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Triumphs and Defeats in the Study of Mediumship*

GARDNER MURPHY

From year to year I have liked to vary my emphasis. Sometimes it is spontaneous cases; sometimes experimental work; today, mediumship. Those who know our field well will I hope forgive me if I reiterate a point of view, and describe anew some of the rich material published long ago.

I

It is a very ancient and deeply ingrained human belief that living human beings may serve as channels of communication between this world and the next, between the world of the embodied and the world of the disembodied. Not only primitive human societies, but the great civilizations of the Far East, as well as those of the West, have developed specific techniques for the training of professional

*This paper was delivered by Dr. Murphy at a meeting of the Society on March 7, 1957.

go-betweens or mediums of this type. The history of Western Europe is full of vivid examples. Modern spiritualism gave new life to these beliefs, gave them organized expression in a religious movement, and created in a large number of devout persons the belief that a new divine gift, in the form of such means of communication between the living and the deceased, added a new dimension to Christian civilization.

The American spiritualist faith which thus came into existence spread rapidly to Western Europe, where it was, for example, championed by Alan Kardec¹ in France and moved even into the Russian empire, where, as a matter of fact, the great spiritualist leader, Alexander Aksakof,² systematized the beliefs and the methods, and, although howled down by the intellectuals, gave substantial support to the efforts of the Western world, notably the Society for Psychical Research in London, and specifically the efforts of Frederic W. H. Myers, in the preparation of his great volumes, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*.³

So widespread and intense was the belief in this new revelation that serious and thoughtful persons in considerable numbers became adherents to the faith. Just as among all human societies persons subjected to a vigorous faith tend to be deeply marked by the precious message, there is nothing surprising in the fact that among those sharing the new belief, many believed themselves to be vehicles through whom the new power could flow. In June, 1884, an earnest and sensitive young woman saddened and rebuffed by difficult personal experiences went to see a Mr. Cocke, a Boston medium and "psychic healer." At her second sitting with him she fell into an odd state sometimes called trance, involving loss of the usual personal consciousness. Through her there soon appeared to talk several entities which claimed to be deceased human beings and some entities hard to identify, one even giving itself the name "Chlorine." Before long, in repeated trances, this newly developing medium, Mrs. L. E. Piper, began to bring intensely before her small group of enthralled sitters the personality of a physician, Dr. Phinuit, who had lived, he reported, some time earlier in France. Quick upon the heels of these strange phenomena appeared a series of communications to two anonymous Boston sitters which impressed them with the apparent capacity of the entities to give evidence of things patently only knowable within the intimacies of a family circle.

¹ *Le Livre des Esprits*, Paris, 1857.

² *Animismus und Spiritismus*, Oswald Mutze, Leipzig, 1890.

³ Longmans, Green, and Co., two volumes, New York and London, 1903; new edition with an Introduction by Gardner Murphy, Longmans, Green, and Co., New York, 1954, by arrangement with Garrett Publications.

II

In the autumn of 1885, William James and his wife held their first sittings in which, as James recounted it, certain items were given in the Piper trance which simply could not have been normally acquired by Mrs. Piper.⁴ Mrs. Piper became a celebrity for psychical research, destined to be studied for a thirty years' period by dozens of serious persons, notably by the great scholar, Dr. Richard Hodgson.⁵ It was in the middle period of the Piper phenomena that the recently deceased George Pelham appeared to communicate in so convincing a fashion as to lead both Hodgson and Professor J. H. Hyslop to the conviction that the survival of death and the reality of communication had been established. Shortly thereafter, the G. P. personality was replaced by the "Imperator Band," a group of ancient prophetic and priestly figures, who maintained a certain order and dignity in the Piper communications from the mid-nineties until the effective end of Mrs. Piper's career about the beginning of the first World War. This last great period of Mrs. Piper's mediumship was that in which abundant messages were delivered in sittings both in Britain and the United States purporting to come from Frederic W. H. Myers, who had died in 1901, from Richard Hodgson, who died in 1905, and from other communicators introduced by them.

The Myers personality frequently dominated the scene. A common feature in the Myers material was the appearance through one medium of a phrase or a series of phrases which in themselves made no particular sense, while other phrases appeared through other mediums which, conjoined with the first, created an inescapable total meaning; the celebrated method of "cross-correspondences."⁶ For flourishing in the same era with Mrs. Piper were a group of women gifted with automatic writing, two of them classical scholars, through whose automatic script appeared Latin and Greek phrases which might well be taken as representing the continuing memories and preoccupations of the classical scholar Frederic Myers. Now if any one person asked the trance personalities to produce evidence of classical scholarship, and they succeeded, it might still be possible to say that the correct answers could have been derived through telepathic leakage from living scholars, so that the automatic writers might have created the misleading appearances of a surviving Myers. There are, however, a number of instances in which it is difficult

⁴ "A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. VI, 1889-1890, pp. 651-659.

