

The ESP Enigma

BY DIANE HENNACY POWELL



Photograph from the book *Signs From The Near Future*, courtesy of author Fernando Barbella*

WHETHER WE CONSIDER OURSELVES BELIEVERS in psychic phenomena or not, many of us have had something happen to make us wonder about the subject. It could have been someone telling us that she was just thinking about us when we called, or vice versa. It might have been a gut feeling to drive a different route from our usual one, only to discover later that a large accident occurred on the road we didn't take. Such experiences may not happen often, but they can leave us with a profound feeling that we are interconnected, that we can know things without understanding how, and that there must be more to our universe than we detect through ordinary senses.

People have believed in psychic abilities since the beginning of recorded history. Certain individuals report more

experiences with psychic phenomena than others. Since these experiences usually only occur spontaneously for most of us, many cultures developed divination aids in order to access psychic information more readily. The Dogon in West Africa toss cowrie shells into a basket and interpret the patterns. The Chinese devised the I Ching, and Egyptian priests slept in special temples in order to have prophetic dreams.

Perhaps the most famous divination practice was the Delphic oracle, who drew the rich and famous from all over the Greek world from the sixth century BC until the fourth century AD. The Greek historian Herodotus claimed that the Delphic psychic spoke in a trance induced by natural gases that seeped through the rocks. This was discounted as a myth until 2001, when Jelle de Boer, a geologist at Wesleyan University in

Middleton, Conn., analyzed the hydrocarbon gases emitted by the temple's nearby spring. He reported in *Geology* that he found ethylene in sufficient concentrations to have created a narcotic effect that would have been experienced as a floating or disembodied euphoric state.

The most widespread form of divination is scrying, from the old word *descry*, which means "to catch sight of" and involves deep concentration on a smooth reflective surface until an image appears. Ancient Greeks looked for answers in spring waters; in ancient India, warriors peered into vessels filled with water to see if they'd return from battle; Tahitians poured water into a hole at crime scenes to scry the image of the culprits. The most famous tool for scrying has been the crystal ball, which became a tool of Gypsies, among others.

The Old Testament of the Judeo-Christian Bible contains numerous accounts of prophets, but Christianity forbade all forms of prophecy except for divine revelation and astrology. As Christianity spread, many forms of prophecy declined or went underground in Christian areas, lest the practitioners be accused of heresy or witchcraft. In the Middle Ages, popes still consulted astrologers to provide them with propitious dates for coronation, but after the Copernican revolution changed our understanding of planetary movements, the Catholic Church declared divine revelation to be the only acceptable form of prophecy.

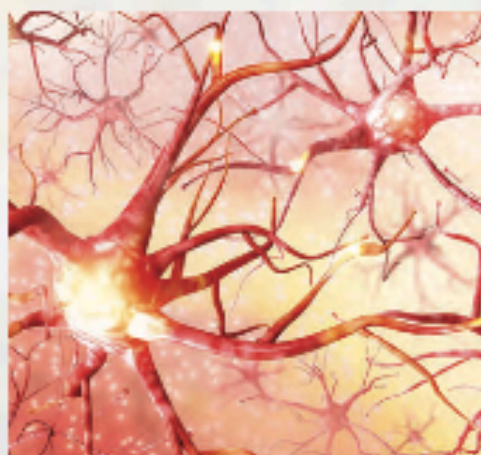
Westerners' growing disbelief in psychic abilities was influenced by the development of the scientific method. During the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment, the universe became increasingly viewed as a mechanistic system, accurately known only through observation, calculation, and reason. Anything associated with the supernatural or psychic phenomena lost credibility.

Skepticism about psychic phenomena was further fueled by scandals that linked claims of psychic abilities with con artists who preyed upon people's vulnerabilities. Also, as the psychiatric profession arose, reports of psychic experiences were often accompanied by signs of irrational thinking and became interpreted as signs of brain pathology, rather than innate gifts or capacities.

