

ARTICLES

Rosalind Heywood

Member of Council, Society for Psychical Research. Was interested in documenting different attitudes towards ESP research. Koestler dedicated his book "The Roots of Coincidence" to Heywood, 'catalyst-in-chief'. Her books included "ESP: A Personal Memoir", "The Sixth Sense" (London, 1959), "Beyond the Reach of Sense" (E. P. Dutton, 1974) and "The Infinite Hive" (Pan, 1966). In the latter book she documented her own psychic experiences.

Does Man Survive Death?

- Rosalind Heywood -

THE PROBLEM of man's survival of death was more vivid and immediate to the early researchers than it is to us, for survival had been an axiom all but universally accepted for thousands of years and the guns of modern science had only recently begun to submit it to heavy bombardment. They lived at a time when the irresistible force of modern science was beginning to crack up against the immovable post of religious belief. Sidgwick's own words bring their predicament home to us.

"When we took up seriously the obscure and perplexing investigation which we call psychical research, we were mainly moved to do so by the profound and painful division and conflict as regards the nature and destiny of the human soul, which we found in the thought of our age. On the one hand, under the influence of Christian teaching, still dominant over the minds of the majority of educated persons, and powerfully influencing many even of those who have discarded its dogmatic system, the soul is conceived as independent of the bodily system and destined to survive it. On the other hand, the preponderant tendency of modern physiology has been more and more to exclude this conception, and to treat the life and processes of any individual mind as inseparably connected with the life and processes of the short-lived body that it animates... Now our own position was this. We believed unreservedly in the methods of modern science, and were prepared to accept submissively her reasoned conclusions, when sustained by the agreement of experts; but we were not prepared to submit with equal docility to the mere prejudices of scientific men. And it appeared to us that there was an important body of evidence - tending *prima facie* to establish the independence of soul or spirit - which modern science had simply left on one side with ignorant contempt; and that in so leaving it she had been untrue to her professed method and had arrived prematurely at her negative conclusions. Observe that we did not affirm that these negative conclusions were scientifically erroneous. To have said that would have been to fall into the very error we were trying to avoid. We only said that they had been arrived at prematurely..."(1)

(1) Henry Sidgwick, Presidential Address, 1888. *Proceedings* SPR, Vol. V, p. 271.

Myers devoted the first volume of *Human Personality* to the study of what he called 'the actions and perceptions of spirits still in the flesh', and the second to an inquiry into 'the actions of spirits no longer in the flesh, and into the forms of perception with which men ... respond to the unfamiliar agency'. He did not accept the popular notion that an apparition was the whole of a deceased personality, but looked on it as merely a manifestation of persistent personal energy, continuing after the shock of death; a manifestation incomplete, probably telepathic in nature and profoundly difficult to achieve. 'An apparition,' he said, 'is a function of two variables: the incarnate spirit's sensitivity and the discarnate spirit's capacity of self-manifestation.'

But although they admitted that such manifestations might be faint and fragmentary, it will be noted that neither Myers nor those of his colleagues who with him became convinced of survival - there were some who did not - seemed to doubt the traditional assumption that the human spirit was a separate entity inhabiting a physical body, or that it was the whole of this entity which survived with all its idiosyncracies, loves and hates. Nowadays, when what is called personality seems to be so intimately connected with endocrine glands, even those who accept the possibility of some kind of survival find so complete a form of it a very tough nut to swallow. It must not be forgotten, of course, that the early pioneers were only beginning to realize the dramatic talents of the subconscious when ministering to the psychological needs of its 'owner'. and that, in consequence, alternative explanations to survival for some of the phenomena they unearthed were less plausible for them than they are for us. Also it so happened that the hypothesis of telepathy fitted many of their cases of spontaneous psi like a glove and they did not think of looking for other explanations, although it is now apparent that many, if not all, could also be attributed to clairvoyance, thus transferring the initiative to the percipient. They also took for granted that precognition, if it occurred at all in human beings, only did so to the slightest degree and they therefore assumed that testimony for it implied the existence of discarnate beings with a wider sweep of vision. This assumption also blinded them to the fact that precognition or retrocognition plus telepathy or clairvoyance could provide an alternative explanation for further phenomena which otherwise had an overwhelmingly strong appearance of having come from the dead. In the end Lord Rayleigh, Crookes, Myers, Sidgwick, Gurney, Lodge and William James all accepted survival. Sidgwick and Podmore were never convinced of it although they accepted ESP.

The evidence upon which the early workers formed their opinions was of two kinds: spontaneous phenomena apparently originating with the dead, and the utterances of certain mediums whom the most rigorous investigation and surveillance had shown to be honest.

