

ARTICLES

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Mental Mediums and Survival

- Eric Dingwall and John Langdon-Davies -

THERE IS no doubt that most people who take an interest in paranormal phenomena are seeking assurances for their belief in survival after death. True, there are a few people who say, one assumes quite genuinely, that nothing interests them less than what happens to them when they die. Some, indeed, are passionately anxious, like Mr. Corliss Lamont, to prove that death is the end of all things; but most of us have some curiosity and even hope that Mr. Lamont is wrong.

Some of us, indeed, have a very strong emotional drive, forcing us to feel that no other problem is as important as this of human individual survival; and this drive has been responsible for a great deal of unfortunate distortion of facts, especially in the part of the subject we are now going to discuss. Moreover, as all powerful emotional demands create a supply and as the deepest desires may go with the shallowest powers of criticism, fraud has thrived here as nowhere else. If a rich widow is convinced that Mr. X can put her in touch with her beloved departed husband every Friday evening between six and seven, Mr. X has very little to worry about so far as financial matters are concerned. So long as loneliness is among the commonest sorrows of mankind Mr. X will not starve.

Throughout history there have been people, usually women, able to convince themselves and others that they can communicate with the dead. In modern times these mediums have differed in their technique in many ways, but almost all of them agree in passing out of their normal consciousness into a state which is called the mediumistic trance. Some investigators regard this trance as indistinguishable from a hypnotic trance and consider that the medium hypnotizes herself and thereby makes herself able to do and to know things which she cannot do or know in her normal condition.

Most mediums are not content with such a description. They feel that when the trance condition comes upon them, they are possessed, or controlled, or entered by an outside force, or spirit, or power, which uses them as the medium (hence the word) for verbal and other intercourse between the living and the dead.

Now we would ask the reader to recall the three questions put in the course of our discussion of physical mediumship in the last chapter. The matter is so important that we will repeat them:

1. How trustworthy are the reporters, and how carefully do they report?
2. Are the facts as stated?
3. Are the interpretations as stated?

In what follows the reader need not worry about the first question. Most mediums may be frauds, but the two or three of whom we shall speak are above suspicion in themselves, while those who have reported them are in every case among the most careful and experienced of psychical researchers.

With regard to questions 2 and 3 we have to be more careful. In some cases the investigators have become convinced that what they have heard is evidence of spirits or other entities from the other world communicating with them through the medium. So much is this taken for granted by both medium and investigator that it is impossible to describe what has happened in terms of pure fact; we cannot avoid using words which involve apparent acceptance of the spiritualistic interpretation.

Nevertheless, however hard it may be, it is worth while trying in moments of reflection to separate the two, to realize, for example, that what you have heard is a voice telling you things which perhaps seem hard for anyone to know by normal channels, claiming probably to be the voice of a spirit in the spirit world talking to other spirits. You certainly hear the voice, hear the surprising information, but it may not be so certain that the rest is as the medium claims and usually herself believes. With that warning let us consider the astonishing stories of Mrs. Piper, Mrs. Osborne Leonard, and one or two others.

Mrs. Leonard E. Piper was born in 1859 and lived her early life in Boston, Massachusetts. When she was eight years old, she felt her right ear hit and made a ring, and then the words, "Aunt Sara, not dead, but with you still." A few days later it was found that Aunt Sara, had died at the day and hour of the experience. It is almost unfair to mention this episode, since the distinguishing feature of her childhood and girlhood was their healthy, normal nature.

At twenty-two, already married and a mother, she had a slight accident while sleighing and went to a then celebrated blind faith healer, who diagnosed and cured her. But to the surprise of the healer and the circle she herself fell into a trance state. As the circle was interested not merely in healing but in developing mediumship, this was naturally encouraged; and on the second occasion her trance was longer and in it she got up and wrote a message, purporting to come from a dead son, which the father, a judge, acknowledged as authentic.

Most fortunately, Professor William James got to know about Mrs. Piper, and from that time her mediumship was controlled by the very best possible investigators, both American and English.

We will begin with an interesting example of her mediumship in which all the facts told by her controls through her proved correct so long as they were things known to the living, but wrong when the living did not know them.

