

# THOUGHTS ON THE DECLINE OF MAJOR PARANORMAL PHENOMENA

by

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## *ABSTRACT*

Major paranormal phenomena, defined as phenomena detectable by the senses alone without a need for statistics, have diminished in the contemporary publications of the Society compared with the publications of its first several decades. The lack of reports of such major phenomena may reflect diminished interest in them on the part of investigators, most of whom have turned their attention to laboratory experiments that elicit marginal results requiring statistical analysis. However, it seems likely that the major phenomena occur less frequently in the West today than they did formerly. Skepticism derived from philosophical materialism may inhibit normally the occurrence of major paranormal phenomena. It may also inhibit them through paranormal processes. The most promising sources of major paranormal phenomena today may be in industrially undeveloped countries, among a few specially gifted individuals, and in certain unusual experiences, such as those of persons who come close to death and recover.

The daunting prospect of trying to deliver a Presidential Address in any way worthy of being placed on the same shelf as previous Addresses impelled me to read, in recent months, many of the Addresses that I had not previously studied. In doing this I paid particular attention to the speakers' appraisals of the Society's accomplishments. Although I made no attempt to rank the speakers on a scale of optimism versus

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<sup>1</sup> Presidential Address, April 1989. I thank T. N. E. Greville, Emily Williams Cook and Rhea White for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this Address.

pessimism in their judgments of the Society's work, I noted that several emphatically expressed optimism about the outcome of our labors. I am not referring to confidence in the worthiness of the enterprise, but to assertions of success in it. In the decades between 1910 and 1980 at least six Presidents asserted that telepathy had been proved or nearly so (Flammarion, 1923-24; McDougall, 1920; Prince, 1930-31; L. E. Rhine, 1982; Salter, 1946-49; and Smith, 1910).<sup>2</sup>

One might ask why, if telepathy had been proved by 1910, later Presidents thought it necessary to reiterate the claim so often in subsequent years. I can think of two reasons why they might have felt a need for such renewed affirmation. First, each generation of investigators, perhaps each decade of them, has believed its methods superior to those of its predecessors. This has entailed the temptation to hint at, or even to say openly, something like: "Our forerunners thought they had solid evidence of paranormal phenomena, but their methods were crude compared with ours. *We* have finally proven the reality of these phenomena." Second, they knew that what they and the audiences listening to their Addresses—largely the members and friends of the Society—regarded as proof did not seem that to the majority of scientists. The rest of the world had not heard, or had not listened if it did hear. They needed to be told again. Unfortunately, the need still exists.

Our inability to persuade larger numbers of educated persons, especially scientists, to take seriously our endeavors and accomplishments seems more than a disappointment; it may now be a fatal weakness. Until the present generation new recruits in psychical research always seemed available to fill the places of investigators who died; and for a time it looked as if the study of paranormal phenomena was taking root in universities. However, we must admit that today psychical research has almost gone from the universities, at least on the continent of Europe and in North America. Even in the United Kingdom, psychical research is almost extinct in universities south of the Tweed. We are not gaining the interest of well-qualified younger investigators with new ideas in sufficient numbers to succeed those of us whose ideas need to be replaced by other insights and better methods.

The decline during recent decades in the acceptance of our achievements—even of the legitimacy of our endeavors—on the part of other scientists must have several causes. I have written elsewhere about what I believe to be one of the less important of these causes, namely the misguided effort to identify a separate discipline of science called

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<sup>2</sup> This list may not be exhaustive of all those who confidently claimed the proof, or near-proof, of extrasensory perception. I have not read *all* the Presidential Addresses.

parapsychology (Stevenson, 1988). However, that is not my theme in this Address. Instead, I wish to suggest other causes of the decline effect in psychical research. I think by far the most important of these causes is our inability to observe and report major paranormal phenomena. Here I emphasize the word *major*, by which I mean phenomena so gross that we require no statistics for their demonstration. In specifying further what I am thinking about, I shall say little about physical phenomena and consider mainly spontaneous (mental) cases, mental mediumship, and the feats of unusually gifted sensitives or clairvoyants. The volumes of the early and middle years of our Society's publications contain numerous reports of carefully investigated major phenomena subsumed under these categories, and I wish to address the question of why we publish little or nothing of this sort today.