⁵ "A Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. VIII, 1892, pp. 1-167; and "A Further Record of Observations of Certain Phenomena of Trance," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XIII, 1897-1898, pp. 284-581.

⁶ Alice Johnson, "On the Automatic Writing of Mrs. Holland," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXI, 1908-1909, pp. 166-391.

indeed to see how this organized plot could have been carried forward, and Mrs. Piper's role in these classical jig-saw puzzles is especially striking. In 1908, for example, George B. Dorr conducted a sitting with Mrs. Piper near Boston in which the purporting Myers had been asked: "What does the word Lethe suggest to you?"⁷ Most of us would probably know enough to say the "river of forgetfulness." Instead of saying anything of the sort, the Myers personality referred to a cave and a female figure with "half a hoop." In later sittings came Iris, Morpheus, CYX, and many other details. After a long search, J. G. Piddington found near the end of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the account of Ceyx and Alcyone, who in connection with a journey to Lethe went to the various spots and underwent the various experiences which had been mentioned by the Myers personality in this fragmentary and obscure fashion.

Not content with all this, Sir Oliver Lodge prepared a slip of paper on which was written, "What does the word Lethe suggest to you?"⁸ and sent it to be opened and used by Mrs. Willett in England, when she sat for script. The purporting Myers wrote: "Myers the will again to live . . . Myers there was the door to which I found no key . . ."

Later the communicator wrote out in capitals DORR; then went on to describe not Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but episodes from the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid* in which another journey to Lethe is described in detail. This is not the place to assess the scholarly complexities involved. It is, however, the place to stress the fact that severe tests, over a period of several decades, were maintained, not simply by the crude device of shadowing Mrs. Piper and preventing a normal communication from unwarranted sources, but by administering to her carefully prepared questions, the answers to which we would ordinarily use anywhere as proofs of the identity of persons equipped with the necessary information to answer them.

III

Unfortunately, through all this period, from about 1885 until Mrs. Piper's retirement, one question was constantly being argued back and forth, a question which is, I shall hope to show, wrongly formulated and incapable of an answer. It is the question: do these communications prove the survival and continuing capacity to communicate on the part of the deceased Frederic Myers and the other com-

⁷ J. G. Piddington, "Three Incidents from the Sittings," "Lethe," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXIV, 1910, pp. 86-144.

⁸ Sir Oliver Lodge, "Evidence of Classical Scholarship and of Cross-Correspondence in some New Automatic Writings," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXV, 1911, pp. 113-175.

municators? It was indeed shown beyond any reasonable doubt that large quantities of Myers-like material were produced year after year. Many things which had meant much to Myers in his lifetime were not only effectively reproduced, but were woven into fresh classical and philosophical constructions, often poetic and devout in very much the mood in which the poetry and devoutness of Myers had earlier been expressed; but with new content chosen under test conditions to meet the occasion. This meant, to many people, in so many words, proof of Myers' survival. But others pointed out, with equal vividness and emphasis, that the material contained many mistakes, some of them gross ones.

For example, any classicist such as was Frederic Myers would know that there are two great heroes named Ajax in the Homeric poems, Telamonian Ajax and Ajax Oileus. The Myers personality gets the two Ajaxes mixed up. This would be very much like your getting Theodore Roosevelt mixed with Franklin D. Roosevelt if you were a specialist in American politics. It simply does not pass. If one goes on arguing as to whether the communicating entities really *are* or really *are not* the deceased, one gets into a tissue of contradictions. What does one mean by saying that a trance personality simply is the deceased person, when the picture is so confused as to permit no equation of the known living form with the indirect and tangential statements in mediumistic trance?

When G. Stanley Hall asked the purporting communicator, Richard Hodgson, to bring his niece, Bessie Beals, to communicate, there was no trouble in his doing so and Bessie Beals communicated, but it was then learned that no such person had existed.⁹ It is not at all difficult to produce spirit artifacts of this sort, and they are vouched for and behave like the supposedly real and authentic communicators. There is, indeed, much of the nature of dream stuff, not only in specific contents, but in the very demeanor of the communicators when in poor moods, or subject to confused working conditions. The point is here often made that the subconscious mind of the medium is coloring the phenomena and causing mistakes. This is, however, rather inadequate to handle the situation when non-existent entities are created and when self-contradictory and highly non-characteristic remarks are made.

