

## Philosophical Discussion

# Evidence Unseen: The Ethnographic and the Personal

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Among Spiritualists, it is a commonplace saying that, “mediumship proves survival.” It is through the providing of rich personal details about the communicating spirit that the medium hopes to demonstrate to the sitter in a home circle or private reading, or to the recipient in a public demonstration, that the medium is indeed in touch with the deceased. Evidence of survival is accordingly predicated on the provision of such details as, the spirit’s name (difficult to receive, but not impossible); places, events; shared memories; recognized objects of memory; character traits and peculiarities of language, dress, manners or occupation. Such details and others might be said, to borrow Geertz’s term, to constitute a “thick description” of the communicating spirit. We might refer to this kind of description as **the primary level of evidence**, since it is, ideally at least, reasonably verifiable by the recipient.

Some researchers of the past or present have argued, however, that this kind of evidence might be obtained from the recipient or sitter through telepathy, such that the medium has simply obtained the evidence directly from the consciousness of the recipient. This argument presumes that telepathy exists. To disprove this argument, if it needs to be dismissed, it would be necessary to produce evidential information that was unknown to the recipient’s consciousness, evidence that would have to be verified later. Such a situation is, in fact, not uncommon in mediumistic communications, and may present strong evidence for survival.

For the researcher who might be concerned for the evidential quality of mediumistic communication, however, there is a greater problem here anyway, and it is an important methodological factor. How *do* you gather sufficient data to support the evidential quality of mediumship, especially from a scientific or social scientific perspective? A typical Spiritualist Sunday service demonstration of mediumship, usually of clairvoyance, may see from three to five messages given, of varying evidential quality. Usually verification by the recipient follows, either throughout the delivering of the message or at the end. If there is matter that must be verified later, matter that is unknown to the recipient, that verification may be unknown to the researcher. The researcher may be unable to follow up the later verification, which might be done privately. Considering that there are hundreds of Spiritualist churches throughout the English speaking world, and possibly others elsewhere, which are running similar services and doing similar kinds of demonstrations on Sundays and other days, the data base for researchers is potentially vast, though practically limited by time, distance and the ubiquitous funding.

As a part-time Spiritualist medium for 43 years (as against a full time medium who earns her/his living through providing mediumistic services), I would estimate that I have given out something like 3000 plus messages in public demonstrations in

Spiritualist churches and in some public large scale demonstrations in halls, as well as in private readings and even in class rooms. I am only one of many mediums around the world, and am not involved full time, nor have I ever made a living through mediumship. I have no idea how many mediums there may be around the world today, doing message work Sunday after Sunday. Nor can I guess the number over the 150 or more years of Spiritualist demonstrations that have been given, the number of messages, potentially evidential, must be staggering. In fact that number, whatever it might be, must theoretically at least, be considered the parameters of the research data base. In other words, no researcher is ever likely to be able to fully evaluate the degree of evidentiality of Spiritualist mediumship demonstrations. Nonetheless, researchers of various sorts may still choose to create generalities based in fact on a tiny percentage of possibilities. On the other hand, we can actually come to a reasonable conclusion based on the concept of a **preponderance of evidence**, a term suggested to me by Michael Tymn, author of *The Articulate Dead* (Amazon Books.com). As a legal term, it simply means that there is a sufficient amount of evidence such that, while no one individual piece may be absolute proof in itself, the total makes it highly likely or even convincingly likely, that it is so. In ordinary language, we might say that, "if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, flies like a duck, eats like a duck, etc., it's pretty obvious that **it is** a duck." Of course, in this analogy, one needs to know what constitutes a duck before applying the above criteria.

Ducks notwithstanding, the researcher in the area of paranormal communication supposedly involved in Spiritualist mediumship demonstrations, has both **quantitative and qualitative difficulties**. There is a potential plethora of data, but we can't always access it. In addition, although clairvoyance and clairaudience seem to be the most common and easily available forms of mediumship, other forms may also be highly evidential, provided they are accessible.

While richness of detail, or "thick description" of communication may be considered a primary level of communication evidentiality, information that is unknown to the recipient and which must be verified by turning to others such as family members or others may be considered a **secondary level** of evidentiality, and one which potentially may be greater than that of the primary level. In this case, telepathy and "cold reading" of the recipient are both eliminated from the etiology of the phenomenon, to borrow another term. However, the researcher, as suggested earlier, may not be in a position to document the verification of such material, since it is likely to occur later and in private.

Yet another level, a **third level**, may be the most evidential of all, but again may also be problematic in access. At this level, information is obtained about spirits and situations which are absolutely not consciously known to the recipient, and which may not be verified for a longer period of time. Explaining such information may lead the skeptic or even the researcher into esoteric kinds of models which might be forms of reification, or perhaps which reach in to the absurd or even silly, as has occurred in some past research. I have been the recipient of such information which took almost twenty years to verify under extremely unusual conditions.

