

Parapsychological Investigations: Reflections, Adventures, and Cautionary Tales

Results:

The result of my research is a book whose principal theme is the appearance—and sometimes *only* the appearance—of psychic or paranormal events in everyday life. It's written both for academics and educated laypersons, and it describes some of my most memorable encounters with the ostensibly paranormal. I began serious philosophical study of the evidence in parapsychology thirty years ago, and since that time I've had many opportunities to investigate cases for myself. Most of those concerned alleged instances of spontaneous, large-scale psychokinesis (PK), and in the process I've gained insights into the investigative process as well as the phenomena themselves. My previous four books dealt either entirely or partially with theoretical issues relating to psychical research. Although this book also deals with some of those interesting issues, it's largely autobiographical, and it's presented in readable and relatively informal prose.

Five chapters discuss individual case investigations and the theoretical issues related to them. In Chapter 1, I present the case of the “gold leaf lady,” a Florida woman whose body would break out spontaneously and at close range in a golden foil that turned out to be brass. I describe the careful conditions under which that phenomenon has been observed, as well as a noted magician's inability to replicate it, and also a botched attempt by the TV show “Unsolved Mysteries” to study and document its occurrence. I also consider why the phenomenon took the peculiar form of brass leaf, and whether (if genuine) it should be regarded as a materialization or an apport (i.e., the paranormal movement of an object from one location to another).

Chapter 3 concerns my exasperating attempts in New York to study the alleged psychokinetic superstar, Joe Nuzum. I describe Nuzum's efforts to circumvent previously agreed-upon controls and how I apparently caught him cheating. I also describe how Nuzum was—sometimes innocently—aided in his evasions by his enthusiastic but uncritical supporters. To some extent this chapter is a cautionary tale. It indicates the sorts of things that can go wrong when a subject is given too much control of test conditions. It also details what at least appears to be both incompetence and treachery on the part of Nuzum's principal sponsor.

Chapter 4 is a kind of sequel to the Nuzum case. It's the story of a subject from California who seemed able in informal settings to produce impressive observable psychokinetic effects. But when he was brought to New York for careful testing, his previously confident attitude was thoroughly undermined by his sponsor—the same person who had funded my experiments with Joe Nuzum, and who apparently wanted to retaliate against me for having claimed I caught Nuzum cheating. This, too, is a cautionary tale, concerning the psychological delicacy of even the most promising subjects, and the need for extreme care and sensitivity in dealing with them and in designing experimental protocols.

Chapter 5 describes a peculiar encounter I had with a policeman who believed he could transfer images from photographs onto other objects (including his own body), simply by placing the photos on those objects. Although nothing of the sort actually happened, the policeman, remarkably, continued to insist that the phenomenon was real

and obvious. I consider this yet another cautionary tale, about how even presumably trained observers can be blinded by their own credulousness.

Chapter 6 concerns paranormal photography. It's a postscript to the famous case of Ted Serios, the subject of one of the most fascinating, and undoubtedly one of the strongest, investigations ever of observable PK. In the 1960s, Serios produced a variety of images and other effects on "instant" Polaroid film under well-controlled conditions—for example, while separated at a considerable distance from the camera and while wearing clothes provided by the experimenters. Moreover, because Serios never handled the film and because the pictures developed immediately upon removal from the camera, the results couldn't be explained away as darkroom tricks. This chapter brings the case up to date and describes my own encounters with Serios, years after the major investigation of him had concluded.

To lend perspective to these case reports, in Chapter 2 I survey the dramatic and fascinating history of physical mediumship connected with the heyday of the Spiritualist movement (roughly, 1850-1930). The best cases from that era make it very clear why concerns about possible fraud are both legitimate but also sometimes overrated. Moreover, they supply a yardstick by which we can measure the significance of contemporary cases. I give special attention to the careers of D.D. Home and Eusapia Palladino, explaining why their best-documented phenomena can't be dismissed as fraudulent and why effects of the magnitude found in these cases seem no longer to occur.

With Chapter 7, the book becomes somewhat more abstract, although the chapter begins with a personal matter. I start by describing one of my more curious apparent encounters with the paranormal—a very strange and seemingly meaningful coincidence. Inevitably, this raises a recurring hot topic originally introduced by Carl Jung—namely, *synchronicity* (acausal meaningful coincidence). However, because this concept is especially confused and widely abused, I take the opportunity to clarify it. And as a result, I theorize at somewhat greater length than in the previous chapters. In the process, I make several crucial and related points. Perhaps most important, I show that it's incorrect—in fact, incoherent—to claim (as many do) that synchronicity is a principle in nature that organizes events into meaningful clusters. Ultimately, I argue for a controversial—but I believe unavoidable—position: namely, that if genuinely nonrandom meaningful coincidences occur, this would be best explained in terms of a refined, extensive, and potentially very intimidating form of large-scale psychokinesis.

In Chapter 8, I describe some of the intriguing activities of my wife Gina, an academic and clinical psychologist who also happens to be a virtuoso astrologer. Gina has successfully used her astrological skills to help several European and Asian professional soccer teams rise to the top of their respective leagues, and her startlingly detailed and accurate predictions were also highly valued within the Serbian mafia. This chapter presents some of the episodes from Gina's history and from our life together that have forced me—to my great discomfort—to confront my own prejudices against astrology. Finally, I bring this chapter and the book to a close with some speculations about the place of psychic abilities in the general scheme of things.

The various adventures recounted in this book are interesting in themselves, quite apart from their relevance to empirical and methodological issues in science generally and parapsychology in particular. Nevertheless, in their own distinctive ways all the reported cases are empirically significant. Some provide provocative evidence for the reality of psychokinesis; others document only human duplicity and delusion. Some offer object lessons about how *not* to investigate the paranormal. Some illustrate the

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fragility and context-sensitivity of the phenomena, as well as the need to probe beneath the psychological surface to understand their psychogenesis. Some show how evidence can be suppressed or compromised by the zealotry of both believers and non-believers. Moreover, the case of the gold leaf lady illustrates how the collection of evidence can be undermined by the interest and funding of the media.

This book will be published in Fall 2007 by the University of Chicago Press, under the title *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations*

Published work:

The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations. 2007. University of Chicago Press.

Braude, S. E. (Forthcoming). The possibility of mental mediumship: Philosophical considerations. In A. Rock (Ed), *The survival hypothesis: Essays in mediumship*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Braude, S. E. (forthcoming). *Crimes of reason: On mind, nature & the paranormal*. Rowman & Littlefield.

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