It was Mrs. Henry Sidgwick who over fifty years ago pointed to the most likely reality in the situation, a reality far indeed from both of the competing hypotheses. She pointed out that according to any psychological criteria the controls and communicators, for example, the Emperor Band, and the various individuals who communicated

⁹ "Studies in Spiritism," by Amy E. Tanner. Introduction by G. Stanley Hall. D. Appleton and Co., New York, 1910, pp. 166-258.

with the living through Mrs. Piper are all of them created by the anticipations, hopes, fears, and modes of inference which we can broadly subsume under the term "suggestion."¹⁰ As a matter of fact one can produce mediumistic phenomena in this way and get characteristic, mediumistic results. Yet, she continued, the evidential material produced in the communication can be derived telepathically either from the deceased or from the living. The hypothesis would thus provide for real survival evidence. It would also provide for the well-documented cases in which communicators appear, report themselves to be deceased, give authentic facts unknown to anyone present, and are accepted as deceased communicators — all this to be followed by the discovery that the persons involved were actually still alive. I am referring especially to S. G. Soal's Gordon Davis case¹¹ and to Canon Douglas's Réallier case.¹² Mrs. Sidgwick pointed out that the only reasonable means by which one could derive such information would be a telepathic interchange with some source possessing the facts. The dynamics, however, of such interchange would probably be the same whether the source of such information is incarnate or discarnate, alive or deceased. In other words, brilliant telepathic material appearing as evidence of individuality can be attributed either to the deceased or the living, depending upon internal evidence and circumstantial detail. In the case of the cross-correspondences, one would have to attribute the many classical fragments to a considerable number of different living sources, and the law of parsimony will make it easier for some to believe that the surviving mind of Frederic Myers is more probably the source of the messages. Others unwilling to accept the reality of a discarnate intelligence will prefer to say that the piecing together of the information from various living minds is a more acceptable principle. J. H. Hyslop suggested that one may have at times an actual fusion of the minds of the deceased and of the medium.¹³

You will note that the problem of possible telepathy from distant living persons always has to be faced and there is therefore no special importance in raising the question whether the sitter could have supplied telepathically the material which is communicated through the medium. There is considerable evidence that entranced

¹⁰ "Discussion of the Trance Phenomena of Mrs. Piper," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XV, 1900-1901, pp. 16-38.

¹¹ "A Report on Some Communications Received through Mrs. Blanche Cooper," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXXV, 1926, pp. 560-589.

¹² "A Case of Alleged Mind Reading." This case was first reported in the Jan-March 1919 issue of *Unpopular Review*. See also *JOURNAL A.S.P.R.*, Vol. XIII, 1919, pp. 130-136, 281-283, and 492-494.

¹³ *Psychical Research and the Resurrection*, Small, Maynard & Co., Boston, 1908, pp. 290 ff.

sensitives can make contact with distant as well as present living persons, in fact that space is no particular consideration. There is, however, quite another way in which it is important to distinguish between what is known to the sitter and what is known only to other living persons, namely, the fact the medium quickly establishes as a frame of reference the mind of the person interacting with the medium in the sitting, and it is psychologically quite a feat to find and make contact with some distant person unless the person is himself well known to either medium or sitter; otherwise you are looking for a needle in a haystack. Ingenious experiments have been done by the method known as the "proxy sitting," in which contact with distant persons is greatly reduced.

In the better type of proxy sitting individuals who desire to hear from their deceased loved ones request that a sitter holding a sitting with a particular medium obtain something personally for them. In some cases the actual proxy sitter does not even know who the distant person desiring to receive the message may be. From 1929 to 1938 proxy sittings with Mrs. Osborne Leonard were held by Mrs. Allison and published in *S.P.R. Proceedings*, in a B.S.P.R. volume, and in this *JOURNAL*.¹⁴ Later John F. Thomas of Detroit, while working for a doctorate in psychology at Duke University under Professor William McDougall, and in association with Dr. J. B. Rhine and Dr. Louisa Rhine, reported on successful proxy sittings appearing to come from his wife through Mrs. Leonard.¹⁵ Extensive statistical work by the proxy method was carried out, indicating that the successes under these conditions are much greater than can be attributed to chance. Particularly dramatic results with the proxy method were published by the Reverend C. Drayton Thomas in Great Britain between the two world wars, Mr. Thomas himself repeatedly serving effectively as proxy sitter on behalf of distant persons.¹⁶ Within the last year Dr. Gertrude R. Schneider and Dr. Karlis Osis have added some ingenious new features on which I hope they will both soon report. Taking it all together the case for effective proxy sittings is strong and does add something to the survival evidence in the sense that the psychological bond between actual sitter and distant receiver of the proxy sitting is relatively weaker and therefore the burden of proof is relatively greater upon anyone who would say that telepathy

