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The Truth Is Out There

After a formative encounter with the paranormal, one philosopher embraced the study of it

By Scott Carlson

The pivotal moment of Stephen E. Braude's academic career happened when he was in graduate school, on a dull afternoon in Northampton, Mass., in 1969.

Or, at least, what follows is what he says happened. Readers — skeptics and believers both — will have to make up their own minds.

Braude and two friends had seen the only movie in town and were looking for something to do. His friends suggested going to Braude's house and playing a game called "table up." In other words, they wanted to perform a séance.

They sat at a folding table, with their fingers lightly touching the tabletop, silently urging it to levitate. Suddenly it shuddered and rose several inches off the ground, then came back down. Then it rose a second time. And again and again. Braude and his friends worked out a code with the table, and it answered questions and spelled out names.

Braude says he had not given much thought to the paranormal before that afternoon, but the experience shook him to his core, he says, sitting in an easy chair in his immaculate home in suburban Baltimore. He insists there was no way his friends could have manipulated the table, adding, "I should tell you, we were not stoned."

Today Braude, 62, is one of the few mainstream academics applying his intellectual training to questions that many would regard at best as impossible to answer, and at worst absolutely

ridiculous: Do psychic phenomena exist? Are mediums and ghosts real? Can people move objects with their minds or predict the future? A professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County, Braude is a past president of the Parapsychological Association, an organization that gathers academics and others interested in phenomena like ESP and psychokinesis, and he has published a series of books with well-known academic presses on such topics.

His latest, *The Gold Leaf Lady and Other Parapsychological Investigations* (University of Chicago Press), is sort of a summing up of his career, filled with stories of people who claimed to have otherworldly abilities. The writing is so fluid that the book at times seems made for a screen adaptation. (In fact, Chris Carter, creator of *The X-Files*, contributes a blurb to the back of the book. Braude advised Carter on a screenplay he is writing.) But Braude also includes some dense philosophical arguments — especially in a chapter about synchronicity, in which he ponders whether humans can orchestrate unlikely coincidences through psychokinesis, the ability to move or influence objects with the mind.

"He is setting the standard for how an analytic philosopher who takes this stuff seriously should proceed," says Raymond Martin, chairman of the philosophy department at Union College, in New York, who formerly worked at the University of Maryland at College Park and met Braude then. "He's very thorough in informing himself about what has been shown empirically, and he is cautious. He is usually skeptical in the end, but he is not dismissive."

Martin thinks philosophers are often too quick to dismiss anything that smacks of exotic phenomena because they want to protect the integrity of the discipline. "A lot of people just don't want this stuff on the table, because they regard it as an embarrassment to philosophy," he says. "Steve does take it seriously, and he has paid a price."

Greg Ealick took several of Braude's classes 20 years ago when he

was an undergraduate at UMBC, and he is now Braude's colleague as an adjunct instructor in the philosophy department there. He says the philosophical aspects of Braude's work are "first-rate," although he's not convinced of the science of researching paranormal phenomena.

Braude's explorations could be seen as thought experiments, he says. Common in philosophy, such experiments pose odd scenarios to test arguments. A particularly well-known one asks: What if your brain were pulled out of your skull, put into a vat, and hooked up to a computer that could keep it alive and simulate external stimuli? Would you know that you were no longer inside your body? Therefore, can you know anything about the external world? "A lot of first-rate philosophy of mind comes from wildly speculative thought experiments," Ealick says. "I don't think that Steve's are really any wilder than the rest."

After his experience with the table in Northampton, Braude says, he put the event out of his mind for almost a decade. He got a job at the University of Maryland in 1971, and he went about publishing articles on the philosophy of time and the philosophy of language for the next seven years, until he got tenure.

Then he came out, so to speak. He knew that philosophers, like William James and later H.H. Price, had studied paranormal phenomena such as spiritualism and life after death. He thought he could demonstrate to colleagues that such phenomena were still worth studying. "To show you how naïve I was, I actually thought that they would be pleased to discover that they were wrong, so long as that brought them closer to discovering the truth." Instead, many shunned him.

"It clarified for me a lot about the scholarly community generally, something that has been confirmed over and over and over," he says. "It's not the haven of intellectual freedom that it is often cracked up to be."

Some of that jaded perspective comes through in *The Gold Leaf Lady*, which Braude describes as his "kiss-and-tell book" about his

paranormal research. He trashes plenty of people in the book, including supposed psychics and their handlers who appear to be frauds. But he saves his sharpest barbs for prominent skeptics, like Paul Kurtz, a professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo and founder of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, and James Randi, a magician better known as the Amazing Randi. Randi is described as a "publicity hound" who "weaseled out" of a challenge to explain phenomena produced by Ted Serios, who some believe could make odd and spooky images appear on Polaroid film. Kurtz is described as "disreputable" and sloppy. The skeptics, Braude says, pick out the weakest cases and demolish them, then use those spectacular debunkings to persuade the public that all exotic claims are bosh.