Miss Hannah Wild died in July, 1886. Before her death Miss Wild had written a letter, the contents of which nobody knew, sealed it, and put it in a tin box. If she found she could return after death, she promised to do so and to tell her sister, Mrs. Blodgett, the contents of the letter through a medium.

Mrs. Blodgett sent the letter to William James with a request to communicate with a medium, and William James sent Mrs. Piper a glove which Miss Wild had worn on the day she wrote the letter, and also the lining of her hat.

Mr. J. W. Piper, Mrs. Piper's father-in-law, acted as sitter. This excellent plan of having a proxy-sitter has since been frequently followed, so as to avoid information being unconsciously given away by the person really concerned.

In these early days Mrs Piper's spirit-control was an unattractive character named Phinuit, who in life was said to have been a medical man and talked in a loud, masculine voice and a mixture of French and American, and Negro patois. Mrs. Piper went into trance, and Phinuit proceeded to dictate six pages of a purported letter, every word of which was later shown to be wrong. Moreover, his description of Miss Wild was wrong in every detail.

This was a bad beginning, but in May, 1888, Mrs. Blodgett came in person, though anonymously, for a sitting. What happened at this sitting Mrs. Blodgett summed up thus: "All the details which were in my mind Phinuit gave exactly. On all the points of which I was ignorant he gave false replies, or said nothing."

Here are some examples, and in what follows "Phinuit H.W." means that Mrs. Piper's control, Phinuit, is supposed to be repeating Miss Hannah Wild's words to him. The comment in parentheses is Mrs. Blodgett's appraisal or explanation of the particular item and the whole text is condensed.[1]

[1] *Proceedings*, SPR, 1892. Vol. VIII, pp. 75-6.

Phinuit H.W. Bessie, Betsie Blodgett, my sister. How glad I am to see you. I am Hannah Wild.

(All this time Mrs. Piper kept on slapping me with her hand, just like sister.)

Phinuit H.W. Saw you once before in that audience. Threw a message at you.

(Four weeks after sister's death, John Slater, a medium, said, pointing to me amongst a large audience, "There is a lady here who wants to have you know she is here. She says she will tell you what is in that paper soon.")

Phinuit H.W. My photo is in that bag.

(Mrs. B. had brought a bag, but did not know that a photo of her sister was in it.)

Phinuit H.W. Where is my big silk handkerchief?

Mrs. B. I gave it to Clara. You told me to.

Phinuit H.W. Where is my thimble?

Mrs. B. I don't know.

Phinuit H.W. I saw you put it into this bag.

(Mrs. B. found it later with the things she had emptied out of her bag before coming.)

Mrs. B. Can you tell me where that letter is now that you wrote?

Phinuit H.W. It is at home, in tin box.

Mrs. B. Can't you tell me more about it?

Phinuit H.W. I have told you. It would be like ringing church bells if I could come back.

(Sister did say when we put the letter in tin box, "It would be like ringing the City Hall bell if I can come back.")

Mrs. B. Can you tell me, sister, how many brothers you have in spirit life?

Phinuit H.W. One, two, three.

(I asked her how many brothers, because William had only been dead since March 27 in the same year. Three is correct.)

Mrs. B. Hannah, can you tell me where William is?

Phinuit H. W. He is here. I found him.

Mrs. B. How long has he been?

Phinuit H.W. Weeks. You know all about it. He sticks to you all the time every day. William wants to know how you like that lot.

Mrs. B. What lot?

Phinuit H.W. You ought to know. You bought it to lay him in. He don't like that lot. Do you?

Mrs. B. No.

(I had bought him a lot in Wood-lawn Cemetery. Brother was very proud, and we thought the lot was not as nice as he would like.)

On another occasion Mrs. Blodgett gave Mrs. Piper for Phinuit a lock of her sister's hair and asked him to tell the contents of the letter. Phinuit replied: "This letter is something about Hannah's early history. At one time I met a person I loved. A circumstance in our affection changed my whole life. Had it not been for this one thing I should have been married and happy. Consequently, I went into religious work. Whoever reads this letter after I am gone will know why I remained Hannah Wild." Mrs. Blodgett says that this was not the deathbed letter, but nevertheless perfectly true.

