

techniques that I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation are simply pathways to remind ourselves of these interconnections.

They can allow us to rediscover those connections and to use them for purposes of our physical and mental health and well-being. ■

THE FEAR OF PSI REVISITED, or IT'S THE THOUGHT THAT COUNTS

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My first experience of apparently large-scale psychokinesis (PK) occurred a long time before I knew anything about parapsychology. The year was 1968, and I was in graduate school working toward my Ph.D. in philosophy. I had no interest in parapsychology at the time, and to the extent I had any solid philosophical views at all I fancied myself to be a kind of hard-nosed materialist. That wasn't because of any careful, sustained thought I had given to the subject. It was merely a bit of semi-critical intellectual posturing, something which I felt suited the person I believed I ought to be.

At any rate, it was a slow afternoon in Northampton, Massachusetts (as most afternoons in Northampton were apt to be), and two friends stopped by my house just to hang out. Since we could think of nothing else to do, they suggested that we hold a seance. Actually, they never used the term "seance"; they considered the activity to be a game called "table-up." My friends said they had played the game several times before and that it was fun and interesting. Although I was somewhat underwhelmed at the proposal and suspicious of their prediction that the table would move without normal assistance, I agreed to give "table-up" a try. It was a slow afternoon, after all.

Seating ourselves around a small folding table that I owned, we placed our fingers lightly upon its surface and concentrated silently on the command (and sometimes muttered softly), "table-up!" To my astonishment, for the next three hours the table tilted and nodded in response to questions, spelling out answers according to an absurdly cumbersome code my friends had recommended. We allegedly contacted three different entities, only one of whom provided information which seemed possible to check out. That communicator said his name was Horace T. Jecum (the spelling may well have been botched in the use of our clunky code), and he claimed to have built the house I was living in (a classic and quite old New England home, built some time toward the end of the eighteenth century). Compared to the assertions made by the earlier communicators (especially the one claiming to be the River Styx), I figured that

this apparent piece of information should be easy enough to confirm; all I had to do was to find the appropriate records at City Hall. Unfortunately, it turned out that my house was so old that it antedated the city records. So I never found out who built the house, and whether the person's name was anything like that of Horace T. Jecum.

Of course, quite apart from the information allegedly conveyed by means of table tilting, there remained the peculiar fact that the table tilted for three hours. I doubt that I could describe the event so as to quell all skeptical concerns. However, I will say that I am personally convinced that my friends were not pulling a trick on me. It was daylight; we were not under the influence either of legal or illicit substances; I knew my friends well, and they were not given to practical jokes; the phenomena occurred for a long time, allowing ample opportunity for inspection; I am convinced that nothing but our fingers touched the table (and that they rested lightly on its surface); and finally, even when one of my friends left the table to go to another room, the table continued to tilt and spell out answers to questions, rising under the fingers of the two remaining sitters.

I was so impressed by the phenomena that I resolved to deal with it philosophically as soon as I had taken care of some grubby practical concerns, such as receiving my Ph.D., landing a job, and then getting tenure. Because I knew that my mentors and colleagues would, for the most part, adopt a supercilious and condescending attitude toward an interest in psychic stuff, I simply put the whole matter on the back burner for about 8 years, until (as a tenured professor) I had the academic freedom to pursue whatever philosophical research I wanted.

Now, although the physical phenomena of table tilting are undoubtedly interesting, what intrigues me most today about that episode in my life is the strong visceral reaction I had to what I observed. Not only did I experience alternating blasts of skepticism, puzzlement and curiosity, the phenomena scared the hell out of me. But why should I have felt such an intense fear? I didn't understand my reaction at the time (although,

characteristically, I was at no loss for inadequate hypotheses). Now, however, I think I might have a clue as to what was going on, and if I am right, it helps explain why both the evidence for and the literature about PK have certain outstanding peculiar features.