Added to this was the belief that the mind exists solely within the brain. This is an idea that has grown since Francois de La Peyronie, an 18th-century French surgeon, observed changes in human behavior that accompanied specific brain injuries. The scientific model of the brain and consciousness that evolved in this historical context did not have to account for psychic phenomena.

The scientific model is based on these facts: The brain is a biological machine with over a hundred billion neurons, or brain cells, each of which has an average of 5,000 connections to other neurons. Electrical signals pass along the neurons, causing them to release chemical messengers, such as serotonin and dopamine, from their terminal ends. These messengers land on the receptors of neurons on the other side of the synapse,

or region between neurons for chemical connection. Once neurons receive enough stimulation from their connecting neurons, they send signals along their axons to other neurons. There is almost an infinite number of possible patterns of activity along the neuronal network, and specific patterns are believed to represent concepts, thoughts, or memories. Francis Crick, the late co-discoverer of DNA's structure, summarized this



model when he said, "The astonishing hypothesis is that 'You,' your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."

Even though scientists, including Crick, admit that they do not know what consciousness is or how it is generated, proponents of the current model consider consciousness to be a byproduct of a brain that can access new information only by direct sensory input. The body has receptors for sound, taste, sight, touch, smell, and proprioception (detection of body movement and placement), but there is no hardware to access sensory information from distant points in space and time, let alone to send information directly from one brain to another. The current concept of consciousness cannot accommodate the existence of psychic abilities, and as rational beings, we are skeptical of that which cannot be explained scientifically.

Yet some psychic phenomena have been measured and verified scientifically. One example is the work by Adrian Parker and Joakim Westerlund at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. They placed the "receivers" of telepathic information in isolation and minimized

their sensory input, thereby preventing any potential interference. The "senders" sat in an isolated room watching a film, while the receivers simultaneously commented upon what information came to mind. A real-time recording of the receivers' comments was then superimposed upon the transmitted film for analysis. One participant described accurately, in real time, a full sequence of events as they occurred in the film.

Another example is the research at Stanford Research Institute (SRI) by Russell Targ and Hal Puthoff, two laser physicists, which provided valuable information to almost every branch of the U.S. intelligence community during the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Much of their work was done on remote viewing, in which the sender went to an undisclosed location and the receiver drew a picture of it. One of their best receivers was Pat Price, a retired policeman who had helped the Berkeley police in their search for Patty Hearst. In his first attempt at remote viewing for SRI, he achieved 90 percent accuracy in his psychic drawing of a swimming pool complex that included its dimensions, size, location, and the function of the pools and adjacent buildings.

Despite such experiments, the scientific community still questions the validity of psychic phenomena, demanding research data that is reproducible under tightly controlled conditions in order to accept phenomena as true. At least on a public level, most scientists have taken the stand that something as extraordinary as psychic phenomena requires the data to be extraordinary as well.

A critical review of the laboratory data for psychic phenomena reveals cumulative data would have been sufficient evidence for other areas of research. If one wants to prove whether or not telepathy can exist, one strong convincing case for its existence should be sufficient, because that is analogous to one living brontosaurus being proof that the species isn't extinct. William James, the late professor of psychology at Harvard, shared this same view on what is sufficient proof. He described paranormal experiences as "white crows" and said that "if you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you must not seek to show that no crows are [black];

it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white.”

Applying James’s analogy to the status of psychic research, there have been several sightings of white birds. Scientists haven’t disputed that they are white, just whether they are crows. One has to capture the white bird, inspect it closely, and perhaps even test its DNA to prove that it is a crow. Anything short of this would be insufficient for a scientific revolution. Technology has advanced such that we can better identify the “white bird” in psychic research, and it does appear to be a crow.

But proof of the existence of some psychic phenomena would mean we need to reconcile how they are possible given our understanding of consciousness and the brain. This would pose more of a challenge if the current model were complete and psychic phenomena were the only mystery. Instead, relatively little is known about consciousness. For example, no one has been able to answer what has been called the “hard question” of consciousness: how can something as nonmaterial as consciousness arise from something material like the brain? The model also doesn’t explain free will or our feeling that there is an “I” that has experiences. On top of that, there are reports of near-death survivors that suggest that consciousness can continue even when the brain has shut down, whereas the current scientific paradigm continues to regard consciousness as a product of brain chemistry and wiring.