Now after reading these notes let the reader ask himself one or two questions. Suppose someone has an emotional drive to convince himself of survival after death, how could he possibly regard the notes as anything else but proof of survival? Suppose he has an emotional drive to convince himself that there is no survival after death, how could he help being perfectly certain that the whole thing is a fake? Yet neither conclusion is in the least bit justified by the facts. They can all be explained, both the successful conveyance of information and the failures, by supposing that Mrs. Piper in some way or other had access to matters known to Mrs. Blodgett and no access to matters of which she was ignorant.

It is difficult enough to explain even this, but we are not justified in making the solution of the problem even more difficult.

There is another point: those who feel that nothing is more solemn or weighty than questions of death and immortality are apt to feel shocked at the triviality of the alleged conversations between living and dead. This also is an unjustifiable attitude. Suppose you were telephoning to a person in Australia and that it was vital that you should speak to the right person and to one else. You could not be certain from the distorted voice that you were speaking to the right person. What proofs of identity would you ask for?

Would you be satisfied with his telling you that you were a general or a Prime Minister? No; because he could have got these facts out of a book of reference. But if he said, "Well, perhaps you remember how last time we met it was in a Pullman diner and you found a caterpillar in your lettuce," then indeed you would have some proof of identity. As with a man in Australia, so with a dead man, on the other side of the grave. That is the justification and, possibly, the explanation of the triviality so common in these mediumistic conversations.

However, we can say that in the example quoted the facts are fully explained as an interchange of information between Mrs. Piper and Mrs. Blodgett by some unusual paranormal means.

In the next example telepathy between medium and sitter is no explanation at all. The sitter is Sir Oliver Lodge. He had interested an old Uncle Robert in his experiments with Mrs. Piper and asked him to send him some article that had belonged to his brother, Sir Oliver's Uncle Jerry, who had died at least twenty years before. By the morning post a gold watch arrived and, without letting anyone know about it, Sir Oliver took the watch to Mrs. Piper and handed it to her when she was already in trance. Sir Oliver says: "I was told almost immediately that it had belonged to one of my uncles one that had been very fond of Uncle Robert that the watch was now in possession of this same Uncle Robert, with whom he was anxious to communicate. After some difficulty and many wrong attempts, Dr. Phinuit caught the name, Jerry, short for Jeremiah, and said emphatically ... "This is my watch. My brother is my brother, and I am here. Uncle Jerry, my watch."

Sir Oliver suggested to the "dead, Uncle Jerry" that he might remind Uncle Robert of some trivial incidents of their childhood. "Uncle Jerry" recalled a number of such episodes; these "details of boyhood," writes Sir, Oliver, "two-thirds of a century ago, were utterly and entirely out of my ken."

Now, here we have a very different situation and one far less easy to understand. The information purporting to come from a dead man may not have come from him, but if not, then where did it come from? Not from Sir Oliver, nor from Mrs. Piper. Could it be telepathy from Uncle Robert? Doubtless he was thinking about the séance. Unfortunately for this theory, Uncle Robert couldn't remember some of the incidents and they had to be verified by a third uncle living in the country, who knew nothing of the séances. So that if the information came from the living it must have been either from the "subliminal self" of Uncle Robert, storing there unknown to him or from the mind of another man who could not possibly have been thinking of these things since he had no knowledge of what was going on, or as a third possibility from the mind of Sir Oliver himself where it had lain forgotten - and the theory becomes almost as complicated and unlikely as the theory that it came from the Unknown Country.

Mrs. Piper's powers were to develop far beyond this. The next example cannot be explained in terms of any kind of telepathy, however complicated and unlikely, for the most noticeable thing is that the supposed spirit communicating to Mrs. Piper through Phinuit misunderstands the sitter's questions, and answers with material which was very far from being in the sitter's mind.

The sitter was an American, J. H. Hyslop, Ph.D. The "communicating spirit" was his father. Dr. Hyslop wanted to test his identity and, knowing that his father had thought that his fatal disease was catarrh, asked: "Do you know what the trouble was when you passed out?" If the answer had been connected of the larynx, which Dr. Hyslop knew to be true, a strong case for telepathy would have been made out; but the answer was quite unexpected, "No I did not realize that we had any trouble, James, ever. I thought we were always most congenial to each other. I do not remember any trouble; tell me, what was it about - you ... do not mean with me, do you ...?"

"Father you misunderstand me. I mean about the sickness."