It is tempting to account for my fear by appealing simply to the fear of the unknown. But that won't get us very far. There are lots of unknown things which don't scare us at all. So what was it, *specifically*, that frightened me? Of course, on the surface, at least, it appeared that something other than the three people in the room caused the table to move. So perhaps I was afraid of the possibility of discarnate agency. But why should that have been frightening? For one thing (although I am by no means certain of this), I may well have been too blindly and thoroughly entrenched in my few philosophical conceits for discarnate influence ever to have been a live option in my mind, even unconsciously. But more importantly, since that time there have been other contexts in which I've suspended my customary philosophical prejudices and allowed myself to entertain the possibility that discarnate surviving personalities were influencing events around me. For example, I did that often during the several years I spent getting to know the healer Olga Worrall. But at no time did I ever experience fear in connection with the phenomena I observed. Granted, in principle, the very possibility of discarnate agency raises the spectre of postmortem hostility and revenge. But my guess is that the possibility of discarnate influence is simply not as deeply intimidating as another possibility. Although I did not see it clearly at the time, it was also possible that one or more of those present in the room psychokinetically, and unconsciously, caused the table to move.

Now why should *that* have been frightening? More or less elaborate answers to that question can be found in Braude, 1986, 1987, 1989, and Eisenbud, 1970, 1982, 1983 (and see Tart, 1986, for a somewhat different but complementary view of the matter). The Newsletter-sized answer to the question is this: it does not take much of a conceptual leap to connect the possibility of innocuous psychokinetic object movements with other, far more unsettling applications of PK. Whether we acknowledge it consciously or not, if we can psychokinetically make a pencil, cigarette, or table move—not to mention heal a person—then in principle we ought to be able to do such things as cause auto accidents, heart attacks, or merely annoying pains and tickles in our neighbors. For one thing (and for reasons Eisenbud and I have outlined elsewhere—*op. cit.*), given the current state of our ignorance concerning psychic functioning, we are in no position to suppose that occurrences of psi must always be of small or moderate scale. In fact, we have no idea at all just how refined or large-scale psi might be. But quite apart from that issue, there is no reason to think that car or airplane crashes, heart attacks, and so forth, require more (or more refined) PK than that required for small object movements. After all, events of small magnitude can have far-reaching consequences; so a car crash (say) could be caused, in principle, by a well-placed small-scale psychic nudge. Thus, there seems no escaping the conclusion that if PK can be triggered by unconscious intentions, then we might be responsible for a range of events (accidents, calamities) for which most of us would prefer merely to be innocent bystanders. Moreover, we would all be potential vic-

tims of psychically triggered events (intentional or otherwise) whose sources we could not conclusively identify and whose limitations we could not assess.

More generally, what is so unnerving about this is that we must entertain seriously a world view which most of us associate, usually condescendingly only with so-called primitive societies. It is a magical picture of reality, according to which people can interfere with each others' lives in all sorts of ways we would prefer to be impossible. Of course, some of those interactions might be beneficial; but what scares us, I believe, is the spectre of psychic snooping, telepathic influence, and potent malevolent uses of PK. (e.g., the "evil eye" and hexing) .

Most (or at least many) parapsychologists nowadays will acknowledge that the fear of psi is prevalent both in and outside parapsychology. Indeed, parapsychologists might betray it in quite subtle ways. As Eisenbud has persuasively argued (1983), one way laboratory researchers in the field exhibit that fear is by means of apparently innocent or careless mistakes, oversights, and omissions which undermine an experiment. But even more interesting, perhaps, is a widespread kind of "methodological piety," in which researchers exhibit "endless pseudo-scientific fussiness and obsessional piddling, which, as often as not, results in never getting anything done unless under conditions that virtually strangle the emergence of anything faintly resembling a psi occurrence" (Eisenbud, 1983, p. 153). To put it another way, some researchers manage to make experiments sufficiently complicated and artificial to snuff out all manifestation of psi except, apparently, enough to be significant at the .05 level. That is still enough to merit publishing a paper, and it helps the researcher to feel successful and to justify his or her work within the field generally; but it is not enough to seriously challenge a possibly deeper wish that psi simply doesn't occur.

