing of a spirit child, sketched on the 13th June 2009 during an evening demonstration of mediumship at Walsall Spiritualist church. This drawing is particularly interesting because it was verified as being visually correct on the same evening. The portrait was sketched using the paranormal technique of mediumistic automatic drawing and was acknowledged during the demonstration as an accurate likeness of a young girl (H) by her grandmother (W) who was in the audience. The drawing was completed in a matter of minutes and was one of six paranormally produced portraits that evening. W, when opening her mobile at the end of the evening, was able to show, to members of the audience, a photograph of the child.

On the surface the process of paranormally produced art may look like any other form of mediumship, however, when present at a meeting, the therapeutic potential, of experiencing, and sometimes receiving, an original, hard-copy, visual take-away message, apparently from communication with the after-life, using this extraordinary art-form, cannot be taken lightly. Using the example above I will discuss the relevance of phenomenological artwork to parapsychology research and what it may mean to;

- the audience at demonstrations of mediumship when portraits of the spirit of the dead are created paranormally
- the recipient of the drawing and message
- the artist, as amanuensis, producing the portrait

To conclude I would like to discuss the value paranormally produced artwork may have to parapsychology research even though they may seem strange bed-fellows. As I develop my academic research alongside creating mediumistic artwork, I am finding parallels between the two. It could be said that they both seek meaning,

structure and accurate evidence of the after-life. The former draws upon scientific research for its knowledge and understanding, whereas, the latter engages in the drawing of potentially accurate spirit portraits as spiritualistic evidence of the after-life. Is it possible that this art genre has the potential to give us a new look at mediumistic automatism and communication purportedly from spirits of the dead?

**The Journey in and out of “the Extraordinary:” Long-Term
Research with Mediums in Los Angeles and Brazil**

Dr Yves Marton

Based on long-term anthropological research carried out in Brazil and in Los Angeles on the topic of extraordinary or “anomalous” experiences I will explore the tortuous journey in the path to study the extraordinary. Several stumbling blocks were present in my own journey to make the study of such phenomena somewhat difficult. I will explore these difficulties as they arose at a personal, institutional and societal level in exploring this topic. In being initiated into the knowledge of the existence of “The Extraordinary” there begins a kind of relationship, similar to the relationship between two people, but in this case involving the researcher/seeker and the object of his search. The seeker feels that he is exploring, yet in retrospect, he is being initiated into a different dimension of reality. The researcher may feel that he is setting up tests and methods of research, yet from another perspective he is being drawn into a world which is not of his own making, moving towards a destination that he is unaware of. As this field or research is becoming more accepted in the academic world, it creates new issues for us to explore.

The current popularity of extraordinary experience in society at large can create an opportunity for unchecked subjectivism. Extraordinary experience becomes a debating ground in the war between followers of religion and militant skeptics/secularists. Other issues come into focus as the extraordinary becomes part of a palette of colors or theoretical approaches that scholars can use to enrich their research. Though over time extraordinary experiences may become an ordinary part of a researcher’s life, the sustaining power of such events may leave a lasting mark in the way an individual faces questions of faith as well as crisis and transition points. As such, the study of such experiences may thoroughly transform the researcher, not so much as a theoretician, but as an individual facing the inevitable changes of the journey of life.

Anthropology and Parapsychology: Still Hostile Sisters in Science?

Dr David Luke

As the first anthropologist to take a serious interest in psychical research, Andrew Lang took a dim view of the relationship between these two fields, but is such a perspective still justified? Lang (1896, pp. i-ii) wrote that, “The reported occurrence... of phenomena which suggest the possible existence of causes of belief *not* accepted by anthropology, is a distasteful thing... On the other hand, psychical research averts its gaze, as a rule, from tradition, because the testimony of tradition is not ‘evidential,’... an attempt is [needed] to reconcile these rather hostile sisters in science.”

After a long slow journey from the leather armchairs of its forefathers to out-of-body travels over Amazonian jungles, the anthropology of psi has progressed through a number of historical, methodological and ontological developments. The course of this transformation from the detached and disbelieving dismissal of the occult to the engaged and emic entertainment of psi as a scientific possibility is discussed. Following a century of obscurity within anthropology the notion of magic as psi has finally found unique refuge within the anthropology of consciousness. Nevertheless, despite decades of research anthropological parapsychology can still be considered a completely nascent field of study and is speculated to remain so until its interdisciplinary imperative is actually fulfilled and its subject matter is shared fully by the disciplines that border it.

This paper offers a brief historical overview and methodological review of English language material concerning the relationship between anthropology and parapsychology. Are these two fields still hostile sisters in science, and what has been learned in the last 125 years or more of scientific research?

The Psychical and the Mystical: Is There a Connection?

Dr Paul Marshall

Although there are notable exceptions, researchers in the fields of mysticism and parapsychology have not generally taken an active interest in each other's domain of study. Mysticism scholars have tended to regard paranormal phenomena as unworthy of serious academic study, as inferior phenomena that mystics themselves reject as dangerous distractions encountered on the spiritual path. For their part, parapsychologists have been inattentive to mystical experiences despite their interest in a variety of anomalous experiences, from alien abduction to past-life regression. Perhaps a reason for this neglect may be found in the emergence of parapsychology as a discipline with scientific aspirations, for allegedly 'private' mystical experience is not as clearly open to scientific investigation as the typical subject matter of parapsychology, such as telepathic communications, apparitions, and out-of-body experiences. After commenting on the disciplinary segregation of mysticism and parapsychology, I shall look at some historical and contemporary evidence that suggests a real connection exists between the psychical and the mystical. Given the link between the two, I shall suggest that any adequate theory of the psychical will have to address the mystical (and vice versa), and, more speculatively, I shall put forward the idea that extrasensory forms of perception studied in parapsychology may be mediated forms of mystical cognition.