"Oh yes, I hear. I hear you. Yes, I know now, yes, my stomach."

Now an important difficulty of interpretation has to be faced here. Just as it is easier, if possible, to explain the *utterances* of the communicators as due to telepathy from the living sitter, so it is easier to explain the *personality* of the communicators as something built up by the medium out of material extracted in some way or other from the sitter's mind. But here the material is certainly not from that source. One is tempted to believe that the communicator is an independent, objective something with a mind of its own.

To do Mrs. Piper justice requires a longer book than this, and the reader should refer to the amazing reports published by the societies for psychical research; but before leaving her we must quote her description of what it felt like coming back to her normal self out of her trance state. She begins to weep and murmur, "I do not want to go back to the darkness. Oh it is, it is, it is, it must be the window ... but I want to know where they are all gone. It is funny. I don't want to be. It is funny. You see, when my head snaps, I forget what I was going to say. It must be right. Oh, dear. I feel so weak. Is that my handkerchief?"

Mrs. Piper died in 1950 at the age of ninety-one.

Mrs. Osborne Leonard is perhaps the most remarkable English medium of all time. By great good fortune, she was for many years investigated by the (British) Society for Psychical Research, and among her sitters there were many of the best psychical research investigators that there have ever been. How happy the relationship between them and her was is shown by these important words in her autobiography.[2]

[2] G. E. Leonard. *My Life in Two Worlds* (London, 1931), p. 59.

How greatly the sitter can help one's mediumship to develop! The wise, cautious, even skeptical sitter, if he has an *open* mind, gets the best results, and is a great factor in definitely building up, little by little, the psychical and mental forces of the medium, and even of the control. The credulous "I'm willing to believe anything, my dear. I don't want tests" kind of sitter does not improve the quality of one's mediumship, nor get the best results.

Everybody is agreed that Mrs. Leonard has always been utterly honest, sincere, and modest. During her active mediumship she has never resented any kind of investigation - detectives, for example, hired to see if she was trying to get information about sitters, tests of every sort both during trance and in her ordinary life; and indeed she has welcomed every sort of inquiry and has shown herself as much interested as anyone else to learn more as to the how and why of her extraordinary gift. She has never taken sitters wanting information of material value to themselves, but has confined herself to those who have wanted to get in touch with their dead friends. In short, we are as far away as it is possible to get from the sort of mediumship, usually physical, which must work in darkness, which resents any sort of test and lays down conditions which make all scientific investigation impossible or at least doubtfully effective.

Mrs. Leonard enters a trance state in which she is controlled by a little girl named Feda. That is, you hear coming from Mrs. Leonard's lips a childish voice, speaking in childish English, seldom using "I" and "me" but almost always "Feda does this" or "He tells Feda so and so." Theories as to what Feda is had best be left alone. It makes no difference to us here whether she is the spirit of a dead child, as some people, including Mrs. Leonard, think, or a second personality of the medium herself. We know that such multiple personalities exist, and we are certainly not so sure that spirits exist, unless we are convinced Spiritualists, but the important thing is what information comes through Feda to the sitter.

When Feda has announced her presence, the sitter may say, "Good morning, Feda, how are you today?" and Feda will answer in her prattling way. Presently the sitter may ask Feda if she can ask some recently dead friend of the sitter's to come and talk to her. Then evidence of identity will be asked for, and the séance proceeds.

It should be noted that with a really good medium like Mrs. Leonard great care is taken to preserve the anonymity of the sitter. The appointment is obtained by letter, usually written by someone else, and the reply is sent to the applicant under a false name, care of some friend, or of their bank or lawyer. The sitter should never give any kind of information away, and until the identity has been established must be careful to give no hint that Feda's initials "F.L." is "warm" or "cold." It is with all these precautions carefully observed that the following examples of successful mediumship took place.

Our first example is a *book test*. This is a method devised to give the communicator an opportunity of proving his reality and his identity by conveying information that neither the sitter, nor Mrs. Leonard, nor anyone else can possibly know.

