

Survival of Bodily Death

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Channeling and mediumship

Arthur Hastings

Arthur Hastings (see ref. 1991) led the overview of this field. His research has mostly been on Western channeling, with less extensive investigation of other cultures. Channeling has several degrees of embodiment. At one end of the spectrum, physical channeling, such as the use of a Ouija board, involves some dissociation and automatism, though there is less sensate, auditory, visual, or intuitive information about the presence of a spirit. Physical channeling is often a launch point for the more full-fledged varieties of channeling. As an aside, the occult view is that physical media are risky because they make it too easy for mischievous elementals to get involved; Hugh Lynn Cayce (Edgar's son) said it was like leaving an open door with the light on. Adam Crabtree commented that he knows of two people who, after single experiences with a Ouija board, were plagued with possession-type experiences for the rest of their lives. Arthur reflected that this propensity might stem from the separation of the conscious mind from the rest of the body.

Automatic writing deepens the engagement of the channeler and has been studied by Anita Muhl (1963), who found that people's pathologies would tend to emerge in the writing. She was not interested in the possibility of the spirit hypothesis; she felt that there was no automatic writing that could not be traced to the inner issues of the subject. This conclusion may well have been influenced by her experimental population: patients in mental institutions. At the next level of embodiment, that of hearing an inner voice, Arthur feels that we sometimes begin to see better work. Helen Schucman, for example, wrote A Course in Miracles based upon an inner voice. Having the conscious mind present, perhaps to give ballast to the psyche, appears to stabilize the process and improve the quality.

We then move into the larger automatisms; for example, when in a light trance, a person allows their vocal cords to be taken over by a spirit wishing to speak through them. This transition to speaking directly is often difficult and frightening for channelers. Jane Roberts thought deeply before taking that risk. From the vocal cord automatisms, channels can go to a full-trance possession state in which the whole body is taken over and distinctive mannerisms, body language, and movements emerge. This happened with Seth, Ramtha and others, some of which resulted in good quality material while much of it is quite poor.

Arthur studies the channeled material using Kenneth Burke's rhetorical analysis tools as if it is a drama, analyzing the actor, the message, the purpose, the audience, and the scene. Understanding the audience helps us decipher the message. Messages reflect the interests, capabilities, and personality of the channel and are directed to a certain time and culture. For example, Isaiah channeled Yahweh in Biblical times, who spoke in the first person: "It is I Yahweh who speak." The Biblical prophets went into a trance state, stepped aside, and a disembodied spirit or God ostensibly spoke through them. Judaism was thus founded on prophecy, and early Christianity featured prophecy as a regular part of the service. There are channeling techniques in Buddhism, and even Sri Aurobindo reported writing one of his books, Sadhana, dictated from a yogi on the other side. One of Krishnamurti's first books was channeled. Islam, of course, is completely based on the channeling of Mohammed. Channeling thus has played an important role in shaping world history.

An interesting shift began about the mid-1970's in two directions. First, there has been a general move away from mediumship (contacting departed souls) and towards channeling (the enactment of a personality, teacher, or "being" to convey spiritual teachings). Second, the transmissions have become increasingly psychological and sophisticated, at least those in the highest echelon of quality. The intent of the material is more explicitly geared to psychological and spiritual maturation, a fact that may reflect both sufficient penetration of psychological concepts into our culture and the tailoring of channeled material to the needs of an era. As we become increasingly sophisticated, so do the transmissions. Additionally, more "beings" present themselves as discarnate spiritual teachers who have never inhabited human bodies. In itself, this is not evidence for survival of bodily death but nonetheless represents an interesting trend.

Literary creation seems particularly amenable to channeling. William Blake reported channeling his poem Jerusalem, taking dictation twenty or thirty lines at a time without premeditation. William Butler Yeats wrote A Vision inspired by the channeling of his wife, who was a medium. Patience Worth was a spirit channeled by Pearl Curran in the early 1900's in St. Louis; Patience was a feisty, vivacious spirit who was never actually traced to a historical figure, though she claimed to have lived in the 17th century. Her poetry and novels won widespread acclaim and she even received a National Book Award; the judges did not know that she was not a "real" person. Some investigators of the case felt that Patience was a sub-personality of Pearl but even so had difficulty explaining how Pearl worked so quickly and had the ability to use archaic 17th century words that even scholars did not know until they were tracked down in manuscripts. She would dictate novels, stop in midstream, and begin again a week later, and could even dictate two things at once. Another channel claims to have channeled Charles Dickens, and through this process produced the last half of Edwin Drood, a novel Dickens had failed to complete. It carries on the characters and there is a surprise revelation at the end; Arthur felt it was not quite as crisp as the first half of the book but very engaging. Mark Twain commented that the channeled half was "like Dickens gone flat." The chairman of the English department at Duke felt the piece was Dickensian but that it felt more like a younger Dickens. Conferees felt this work might be fruitfully studied with some of the new authorship analysis tools.