Myers observed that in ESP between the living there were three main classes of 'messages': sensory hallucinations, emotional impulses and impulses to action, and definite intellectual messages. He found too that what appeared to be post-mortem. communications could also be divided into the same three classes. His argument that this resemblance was evidence for survival takes over 600 large pages to expound and illustrate and cannot fairly be summarized in half a dozen. The spontaneous cases he studied divide roughly into six types. First, direct death coincidences. Gurney had pointed out that nearly three quarters of the apparent psi experiences recorded in *Phantasms of the Living* either coincided with the agent's death or very shortly followed it. This might be indirect evidence of survival since it suggested that there was something within a man which was free enough of bodily activities to make contact with distant friends around his time of death.

But the situation was sometimes reversed. The dying person seemed to be not the agent but the percipient, and cried out as if in welcome to persons already dead. There was one variant of this phenomenon which Myers and Gurney felt could not be entirely ignored. There have been times when a dying person has also greeted, with his friends known to be dead, another person whom both he and his living friends had believed to be alive and well, but who, unknown to them, had died. Sir William Barrett collected a number of such cases(2).

(2) Sir William Barrett, *Deathbed Visions* (Methuen, 1926).

Apparitions clustering round the moment of death of the apparent agent might be explained by assuming that they were all caused by telepathic impacts which originated while he was still alive and remained latent for a time in the percipient's subconscious mind. But this hypothesis is somewhat strained by a second class of apparition's which are seen months or even years after the agent's death. Myers records one such case concerning a Mr Akhurst, who was deeply in love with a certain lady. She married another man, Mr Clark, but that Akhurst remained in love with her was clear enough when he visited her and her husband about two years later. He left them to go to Yorkshire and Mrs Clark did not hear from him again. Not quite three months later her baby was born, and shortly afterwards, very early one morning, he 'appeared' to her as she was feeding the baby.

'I felt a cold waft of air through the room,' she reported, 'and a feeling as though somebody had touched my shoulder... Raising my eyes to the door (which faced me) I saw Akhurst standing in his shirt and trousers looking at me, when he seemed to pass through the door.'

Mr Clark corroborated that his wife had told him of her vision later the same morning but that he had dismissed it as nonsense. She had, however, persisted and had said that Akhurst had been wearing only his shirt and trousers. On inquiry they learnt that ten weeks earlier Akhurst had been found dead clad in shirt and trousers, having taken an over-dose of chloral(3). This is one of many independent cases when the person who has the experience, whatever it may be, also has an impression of physical cold. An element of frustrated attachment similar to Akhurst's has been noticed in cases of ESP between the living, particularly in those in which the ESP appears to crop up frequently between the same two persons. It is as if intense desire on one side or the other - or on both - can open channels of communication normally closed.

(3) F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality*, Vol. II, PP. 371-2 (Longmans, 1954).

A Mrs V, wife of a man who had held an important post in India, gave Myers four cases which illustrate some of the testimony for survival produced by apparitions and also the strength and weakness of such cases. (The concealment of names is tiresome but understandable, for sensitive persons are naturally reluctant to have their intimate and emotionally disturbing experiences discussed in public.) Myers knew Mr and Mrs V well and recorded that she had had other similar experiences which were too intimate to make public. The first case she gave him was a death coincidence, but it could be explained away as the subjective result of her own anxiety. 'In 1874,' she reported, 'I was in India at a hill station. On the 7th June between one and three o'clock in the morning, I woke with the sensation that half my life had been taken away from me (I can only describe the feeling in this vague way). I sat up and pressed my side in wonder at what was happening. I then saw most beautiful lights at the end of the room. These lights gave place to a cloud and after a few moments the face of a dear sister then living (as I believed) appeared in the cloud which remained a little while and then faded away. I became much alarmed and at once felt I should hear bad news of my sister who was living in London and had been very ill, though the last accounts we had received had been better. I told my husband what had happened and when a telegram was brought by a friend at eight o'clock in the morning I knew what the contents must be. The telegram contained news of my sister's death the previous night.'(4)

(4) *Human Personality*, Vol. II, PP. 332-3 (Longmans, 1954).

The second case reported by Mrs V occurred eleven years later. It was an apparition of her dead sister, who still seemed to be concerned with the welfare of the living. It may thus suggest survival but it could be dismissed as created subconsciously by Mrs V alone.

'I was present in Church at the Confirmation of my sister's youngest boy,' she told Myers.

'I was in the left hand gallery of the Church, the boy in the body of the Church, on the right side. As I was kneeling, I looked at the opposite gallery which was of dark wood. I here saw the figure of my sister, the head and arms outstretched high above the boy as if blessing him. For the moment I thought it was impossible, and closed my eyes for a few seconds. Opening them again I saw the same beautiful form, which almost immediately vanished.'

Mrs V's third case can again be dismissed as the result of her anxiety about a dying man. Or it can be explained as a telepathic impact from the man's wife, who was longing for her presence and who subconsciously conveyed to her the brother's name. Or it can be taken at its face value, which hints that the wife's deceased brother felt continuing concern for her welfare and was trying to persuade Mrs V to go to her aid. Here is Mrs V's account. 'In India, in the winter of 1881, the husband of an acquaintance was lying dangerously ill at a hotel about five miles from us. Knowing this I went frequently to enquire for him. One particular evening I remained with his wife some time as the doctor thought his condition most critical. When I returned home about ten o'clock that night I ordered beef essence and jellies to be made to send early the next morning.