Braude believes that most people who dismiss the possibility of paranormal phenomena simply have not considered "the best cases" in parapsychology — cases like that of D.D. Home, which Braude summarizes in *The Gold Leaf Lady*. Home, a medium who lived in the mid-1800s, allegedly performed several fantastic phenomena under strict observation. He once held an accordion by one hand inside an electrified cage, and the instrument played all by itself — or so several observers documented.

Another "best case," according to Mr. Braude, is the real-life gold-leaf lady of the book's title. She is an allegedly illiterate Florida woman named Katie who goes into trances and writes in French, has predicted events for police detectives with stunning accuracy (like the time she predicted that bales of marijuana would wash up on a particular beach on a particular day, and they did), and occasionally finds flakes of paper-thin brass growing on her body. Braude believes that he saw a piece of brass appear spontaneously on her face during an interview. (He has kept some samples of the brass leaf in Ziploc bags.)

But other chapters of *The Gold Leaf Lady* describe the difficulties of putting strict controls on tests of "psi" abilities (like psychokinesis or ESP) and the inconclusive results that follow. Braude tells the story of Dennis, a fellow who showed potential in psychokinesis and was in many ways an ideal test subject. He was

easy to work with, and he had no problem stripping and changing into inspected garments in front of a camera (a standard test procedure to make sure a subject isn't hiding any trick devices). But each time Dennis traveled from California, he traveled on a red-eye flight and arrived tired and flustered, like an athlete who hadn't rested before a big game. That, Braude believes, may explain in part why Dennis could not do much during the controlled tests.

Or it could have been the disdain a colleague showed for Dennis, which may have undermined his confidence before the tests. While observers want to apply strict controls, they don't want to squelch phenomena by applying pressure or making test subjects feel badgered. "That would be like saying, Let me see an erection," Braude says.

Or it could have been a "source of psi" problem — that is, the unconscious, latent psi abilities of the testers could have interrupted the movement of the objects.

(Sadly, Dennis could not continue his tests under better conditions. After he traveled back to California the second time, he was bitten by an opossum and died of a heart infection.)

Even to consider the question of psychic ability, never mind going through the trouble of testing people like Dennis, takes a leap in faith that psychic ability actually exists — a leap that many people aren't willing to make.

And some people at UMBC seem to not want to be associated with his research, or even talk about it. Senior members of Braude's own department either did not reply or did not want to comment about his work when contacted by The Chronicle.

In 2002 Braude gave a lecture to the physics department, where he says he was shouted down by other professors. Lynn Sparling, an associate professor of physics at the university, doesn't remember the substance of the talk, but she remembers her impression of Braude. "I came away feeling that this guy was kind of an embarrassment to the university," she says. "I just thought he was

a total goofball. I couldn't believe some of the things that I was hearing."

"If you're going to talk about that stuff, you really need to know what the physical laws are," she says. "If something is defying gravity, you have to have a reason for defying a law that has been proven over and over and over again."

In an e-mail message, Braude responds that so little is understood about psychokinesis (if indeed psychokinesis is real) that a levitating table does not necessarily defy laws of physics. And, he says, we don't necessarily have to understand and explain a phenomenon to know that it is real. "This matter could only be a problem for those who naïvely believe that physics must have an explanation for everything that happens," he says.

Larry Wilt, library director at UMBC, who has a doctorate in philosophy, has read much of Braude's work and admires its philosophical rigor. "My sense is that he is well respected by people on campus who have read his work," he says. "Those who haven't read it will dismiss it out of hand."

Braude will retire within a few years, and he's not sure to what extent he will continue to study the paranormal after he leaves the university. He is a pianist trained in classical music and jazz — a beautiful grand piano sits in his living room — and he plans to devote lots of time to playing and performing with groups.

He is also a stereoscopic photographer, with a collection of antique equipment, some inherited from his grandfather. His photos of landscapes pop to life in three dimensions when placed in a viewer. His portraits of people are so lifelike they are eerie — human beings locked in time, almost like wax figures.

But there may also be new horizons for him in parapsychology. Djurdjina Ruk, his wife of five years, studies astrology. Once a professor of psychology at the University of Novi Sad, in the former Yugoslavia, she supported herself during the recent civil war by providing astrological predictions for European and Chinese soccer teams and for the Serbian mafia. She wanted for

nothing and was even offered a Ferrari by the mob while the country around her imploded, as Braude details in the last chapter of *The Gold Leaf Lady*.

Braude says that during their time together she has been uncannily accurate, determining, for example, the time of the birth of one of Braude's friends down to the minute. The couple plan their trips and vacations around her astrological charts. They also gamble based on her predictions; their winnings during the 2005 football season paid for a summer vacation.

He's still not sure what to make of it. He once regarded astrology with the sort of disdain that others bring to his work, but now he thinks he should have an open mind. One thing is certain: He doesn't care what other people think.

"I stopped worrying about trying to convince other people," he says. "I'm in this to try to figure out things for myself."

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