In mathematics, Srinivasa Ramanujan was one of the major genius mathematicians in history, a man who grew up poor and uneducated in a rural Indian village and taught himself mathematics in his teens. He claimed that his mathematical formulas were given to him in visions by local goddesses; some of these formulas proved correct while others did not, though even the incorrect ones had mathematical elegance to them. In music, a medium named Rosemary Brown saw the spirit of Franz Liszt standing by her piano. He proceeded to dictate compositions to her. Over the last decades, she has composed a variety of other pieces from other dead composers, many of which are beyond her technical ability to play. Several have been published and favorably received by top caliber musicians, though others feel the pieces are mere pastiches and unworthy of their supposed source composers. Miss Brown has no formal training in music composition. Much of the work has a first-draft quality to it though most is quite pleasing, consonant with what we might expect for channeled material. The compositional style is similar to the that of the dead "authors." In art, Luiz Gasparetto has claimed to be channeling master painters at great speed. Though many of his paintings bear no resemblance to the work of their supposed source, he produces them very quickly, in five minutes or less, in a light trance, and even does some upside down or with his feet. They are distinctly different from his conscious style. He claims to feel the artist touching his brush hand.

Arthur feels that a great many people have been artistically, scientifically, or otherwise inspired in a channeled way but have never gone public. Adam Crabtree told the story of a man who was a violin maker, one of the top such artisans in the world. He decided as a young man that he wanted to make violins and visited a shop; he was impressed but didn't know how to go about it. As he stood over the wood, a voice came to him and gave him explicit instructions. This instruction went on for a year, though he told no one about it. After a year, the voice stopped and a dream conveyed that he no longer needed the assistance. Many such people have not gone public.

Channeling is advantageous in that it bypasses both the conscious ego of the channeler, thereby allowing access to deeper reservoirs of understanding, and the "ego" of society, thereby allowing access to material that might not reflect the consensus worldview. It is therefore a very good vehicle for psychological insights, for spiritual teachings, and for psychic readings. Its very "otherness" allows certain things to be said which that otherwise be difficult to assimilate or verbalize. Regardless of the source, channeling serves an important function.

Arthur believes our paradigms for studying these kinds of phenomena need to be expanded to include qualitative methods. Most of the artistic works do not lend themselves to strict quantitative analysis, though they are assessable by sophisticated experts in their respective fields. In Arthur's study of this subject, he used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Qualitative study is helpful for a fine-grained analysis of the experiential landscape.

Channeled material often emerges in poetic form; for example, the Delphic oracle spoke in hexameter from a light trance. Michael Murphy commented that Aurobindo, who was both a poet and a fine literary critic, felt that Shakespeare may well have been operating from a channeling mode. His words do not sound as if they have been rewritten. Aurobindo felt that editing Shakespeare could only take the form of replacing one inspiration by a higher inspiration. The sheer speed at which Shakespeare produced his work supports this idea, as does the fact that much channeled material comes through in metered verse (such as parts of A Course in Miracles).

Michael Murphy commented that there is a high metaphysical culture -- witness Plato's Phaedo -- and a low one, into which many of these channeled works fall. In Russia, there is a regular affliction, a kind of glossophilia, in which torrents of words pour through, perhaps in reaction to cold Arctic nights and bad entertainment. These writers turn out enormous volumes of work every year, most of it pure sludge. Much of the channeled literature resembles it. This actually resonates with the reports from respected channels themselves; Alice Bailey, for one, commented that 85% of channeled material arises from the unconscious or superconscious, not from outside entities. There is also much metaphysical repetition in channeled messages. William James commented he could hardly resist the sense that all channeled material seems to have been written by the same person. He was not highly impressed by the philosophic payoff. Thus the quality of channeled teachings will be heavily, if not entirely, influenced by the degree and depth of understanding of the channeler.

Arthur did not find much information that provides good evidence of survival since many of the channels demonstrate significant psi abilities. Eileen Garrett, who was a medium, tested better on psychic ability than her supposed guides (Rhine, 1937, p. 225). Lawrence LeShan worked with her and observed her channel deceased relatives for clients in remarkably authentic ways; however, when asked, she realistically said that she had no idea whether it was actually the deceased spirit or a product of her unconscious since she was admittedly very psychic.

Mediumship

The mediumship evidence that does support the survival hypothesis falls into the following categories:

1. Evidence that the personality of the communicator is the deceased:

- personality traits, quirks, mannerisms, interests, style, responsiveness
- knowledge or memories that are specific to the individual
- skills specific to the individual (writing, painting, or a doctor giving medical advice).
- the ephemeral "feeling" that the communicator is the deceased person.
- meaningful personal messages

2. Evidence that the source is not the medium her or himself

- Information that goes beyond the medium's knowledge
- Information that is not known by the present company
- Teachings of a psychological, metaphysical, or spiritual nature that go beyond the medium's intellectual ability.
- Skills that are not consciously available to the medium, such as speaking other languages.
- Messages of no motivational interest to the medium.
- Indications that the channeler is healthy and not given to dissociation, multiple personality disorder, or psychological disturbance. Many supposed cases of channeling fit with the personality structure of multiple personality disorder.