A primary reason psychic phenomena are hotly contested by the scientific community is that the validity of such phenomena would mean a major scientific revolution, similar to the Copernican revolution that forced us to accept the sun as the center of the solar system. Scientific revolutions are not easy matters. Thomas Kuhn, the late physicist and professor of the history of science at MIT, compared scientific revolutions to political revolutions, with good reason. They involve a lot of politics. Some interested scientists have openly stated that they were afraid that they would lose their credibility should they investigate psi. Partly as a result of these concerns, today there are no more than 50 scientists across the globe involved full-time in this area of research.

But it is the study of anomalies, such as psychic experiences, that will provide a better understanding of consciousness.

When a scientist has devoted his or her career to studying psychic abilities, it has usually been because of a thought-provoking personal experience. One of many examples is Hans Berger, the inventor of the electroencephalogram (EEG), which is used clinically to measure brain waves. Berger invented this device as a means of investigating telepathy after an extraordinary experience with his sister, who sent him a telegram saying she was very concerned that something bad had happened to him.

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Her timing was impeccable. Earlier that day he was almost killed while riding a horse. His sister’s timely concern was so striking that Berger hypothesized that brains must be capable of sending signals to one another. Because this was during the time when electromagnetism was an exciting new field of inquiry, he thought that he’d find the answer by designing a machine that measures the electromagnetic activity of the brain. Although the EEG did not provide proof of telepathy, it has been of great help in advancing our understanding of the brain.

My own interest dates back to when I was 13 years old. Through a good friend, I met a circus magician known primarily for his Houdini escapist tricks. In my friend’s living room, he demonstrated something astonishing. From 20 feet across the room, the magician read, word for word, the contents of any book that I randomly chose from among hundreds on the bookshelves. There were no mirrors behind me, and I knew that these books belonged to my friend, not the magician. Even if he had memorized all of the books, he would also have needed exceptional luck to guess which pages I chose. There was no rational explanation at the time for what I observed, but it fostered a deep, abiding curiosity.

I was already familiar with extraor-

dinary mental abilities in one sense. I was a math prodigy as a child, someone who could do ninth- and tenth-grade math at seven years of age. And at age four my grandmother was a musical prodigy who could play songs accurately after hearing them only once. Much later I learned of autistic savants and other prodigies whose abilities were well documented but, like psychic phenomena, were not explained by the current understanding of consciousness and the human brain.

My interest led me to study neuroscience in college and specialize in neuropsychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. While on faculty at Harvard Medical School, I encountered a patient who claimed to be psychic. She then told me several accurate details about my life and made specific predictions about my future, all of which eventually came true. After this encounter, I decided to systematically investigate psychic phenomena. And over the past 20 years I combed through decades of published studies, experiments, investigations by the CIA, insights from patients who shared details of their psychic experiences, accounts of prophetic dreams, work by famous psychics such as Edgar Cayce, and the conclusions of Carl Jung and Albert Einstein on consciousness and the illusion of time, to build a scientifically-based model that makes Psi not just possible, but probable. ☺

*The photograph from the book *Signs From The Near Future* is courtesy of author Fernando Barbella, a noted Argentinian advertising and creative director at OgilvyInteractive. For more information about Barbella and his work, please visit: cargocollective.com/ferbarbella/ABOUT-ME-1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DR. DIANE HENNACY POWELL is a practicing psychiatrist; John Hopkins trained neuroscientist, a former faculty member at Harvard Medical School, and a contributor to the *Institute of Noetic Sciences*. She is also the author of three books, including *The ESP Enigma*, from which this article was adapted. For more information on Dr. Powell and her groundbreaking research, visit diane.hennacypowell.com. Please join Diane and others in Virginia Beach at the 87th A.R.E. Members’ Congress, June 22-27, 2018.