In the early summer of 1969, I was the recipient of a wrong-hand mirror writing spirit message of puzzling information. In this particular case, the medium was a friend and developing medium whom I had met at the first Spiritualist church I had ever attended, in Montreal, Quebec. The medium's name is George H., and he wrote this form of automatic writing using the opposite hand to the one which was normally used for

writing, and he wrote very quickly in reverse, so that the paper had to be held up to a mirror to read. He worked with a spirit collective, which called itself "Tonancas," and from whom the information was given. George claimed that the information was usually very evidential, though he did have at least some knowledge of me and my background at that time. The procedure is rather impressive to watch, especially considering the speed at which it is done. Nonetheless, the message at that time made no sense to me whatsoever. For example, since names are a thing of the earth plane, it is said that we often have other names on the Other Side; George asked Tonancas by what other names I was known on the spirit side. Several names were given, but then it said that I was also known by a name "which was held dear in my mother's heart," the name being Andrew. While I am fond of the name, I felt no special connection to it, but I later asked my mother if that made any sense to her. Her answer was a simple, "No."

Other names of supposed relatives in spirit were also given, and meant nothing to me. So George was disappointed, and could not understand why the process seemed so out of sync that day. I tucked the sheets of paper away at least, and let the matter go. Seventeen years later, however, the old message began to take on new possibilities, and about two years later indeed was to prove quite accurate. That was because seventeen years after the message was given to me, my parents finally told me that I was not their natural child but that I had been adopted at five months of age. Needless to say, I was stunned by this profound shock of a totally unknown aspect of my personal identity. I was now facing the profound difficulty of identity reconstruction and the vast possibilities of that which was unknown. I began a search for my birth origins, armed at least with the name of my birth mother (on the adoption papers) and not much else. At that time, 1986, the province in which I was born would give out, as was common, only non-identifying information about my family of origins. To cut a long story short, as the saying goes, I did succeed in tracing my birth family, though my birth mother was deceased by the time I succeeded, and I discovered that my maternal grandfather, to whom I bore a resemblance, was Andrew. And the rest of the names on that document from 1969 were deceased family members not of my adoptive family, but *of my birth family*. Now, I would surmise that some might wish to say that the "Tonancas" collective was telepathically "reading my unconscious" mind and producing information that I unconsciously knew from before birth. (I can think of at least one well-known debunker who would probably gravitate to such an explanation!) Or perhaps one might argue that I gained the information after birth, even though I was removed from my birth mother, according to the records, only 10 days after birth. Others might fall back on some scheme of "universal consciousness" into which the medium tapped to provide such information. Ultimately the non-evidential hypothesis creates far more problems than the Spiritualist explanation creates, and we do know about Occam's Razor.

An interesting footnote to the above situation, again from a personal view point, might be the case of my missing sister. At age 17, I was "urged" from within, for lack of better words, to do a portrait of a young woman, in pastel chalk and pencil, which is hanging currently in my study. The young woman would have been a few years older than I was at the time; I did not know who she was, nor why I had to do her portrait; I knew only that I had a strong connection to this image, and I called her, "Marianne," after the girl in a song by Harry Belafonte popular at that time, who was "down by the sea side, sifting sand"... and collecting shells. At that time I had a bit of art training, but

mainly was self taught. Over the years, a number of mediums had told me that I had a sister in spirit, but I could not verify that. When I first began my search for my family of origins, I consulted a psychic who was recommended to me by a fellow medium whose judgment I trusted; in the course of the reading, he found that he was having difficulty understanding what he was receiving and asked if I were looking for something in particular. I replied that I was searching for my family of origin. He said that I had a natural sister in spirit, that she had only lived a few days or, perhaps, was born retarded or handicapped in such a way that she "had never fully touched the earth plane." Of course I could not confirm that. Eventually, when I had located my birth family (with direct spiritual help as well as help from Parent Finders), I mentioned a sister. They had no knowledge of a sister. Yet the matter came back to me a number of times over the next several years, along with another detail in which I was told from my own spiritual contact that I would eventually contact the woman who has my birth mother's papers and diaries. Following inner direction, I placed an ad in the newspaper of the major city near where my birth mother and her husband had lived, asking for any information anyone might have on my mother and her husband. I received a call from a constable of the city police force, saying that his police partner had seen the ad and recognized the names as being people that he knew. Of course I had to explain to him who I was, which surprised him. He told me that I really needed to speak to his sister-in-law, who was coming around in a few minutes, since she had been the executor of my birth mother and husband's estate. A few minutes later I was speaking with her in a very emotional conversation, for both of us, and she told me what my cousins did not know, that I would have had a sister, a few years older than I, but she only lived a few days, and her name was Marianne. I now have the papers and diaries that my birth mother kept over many, many years. From the photographs that I have from my cousins, I can see Marianne's resemblance to my mother and her husband, as I see my own resemblance to my mother and her father, Andrew.

The question, though, still remains: how much qualitative material does it make to create a preponderance of evidence, and how is it to be gained? Though psychical research began in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century and continues today to produce strong evidence for the survival hypothesis, we still face a powerful denial of any such possibilities from the faithful orthodox religious and the faithfully orthodox scientific materialists. In both cases, the religious and the scientific, it seems that the power and the authority of the paradigms and the paradigm holders is what is threatened. No matter what the explanation of mediumship, I find it quite bizarre that the possibility of life after death remains steadfastly avoided by those who seek the truth for the betterment of humanity. "Truth", as Karl Popper supposedly said, "is a hard thing to come by."

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