The main theories that account for channeling are:

1. The spirit hypothesis
2. Superpsi hypothesis
3. A transcendent or archetypal part of the self: our tendency is to personify ideas, thoughts, and teachings which might not actually come from a separate "being." Channeling could be seen as drawing upon the collective unconscious.
4. Fraud
5. Impersonation by the unconscious, a variation on multiple personality disorder.
6. Any conceivable combination of the above.

Michael Grosso believes the most compelling case of mediumship providing evidence of survival was studied by Richard Hodgson, a close friend of William James and Frederick Meyers, and involved a man named George Pellew who had died falling from a horse. Eleanor Piper, one of the great mediums of all time, was working with Hodgson when Pellew became the "control" personality for Mrs. Piper. In the course of 130 sittings, of which thirty included people whom Pellew had known, she was able to recognize all of Pellew's friends. Beyond the bare fact of identification, George Pellew was able to respond through Piper to these friends in appropriate ways, appearing to know intimate details of their lives. A recent critique of the case by Munves did not address this ability to identify friends so precisely. Munves' main argument was an ad hominem attack on Hodgson, accusing him of reacting to the Darwinian revolution by developing a belief in survival.

The debate over the source and meaning of channeling tends to get stuck on the question of veracity, whether it is or is not "true" that a channel is contacting discarnate spirits or entities. A better line of inquiry, Arthur feels, is to pursue the major hypotheses to their logical conclusions. This is typically not done, perhaps due to a reluctance to face the implications of any of the hypotheses. The following two scenarios carry the two major hypotheses to their logical conclusion:

Scenario #1

There is a non-physical realm, populated by various discarnate beings, which human beings can contact through trance states and intention. The discarnate beings can initiate contact in the reverse direction as well. These entities can adopt personalities with perceptions, intentions, memories, etc. Many of the beings have talents (musical, artistic, literary, mathematical, intellectual). The entities can access information that is not bound by the known laws of space and time. Information, decisions, advice, and artistic creations can be given through a human channel for individual and social purposes. Human beings can be assisted by these outside entities towards physical health, emotional maturation, or spiritual understanding.

Scenario #2

Personalities can be constructed by the mind without historical development or behavioral experience. Some part of the human mind can be aware of information without the use of the recognized sensory channels. Some human beings have the capacity, from unconscious sources, for talents and skills for which they have little or no training; they can perform far beyond their knowledge or skills in the ego state. Complex verbal, symbolic, and artistic material can be created in final form at great speed without conscious planning. Skills are acquired without a developmental process. The production of sophisticated channeled material may require separation of the creative process from the primary ego consciousness. In a social context, there may be ideas that can be heard only if they come from the "outside."

Michael Grosso pointed out that if channeling and mediumship do not rely upon outside entities, we must recognize that humans have amazing latent talents and an enormous capacity for self-deception. Adam Crabtree added that there is a third option that relies upon what Ellenberger called the "mythopoetic faculty" of the unconscious mind. This hypothesis proposes that we constantly generate stories and myths in our unconscious mind which only occasionally reach conscious awareness. Rather than resorting to accusations of deception, we can invoke this inner myth-generator to explain how and why we might construct personalities and stories. Michael Grosso felt this is similar to Anita Muhl's (1963) "automatic zone," an area of the unconscious which, by its very nature, generates cohesive stories and plot lines, which may be constructive or destructive.

Ed Kelly added his reflections on a possible developmental unfolding in the channeling of "higher" entities. Some channelers appear to work through a hierarchy of spirits on different levels, and the channeler must become adequate to each "higher" level. The higher level beings are said to be more highly charged and can be exhausting to channel. This is common in the channeling literature and shows up in cross-cultural work, though he is unsure what to make of it. It may tell us something of the hierarchization of the afterlife or reflect structures of the evolving psyche. For many years, his sister acted as a channel. In the early years, there were garden variety characters: a Chinese man named Wu Sun and a few American Indians. Later in her years of channeling, however, she began to channel Christian saints, which she reported as higher intensity beings. This brought up the subject of in-depth study of the psychology of mediumship and channeling. What personality characteristics and variables influence the channeling capacity?

Arthur has recently been doing research with the use of a psychomanteum, an assembled room that is enshrouded in dark cloth and has a mirror hung at one end. Such conditions provide a suitable matrix in which visions, sensations, or audible impressions from what appears to be the "other side" register on the consciousness of the subject. Though a minority of subjects report full-blown apparitions, approximately fifty percent report some feeling of contact or resolution around a deceased individual. The implications for therapy are perhaps even more significant than for work on the empirical study of survival. Such a room was assembled for the duration of the conference.

References

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