¹⁴ "Proxy Sittings with Mrs. Leonard," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XLII, 1934, pp. 104-145; *Beyond Normal Cognition*, by John F. Thomas, B.S.P.R., 1937, pp. 84-127, 307-310; "Further Proxy Sittings with Mrs. Leonard," *JOURNAL A.S.P.R.*, Vol. XXXV, 1941, pp. 196-225.

¹⁵ *Beyond Normal Cognition*, B.S.P.R., 1937.

¹⁶ "A Consideration of a Series of Proxy Sittings," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XLI, 1932-1933, pp. 139-185; "A Proxy Case Extending over Eleven Sittings with Mrs. Osborne Leonard," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XLIII, 1935, pp. 439-519.

from the living is the sole basis for the results. The case cannot, however, be regarded as closed.

In my own judgment, if we put aside the very dramatic evidence of survival coming from spontaneous cases, such as apparitions and dreams which give highly personalized information not easily attributable to any living source, the strongest survival evidence would appear to come from those mediumistic communications in which the message could not very well have been devised by any single person living or deceased, but in which two individuals after their deaths have compared notes on their life interest and have given through one or more mediums a message which represents a sort of compound or integrated shared bundle of information representing the two personalities. This is exactly what was reported by Gerald Balfour in the celebrated case, "The Ear of Dionysius,"¹⁷ in which Dr. A. W. Verrall and Professor Henry Butcher, classical scholars, are represented as meeting after their deaths, contriving a message intimately conveying the personalities of the two delivered through the automatic script of Mrs. Willett and later deciphered and published by Balfour. Even in these cases I must again unfortunately play devil's advocate if I am to try to maintain the role of dispassionate and objective scientist. I must remind you not only that living persons possessed the classical information given, but *may* have known that the two men possessed this information and that the two types of information interlocked in various ways.

IV

And I must remind you that there is always a third possibility, namely, the possibility that we are asking this question the wrong way, this question about the sheer survival of personality beyond the moment of death. It remains possible that the question is wrongly stated. Perhaps the personality is not one of those things which is anchored in time, in the way in which the eruption of a volcano is anchored in time. Maybe some of the aspects of personality are not in the time dimension and that the question of continuity beyond death is wrongly stated. There are several other philosophical enigmas with which we are not prepared to cope in this era. We must, however, go on studying the extraordinary phenomena of the paranormal, particularly as evidenced in those rare and gifted persons whom we are sampling today.

You will note that I have named no sensitives who are now living and working as sensitives. There are various reasons, personal and professional, which will occur to you, why even the most brilliant

¹⁷ "The Ear of Dionysius: Further Scripts Affording Evidence of Personal Survival," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXIX, 1918, pp. 197-243.

contemporary material should be described in such a way as to maintain certain reticences. One of these reasons I am sure you will realize is that in such a public address I would have no right whatever to appear to commend or draw special attention to the work of any active living sensitive.

V

How much triumph and how much defeat do you find in what I have tried to suggest? The fact of telepathic success of this order of brilliance is enough to convince any careful reader of the cross-correspondences that these are among the most extraordinary and, at the same time, best documented instances of paranormal powers ever recorded. If mediumship had done nothing else, it would have given us magnificent evidence of a far ranging capacity of the human mind to reach beyond itself; evidence far more convincing for many of us than can be obtained by the relatively rare performances of high scoring subjects in experimental tests. Actually, I would myself avoid invidious distinctions, and would say that mediumistic evidence and the experimental evidence are about equally cogent, and I would add a third category, namely, the strongest cases of spontaneous telepathy, such as those in which an apparition appears to a distant loved one at the moment of the death of the person whose apparition is seen, supplying rich, qualitative detail as to the mode and circumstances of death. Mediumship has, however, one great advantage over both spontaneous cases and experimental studies; it gives us, as Mrs. Sidgwick so well showed, a very rich avenue of information as to the psychology of the paranormal processes. There is, so far as I know, in the whole literature of psychical research, no document so rich in the discussion of subconscious mental activity as it relates to readiness for telepathic contact, as the Sidgwick study of the psychology of Mrs. Piper¹⁸ unless, indeed, one should turn to Balfour's equally extraordinary study of the psychology of Mrs. Willett.¹⁹ The two are among the great classics of psychical research.