On the fifth book, 1917, Mrs. Beadon wished to get in touch with her husband, Colonel Beadon. Feda told her to go to a squarish room and to take the fifth book on a certain shelf whose position was minutely described and look at either page 71 or 17 - she was not sure which, but thought it was 71. On this page would be found a message to her from her husband, who, through Feda, described seven tests:

1. The passage in question referred to a past condition.
2. But also had application to the present.
3. It is an answer to a thought previously more in Mrs. Beadon's mind than at present.
4. On the opposite page there is a reference to five.
5. Also a reference to light.
6. Also a reference to olden times, but none of these have anything to do with the message; they are only for identification purposes.
7. On the same page or opposite or perhaps overleaf a very important word beginning with S.

(In passing we may remark that Feda is always bad at numbers and uncertain of proper names. When she gets them, presumably from the communicator, they are often distorted, or it is after great difficulty.)

Mrs. Beadon identified the shelf in a room in her mother's home and took down the book indicated. On page 71 there was the following poem:

*The weary pilgrim slumbers,
His resting-place unknown,
His hands were crossed, his lids were closed,
The dust was o'er him strown;
The drifting soil, the mouldering leaf
Along the sod were blown,
His mound has melted into Earth
His memory lives alone.*

The communicator, Colonel Beadon, was killed in action in Mesopotamia and buried the same night. All traces of the grave were obliterated to avoid interference from Arabs. Therefore the poem can be said to refer very accurately to the dead person whose identity had to be established. But that is only the beginning. Let us consider the seven tests.

1. The poem is O. W. Holmes's "The Pilgrim's Vision" and refers to early American settlers, i.e., a past condition.
2. It refers to the present, i.e., Colonel Beadon's resting-place unknown.
3. Mrs. Beadon had at first been worried by the fact that her husband's grave was not marked by a cross and had hoped to have the spot identified, but had recently felt far less concern about the matter.
4. On the opposite page there was the following poem:
*Still shall the fiery pillar's ray
Along the pathway shine,
5. To light the chosen tribe that sought
6. This Western Palestine*

(The lines refer to the Israelites led by a pillar of fire out of Egypt into Palestine.)

7. On the next page there is a poem called "The Steamboat" in capital letters.

Curiously enough, on turning to page 17, Mrs. Beadon found another poem mentioning an unmarked grave and on the opposite page there are the words "fire" and "sunset glow." No wonder Feda was not quite sure of the page! Moreover, on page 17 the lines appear "No altars - and they need *them* not who leave their children free," which was even more strongly a message, especially as the poem was a soldier's message about a battlefield and as it mentions "the Indian's shaft, the Briton's ball" when her husband was commanding Indian troops.

In short, Feda seems, on the face of it, to have been given a double reference by Colonel Beadon for communication to his wife. There cannot be any other book in which the references on two different pages would be so appropriate, whether taken together or apart. We have said "On the face of it" in order to retain impartial approach to the questions involved, but we are not prepared to suggest an alternative explanation, nor has any other been offered.

More than five hundred of these book tests were carried out by Mrs. Leonard and her various sitters, with results of varying accuracy. A large number were as suggestive as the one we have quoted, though few probably contained quite as many separate items. In order to get an idea of how chance results would compare, a careful experiment was carried out. Three ideas were selected and a page chosen out of one of a number of books on which something to do with the idea was to be found. Thus one "idea" was an allusion to circles of any kind, and page 150 of Emerson's *English Traits* was looked up. If there was anything to do with circles on it that scored a success. Of 1,800 trials 1,889 per cent were scored as successes, 4.72 per cent as successes or partial successes, and 7.67 per cent when "slight successes" were added to the others. In Mrs. Leonard's mediumistic tests the percentages were 17.2, 36, and 54.1 for all 532 results and with the best communicator 63.6, 68.2, and 77.2. That should settle the question as to whether the results were due to chance.

Book tests are only one way in which the identity of the communicator can be sought, and we shall end with one example of the commonest type of séance. During the First World War a benevolent Spiritualist who was also a careful psychical researcher, the Rev. C. Drayton Thomas, sought Mrs. Leonard's help to comfort his bereaved parishioners. Sometimes he failed to get the results he wanted, but often the séances were brilliantly successful. One of the best was his first meeting with Mrs. Leonard on February 3, 1917. We give it to the reader and invite him to form his own conclusions as to the interpretation of the facts. As to the facts themselves, they are as follows: Drayton Thomas, and he had the reputation of being an honest, sincere man and a careful investigator. It is, of course, no use hiding the fact that he was emotionally longing to get the kind of result that seemed to get, and many people might regard that inevitable factor as a reason for suspecting his accuracy. On the whole, however, it would be hard to get evidence which was less likely to prove false, and as always, the reader will decide between the possible alternatives of fraud and of communication of the sort Mr. Thomas himself claims, according to his temperament. We emphasize this once more, for the truth seems to be that, when all is said, though facts can be judged on strictly objective and scientific principles, their interpretation involves a man's personal feelings.

