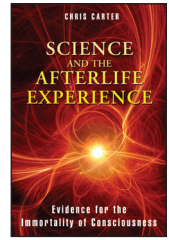


Science and the Afterlife Experience
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Strange Visits

Reports of apparitions come from virtually all societies of which we have records. It is said they are portrayed on Egyptian papyri, and St. Augustine wrote about them as familiar occurrences. Accounts presented as genuine also appear in classical literature.

Pliny the Younger tells the story of Athenodorus the philosopher, who one day heard that a house was going cheaply in Athens because it was haunted by the specter of an old man, described as skinny and dirty with fetters on his legs and clanking chains on his wrists. Considering the house a curious bargain, the philosopher decided to rent it. The first night, as he sat reading a book, he first heard the chains, and then saw the figure. It beckoned him into the garden, and the philosopher followed. After pointing to a spot on the ground, the specter suddenly vanished. Athenodorus marked the spot with some grass and leaves, and on the next day had the local magistrates dig there. A skeleton in chains was found and given a proper burial. From that time on, we are told, the haunting ceased.

Ghost stories of this kind continued to be reported down through the centuries, and reports of apparitions are not as uncommon as one might think. In 1975 psychologist Erlendur Haraldsson asked a representative national survey in Iceland “Have you ever perceived or felt the nearness of a deceased person?” Thirty-one percent of respondents replied with a yes. In 1979 John Palmer surveyed the residents of Charlottesville, Virginia, and found that 17 percent of 622 respondents

claimed to have had the impression of an apparition, and about three-quarters of these acknowledged more than one experience.

Apparition reports are not necessarily visual; people may say the apparition was only heard, or somehow “sensed” as a presence. About half of the reports seem to be visual: 46 percent for Haraldsson, or 14 percent of the original sample; and 44 percent for Palmer, or 7.5 percent of the total sample. However, Green and McCreery’s study found that 84 percent of experiences were primarily visual, with about a third of these cases also having an auditory component; only about 14 percent of their cases were entirely auditory.

As mentioned earlier, apparitions typically appear real and solid, so much so that they are frequently mistaken for actual living persons. Green and McCreery state that only 46 percent of their sample realized immediately they were experiencing an apparition; 18 percent realized this before the experience ended, 6 percent as it ended, and 31 percent only *after* it ended. In other words, *over half* did not immediately distinguish the apparition from a living person, and nearly a third thought they were seeing an ordinary person throughout the entire experience.

There are several reasons for this perceived realism. Apparitions may cast a shadow or be reflected in a mirror. They typically show awareness of their surroundings, avoiding furniture and people, and they may turn to follow a person’s movements. Some are reported to speak, although this is not common; if the apparition does speak, there are usually only a few words. However, in other respects apparitions do not resemble ordinary living persons: they may appear and disappear in locked rooms; vanish while being watched, or fade away in front of the percipient; pass through physical objects; and be visible to some people in a room, but not to others. Most attempts to touch an apparition are unsuccessful, but most who do report their hands simply passing through the figure. Only rarely do people report apparitions that are capable of being felt. Sometimes a feeling of cold is reported, especially when the figure is nearby. Typically, they leave behind no physical traces such as footprints. At the end of the experience the figure usually vanishes

instantly, although it may fade gradually, or simply walk out of the room.

In Haraldsson's survey, most apparitions were of persons recognized by the respondents. Almost half, or 47 percent, of the apparitions were of deceased persons related to the experient; 24 percent were recognized as acquaintances; and the remaining 29 percent were complete strangers (some of whom were later identified).

There are also reports of apparitions of animals. In Celia Green and Charles McCreery's study of apparitions, the great majority of animal apparitions were of dogs and cats. The following case is an extremely unusual report, because it involves much more than a mere sighting.

I had made good friends with the next-door neighbor's dog "Bobby," a large black mongrel. Before I went in the army, we had grown very fond of each other, and an outsider would have thought he was my dog. I volunteered for the Army to be a Regular Soldier, but my attachment to the dog was so great, that I almost didn't "join up." Nevertheless, I did, but don't mind admitting I suffered a lot of emotional upset over the dog.

On the night in question, I arrived home at about 2 a.m., and sure enough, as soon as I opened the side gate, "Bobby," who normally slept in a kennel outside the house, bounded up to me, and made a terrific fuss of me, nuzzling and licking my face. I stayed with him for some ten minutes or so, and then went indoors. There is no question in my mind, to this day, that I played with "Bobby" for that short time. I knew and loved him so well, that there couldn't possibly be any mistake about his identity. As he left me, he disappeared out of sight into my neighbor's large dahlia bed, and that was the last I saw of him.

The following morning I made my usual visit to my neighbor, the dog's owner, who was a very great friend of ours. I told him about meeting Bobby the previous night, and remarked quite casually that he was out of his kennel. My neighbor was thunderstruck, and said, "Bobby died three months ago, and is buried in the middle of the dahlias."