But suppose you are annoyed with me for not accepting the proof of survival? To this I must reply that the years from 1890 to 1910 piled up enormously impressive data, but that since 1910 or thereabouts relatively little that is really new has appeared. Much of the evidence is indeed cogent, but the paranormal powers of the living sensitive have not been widely explored, nor do we know what kinds

¹⁸ Mrs. Henry Sidgwick, "A Contribution to the Study of the Psychology of Mrs. Piper's Trance Phenomena," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XXVIII, 1915, pp. 1-XIX + 1-652.

¹⁹ Gerald William, Earl of Balfour, "A Study of the Psychological Aspects of Mrs. Willett's Mediumship, and of the Statements of the Communicators Concerning Process," *Proc. S.P.R.*, Vol. XLIII, 1935, pp. 41-318.

of information about either the deceased or the living can be obtained by a sort of searchlight process of which I have already hinted. We are not manufacturing this searchlight out of wishful thinking; the character Phinuit to whom I earlier referred, who appears never to have existed, gave, through the Piper trance, a good many of these rather striking searchlight effects, and the Blanche Cooper of the Gordon Davis case and the Mrs. Halsey of the Réallier case were apparently operating exactly in the manner of searchlights for the sweeping in of paranormal information. It seems to me that we have to know considerably more about the operation of these searchlights before we can say that mediumistic phenomena are in themselves cogent evidence of survival and communication. I would say, therefore, that frustrations and defeats with reference to the original spiritistic hypothesis emerge in the same parcel which brings us the first fruits of this magnificent inquiry. You cannot have the sweet without the bitter. You cannot make these discoveries without realizing how far they fall short of the great hope which was originally engendered by the spiritualist movement as it first took shape.

VI

But I do not believe that this is all there is to say. I think that it is characteristic of our limited place on this little planet, in this solar system, in this galactic system, in this mysterious and unfathomable universe, that we have attached enormous importance to questions which we do not even know how to formulate properly. We do not know where the amazing new powers in the human mind now being discovered may lead us. We do not know, indeed, what kind of existence we might have without our bodies; what kind of memories we might have without our brains; what kind of forms of emotion we might have without our vital organs; what kind of aspirations we might have without the regulatory systems which govern our ordered thought and which, as we know from daily psychiatric experience, are associated with chaos and defeat, even in the case of brain injuries, fevers, and other types of pathology. What personality might be without a body, who is wise enough to make an intelligent guess?

I think there is indeed a little boldness or even, if you will permit me to say so, a little arrogance in the demand of humanity that we should get immediate answers to questions like these that relate to survival. Mediumship, I believe, is like all the other types of investigatory techniques which have come our way. It gives us a great deal and instead of being grateful and saying in the manner of Newton that we have been gathering pebbles on the shores of an infinite sea, we wish immediately to cast the fragments into the form of proof

that we continue indefinitely beyond death, and that we have such and such personal characteristics beyond death which are those we know here in the flesh. I believe there is only defeat at this time for this kind of conviction, just as I believe there is only triumph for a view which looks onward and upward to a constant maze of ever enriching information regarding the depths and ranges of what human personality may become. There may indeed be many dimensions in which human personality may be conceived and some of these various dimensions may indeed have existence beyond the time-space frame of reference which biology uses. If this be so, there may well be types of survival. These might however be quite different from the sheer projection of the individual personality, the same old self beyond death that existed before it. It is my own conviction that we shall get much further in psychical research by emphasizing constantly how little we know; making the most of the joys and glories of such discovery as we are able to make; the maintenance of continuous humility as to the rate of our progress, and the willingness to admit with regard to almost all the ultimate questions that probably we have raised the question in the wrong form and that neither a "yes" nor a "no" makes very much sense. It is my own belief that something profound and ultimately very heartening about human personality will come through the studies of mediumship, and that very few people have contributed as much as have the mediums towards challenging the old shell of premature certainty and giving us areas of breath-taking new inquiry. The little band of mediums, the little band of investigators often finding something quite different from what they were looking for, have carried us to a hilltop from which the distant mountains of the great range can be seen. The great temptation is to keep guessing what is on the other side of the mountains. The great problem is to get people to tackle the rough road-building problem which will give us a way of getting from these lowly hills to the land beyond those mountains.