What may be more interesting, though, is the way the fear of psi seems to have shaped the course of parapsychology around the turn of the century. Skeptics often like to sneer that dramatic large-scale PK, such as full table levitations and materializations, seem to have disappeared from the parapsychological scene. The main reason, they often charge, is that modern technology has simply made it too difficult to get away with the fraud that was more easily perpetrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But even though that position is often promulgated as an obvious piece of received wisdom, it is, to put it bluntly, clearly defective (if not simply foolish). Often, it demonstrates such a grossly superficial command of the data and issues that one can only wonder why proponents of this view would risk embarrassment by flaunting their ignorance in print.

Without going into the whole matter here (see Braude, 1986, for a more complete discussion), we should note, firstly, that the skeptic's appeal to modern technology is a double-edged sword. Turn-of-the-century technological primitiveness affected not only the means for detecting fraud, but also the means for producing it. Just as there were no small electrical devices (such as miniature video cameras) capable of catching fraudulent mediums in the act, there were also no similar devices capable of producing the large-scale phenomena for which we have good evidence. Forget about those phenomena explainable, in principle, by means of slight-of-hand and diver-

sion techniques. There is a substantial residue of phenomena produced under conditions in which no accomplice or device could have been concealed, and also phenomena which even today's technology cannot simulate (e.g., D.D. Home's materialized hands).

One of my favorite examples concerns D.D. Home's accordion phenomena. Many observers report that Home was able to make accordions play untouched, or when held at the end away from the keys. Sometimes the accordions were said to play melodies on request. Now, Home preferred to have the accordion do its thing under the seance table; he said the "power" was strongest there. Obviously, that could be cause for suspicion; but to a more generous or open-minded investigator it might simply indicate Home's own idiosyncratic beliefs about the workings of psi. William Crookes fell into that latter category; but he also realized why others might, quite reasonably, be concerned about phenomena which the medium preferred to produce under the table. So Crookes devised a way to test the phenomena while still honoring Home's preferences.

First, Crookes bought a new accordion for the occasion; hence it was not Home's own instrument, nor one he had an opportunity to tamper with beforehand. Second, Crookes picked Home up at his apartment and watched him change clothes; thus, he could determine that Home was not concealing a device capable of producing the phenomena (although in the 1870s, it is unclear what such a device could have been). Crookes then took Home to his house, where he had built a special cage for the accordion. The cage fit under Crookes' dining room table, and there was only enough space above it for Home to reach in and hold the accordion at the end away from the keys. There was not enough room for Home to reach down further and manipulate the instrument and its keyboard. Observers were stationed on both sides of Home, and another went under the table with a lamp in order to observe the accordion. Under those and slightly revised conditions (such as running an electrical current through the cage, and also Home removing his hand from the accordion, placing both hands on the table), the accordion was reported to have expanded and contracted, played simple melodies, and floated about inside the cage (for more details, see Crookes, 1871; Medhurst, Goldney and Barrington, 1972; and Braude, 1986).

I consider this to be an interesting and important piece of evidence. The fact is, as the skeptic likes to note, we don't see such things any more. But if we cannot explain that fact by appealing to the advent of modern technology (or a greater degree of gullibility around the turn of the century), what sense can we make of it? I submit that the fear of psi has probably played a major role.

We should note, firstly, that the dramatic PK occurring around the turn of the century took place within the context of the spiritualist movement, which was enormously popular at the time, and which gave rise to the widespread practice of holding seances around a table for the purpose of contacting deceased friends and relatives. Furthermore, the great mediums of that era were all sincere spiritualists. They believed that they were merely facilitating phenomena produced by discarnate spirits; they did not believe they actually produced the phenomena themselves. So psychologically, those individuals were off the

hook no matter what happened. If nothing (or only boring phenomena) occurred, the medium could always attribute the failures to an inept communicator or a "bad connection" between this world and the spirit world. More importantly, however, when impressive phenomena occurred, mediums did not have to fear the extent of their own powers. They did not have to worry about what they might produce (consciously or unconsciously) outside the safe confines of the seance room.