'The night was perfectly calm and sultry, not a leaf stirring. About twelve o'clock the venetians in my bedroom suddenly began to shake and knockings were heard, which seemed to proceed from a box under my writing table. The knocking and shaking of the venetians, went on for half an hour or more, off and on. During this time I heard a name whispered, A-B-, of which the Christian name was unknown to me, the surname being the maiden name of the sick man's wife. I felt so certain I was wanted at the hotel that I wished to start at once, but I was advised not to do so that hour of the night. Early the next morning a messenger arrived with a note begging me to go at once to the hotel, as my friend's husband had died at one o'clock. When I reached the hotel she told me how she had wished to send for me during the night whilst his death was impending. I ... found that the Christian name I had heard whispered was the name of her brother who had died seven years previously.'

The fourth case occurred when Mrs V was staying at a villa in the South of France, and at its face value it may suggest survival as the apparition was of a person Mrs V believed to be unknown to her.

'One night,' she told Myers, 'soon after we arrived, I went from my room upstairs to fetch something in the drawing room (which was on the ground floor) and saw a slight figure going down the stairs before me in a white garb with a blue sash and long golden hair. She glided on into a room near the hall door. This startled and impressed me so much that I afterwards went to the house agent and asked if anyone had lately died in that house, with long golden hair. He replied that an American lady, young and slight, with golden hair, had died there a few months before - in the very room into which I had seen the figure gliding.'

It is worth considering Mrs V's cases a little more closely for they are typical and indicate the problems to be faced when assessing the testimony of spontaneous cases not only for survival but also for ESP. In their favour it can be said that the percipient, Mrs V, was well known to Myers, who had had much experience in sifting testimony and was only too well accustomed to embroidered exaggeration by mediums and others. She reported her cases with simplicity, and they 'ring true' to those who have had similar ones. Moreover, her cases resemble many others for which the testimony, at least for ESP, is so good that it needs real intellectual contortions to explain it away.

But there are other factors, some of which reduce their value as evidence. Of Case I Myers for example recorded that 'Mr V remembers being told of Mrs V's vision, though at this distance of time he cannot state whether the telegram announcing the death had arrived before he was told.' Of the other cases Myers said:

'In Case II he (Mr V) was told at once of the incident. On Case III he has made and signed the following remarks: "The noise resembled the shaking of the lid of the tin box. I got up and went to the box, which continued making the noise, to see if there were rats, but there were none. There were no rats in the house and there was nothing in the box. A night-light was burning in the room. The rattling was continuous - not like that a rat could produce. It went on again after I had investigated it in vain. This incident was unique in my experience."'

Myers further recorded that Mrs V added in conversation:

"The Christian name whispered was Henry. The brother was not an Indian official and I had never heard of him." Mrs V's acquaintance with the lady whose husband was dying was not an intimate one. In Case IV Mr V again informs me that he was at once told of the incident.'

Myers' notes bring out the kind of evidential weakness that is almost inevitable in spontaneous cases. Case I may not even have been an hallucination, for if Mr V could not remember whether he was told about it before or after the arrival of the telegram, it could be said that Mrs V imagined the figure as a result of the telegram. In Case III Mrs V may have heard the brother's name casually and forgotten it, although her subconscious stored it up. But if this experience is to be dismissed as subjective Mr V's corroboration of the rattling box will have to be explained away, and that seems to entail that both Mr and Mrs V were somewhat weak-minded or liars. It is possible that light may be thrown on the box incident by recent experiments in what is called psychokinesis; that is, the alleged power of affecting a distant physical object by mental means without any known transmission of energy (Chapter XVI). In Case IV it can again be said that Mrs V had heard of the young American and forgotten it.

Myers also found evidence for survival in the apparent display of active initiative by the dead. One of such cases he quoted was exhaustively investigated by Richard Hodgson(5). An American farmer was found dead in an outhouse far from his home, and strangers prepared his body for burial in garments which included a pair of black satin slippers of a new pattern unknown in his home district. His own clothes, which were filthy, were thrown away outside the morgue. On hearing of her father's death, one of his daughters fainted and remained unconscious for a long period. On coming round she declared she had seen her father and correctly described his burial garments, including the slippers. She then asked for his old clothes, saying that he had told her that after leaving home he had sewn a large roll of dollar bills inside his grey shirt in a pocket he had made from a piece of her old red dress, and that the money was still there. To soothe the girl her brother made a journey to retrieve the clothes and in the presence of a number of people the money was found in the red pocket as she had said(6).

(5) *Proceedings* SPR, Vol. VIII, pp. 200-5.

(6) The arguments used to explain away even the most apparently watertight spontaneous cases are usefully summarized in *Psychical Research Today*, by D. J. West (Duckworth, 1954).

Source:

"The Sixth Sense" by Rosalind Heywood (1959, Chatto and Windus Ltd).

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