As Drayton Thomas sat down in Mrs. Leonard's room several bereaved parents came to his mind, among them the parents of Ralph B. Gould, who had died of wounds in Mesopotamia on December 20, 1916 - that is, some six weeks previously. The sitter was interested in him particularly because he had just read his obituary in the *Methodist Recorder*, and not because he had known him or his parents well. In fact, he had not seen him for some years, and had only entered the parents' house twice.

Early in the sitting Feda described a young man in great detail, and the picture was verified afterward by the parents, except that they were uncertain as to details of the nose and eyes.

Feda described his death as sudden, a quick dizziness and choking feeling, but not actual pain. On that same morning the parents had had a letter from his chaplain describing his death in action, but Feda supplied a detail that was not in the letter: "At the time he had been standing on something uneven; it seems to Feda like scrambling up something." After the war - that is, nearly two years later - Drayton Thomas interviewed the chaplain, who said: "Gould was a bit up one side the bank [of a stream-bed] when he was struck by a stray bullet."

Now, if we wish to rule out the idea of a communicator - that is, of Gould himself - giving this information, we have to assume that one piece of this information was telepathically received from the parents and another from the Chaplain, who was certainly not aware of the séance. This is tantamount to saying that Mrs. Leonard was able to dip into the entire existing knowledge of humanity, whether an individual was aware and helping her or not, since in hundreds of séances the same promiscuous collecting of information is found.

There followed a number of correct details about the purported communicator, his family, and his boyhood. Feda described his parents' house, the garden, the school, his favorite games. Drayton Thomas finds that there were in all seven items that he knew already, eleven which he did not know were correct until he made inquiries, and four that neither he nor Gould's parents could have known at the time. Were all these collected from living minds? If so, Feda can choose what she likes from the total life of a communicator; and if we do not believe in Feda it means that Mrs. Leonard and others like her in trance can read as much of our lives as is written in the Book of Life, to be opened, as we are told, on the Day of Judgment! Surely this is an astonishing thing and almost sufficient for our sense of wonder, even if the problem of survival has to be left in dispute!

We feel that many of our readers after these descriptions will want to consult a medium. We want, therefore, to give a word of warning. It is doubtful whether there are twenty mediums worth consulting in the whole world. On the other hand, there may be one in your own street. An open mind will remember both these possibilities and act accordingly.

If you consult a medium, the first thing to ask yourself is whether the medium knows you or knows any of your acquaintances. It is best to go to séances in large towns or anywhere rather than your home town. Don't give your name; go alone or with a stenographer if you want to take serious notes. Don't go in any uniform, and leave any of your badges at home. If you are in a group séance, don't give any sign of assent if the medium says, "I hear the name John," even if that was your grandfather's name; but if the medium speaks to you directly, answer courteously as you would any other friend, but don't give information away. For example, if she says, "I see a gentleman standing by your side and hear the name John. I think it is your father," *do not say*, as many sitters do, "No; it is my grandfather," but "Please go on. I should like to hear something more about the gentleman."

In this way the genuine medium will be encouraged and the fraudulent be given every opportunity of making mistakes. Above all, remember that common sense and good manners require you to avoid expressing skepticism, derision, or incredulity, for the genuine medium, even if she has made mistakes, is on your side.

Do not be over influenced by other sitters having greater success than you. They may not have been as careful as you to avoid previous leakage of information, or they may be so anxious to believe that they will believe anything.

When the séance is over, leave at once and do not chat with other visitors if you intend to come again. Write down anything you may think good and put it in an envelope with your notes. If it seems worth while, send a report to one of the societies for psychical research.

Note:

The article above was taken from "The Unknown - Is is Nearer?" (New York: Signet Key Book, 1956) by Eric. J. Dingwall and John Langdon-Davies.

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