As time went on, more and more people, both in and out of the field of psychical research, took seriously the possibility that physical mediums might be PK agents. And even when the mediums and other spiritualists resisted this belief, the fact remains that the belief was increasingly "in the air" and more difficult to ignore. I suspect that this must have had an effect on the psychology of mediumship generally, because mediums were more likely to be concerned about having powers they could not control. So it is not surprising to find that the best mediums of the twentieth century had increasingly less intimidating repertoires of phenomena. By the time we come to Rudi Schneider in the 1920's and '30's the most sensational phenomena tended merely to be medium-sized object movements. And more recently, alleged PK "superstars" such as Nina Kulagina and Felicia Parise produced even smaller-scale phenomena (see, Honorton, 1974; Keil, et al., 1976; Pratt and Keil, 1973; Ullman, 1974; Watkins and Watkins, 1974).

Moreover, it is interesting to note how much PK superstars of the second half of this century seem to *suffer* when producing their phenomena. Earlier mediums went into a trance, and occasionally were exhausted afterwards. But more modern PK stars seem, rather, to be making a conscious effort. They acknowledge their own role in the production of the phenomena, and it is not surprising, then, that they should have to work so hard (say) to make a cigarette or pill bottle move a millimeter or an inch. In fact, consider how convenient that is psychologically. If a psychic has to expend such an effort to do so little, then (in a careless line of thought characteristic of much self-deception) it will seem that no (or only a fatal) human PK effort could produce a phenomenon worth worrying about.

I cannot let the topic of the fear of psi drop without noting another of its manifestations, one that is as common today as it was during the heyday of spiritualism. It continues to amaze me how otherwise smart people argue against the existence of psi generally and its more dramatic manifestations in particular. There are, of course, careful and reflective critics of the field. But too often critics resort easily to lines of argument they would be quick to detect as sleazy or indefensible in other contexts. It is almost as if a veil of idiocy suddenly descends on those who are otherwise penetrating and intelligent. It is unlikely that in most other contexts skeptics would resort so readily to *ad hominem* arguments, or try to generalize from the weakest cases. But (to take that last offense as an example) quite often one finds skeptics arguing, say, that the case of D.D. Home should be ignored because the small-scale phenomena might be mimicked by slight-of-hand, or because the most poorly-documented bits of evidence (such as the alleged levitation out the window at Ashley House) are weak. Now are we supposed to believe that all of a sudden, these critics don't understand that the best-documented pieces of evidence are the ones that count? It is

obvious that many skeptics are intelligent people, and I suggest that it is highly unlikely that they simply suffer occasional and uncontrolled spasms of stupidity. If they did, they would presumably not occur so exclusively in connection with parapsychology. It is much more plausible that many skeptics are simply in a kind of conceptual panic, and that their fear of psi is little different from what I felt back in 1968.

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AUSTRALIAN NOTES

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Among recent Australian parapsychological developments, one major event has been the retirement of Jurgen Keil from his position at the University of Tasmania. Keil's long and notable career in parapsychology included editorship of the definitive biography of Gaither Pratt, plus investigations of macro-PK phenomena associated with the Russian psychic Nina Kulagina and of the focusing effect in the ESP performance of Pavel Stepanek. Keil is undertaking some part-time teaching in his former department.

Australian researchers have been especially active in the study of the near-death experience or NDE. Allan Kellehear of LaTrobe University is scrutinizing reports of NDE's in non-

Western cultures with a view to ascertaining which features of the experience are universal and which are culture-specific. A study with similar scope is being conducted jointly by Gary Groth-Marnat (Curtin University of Technology) and Jack Schumaker (University of Newcastle). At the University of New South Wales, Cherie Sutherland's doctoral research comprised semi-structured interviews of 50 NDE subjects examining the experience as an instrument of both profound personal transformation and positive social change; a popular account of this work is soon to be published in book form. One of my Masters students, John Pope, is also preparing a report on his study of the impact of the NDE on the experient's attitudes to life, death and suicide. The methodology of Pope's study is a