Some of my listeners and readers may ask whether a return of such major phenomena would improve the fortunes of psychical research. After all, if these phenomena failed to carry conviction outside a fairly narrow circle<sup>3</sup> before, why should they do so today? The point is a good one, and to it I can only reply that the minor phenomena requiring statistics for their demonstration are certainly not exciting interest among modern scientists, and perhaps the major phenomena would. A survey by McClenon (1984) of "elite scientists" offers some support for this view. He found that 29 percent of the respondents said that they believed in extrasensory perception. However, as the basis for their belief, twice as many of the believers cited personal experience as cited reports in scientific journals. Moreover, among 351 scientists responding to McClenon's questionnaire only nine cited a journal in our field as a source of information on the subject. We are not justified in believing from the information available that the elite scientists surveyed by McClenon experienced what I think of as major phenomena, although some of them may have done so. We may, however, believe that they would be more impressed by such major phenomena, if we could report them, than they now are by the marginal results of most laboratory experiments that require statistics for their demonstration.

Next we come to the distinction between the reporting of phenomena and the occurrence of them. The paucity of reports of such major phenomena may reflect nothing more than lack of interest or lack of resources for investigations on the part of psychical researchers. Or there may have been a real decline in the occurrence of the phenomena. Or both these factors may be present.

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<sup>3</sup> The circle of persons interested in psychical research and praising the work of the Society (even though not active in it) may have been larger between 1880 and 1920 than this phrase implies. I think the willingness of so many eminent men to stand in the glaring publicity of the Presidency reflects a broader acceptance of the Society's work by intellectual leaders than we can find among their successors today.

We could argue that the preponderant attention given in our journals to experimental studies compared with reports of the major phenomena reflects a lack of interest in the latter on the part of investigators. A decline of interest in the major phenomena appears to have set in during the 1930s, when they were still more plentiful than they appear to be today. It is worth asking why this occurred.

Several causes may have contributed to investigators having less interest in the major phenomena than they earlier had. Changing economic conditions may have drawn them away from spontaneous cases, the study of which was more costly than experiments were, at least in the early days of the fashion for experiments.

Perhaps researchers became afraid of the phenomena. Eisenbud (1983), Tart (1984) and White (1985) have suggested that psychical researchers are afraid to acknowledge (and hence afraid to observe) the vast paranormal powers of which they assume at least some persons are capable. Who would want to believe that by thinking alone he could move mountains, kill a neighbor, or sink the *Titanic*? This argument seems based on assumptions instead of evidence. Moreover, it must include a discrediting judgment of ourselves compared with our predecessors, because certainly nineteenth-century investigators and some of those in the early years of this century did not hesitate to encounter tables and persons that levitated as well as the appearance or the reality of full-form materializations of the dead.

It seems to me that the psychical researchers of the last two generations have been less afraid of the major phenomena than they have been of the disapproval of colleagues in other branches of science. This led many of them to imitate psychologists, who, in their laboratories, were trying to imitate physicists and chemists in theirs. The unbalanced emphasis on laboratory experiments that has now prevailed among two generations of psychical researchers needs correction, as I have argued elsewhere (Stevenson, 1987). We are bound to have fewer reports of major paranormal phenomena if we have fewer investigators interested in studying and reporting them. Moreover, the paucity of scientists known to take an interest in these phenomena means that persons having paranormal experiences have little information about qualified professional persons to whom they might describe whatever experiences they have. Also, persons who have or think they may have special sensitivities or mediumistic abilities have almost no one qualified in psychical research to whom they can turn for encouragement and guidance.

Nevertheless, I do not believe that we can attribute the decline in the reporting of major phenomena entirely to lack of interest on the part of investigators, whatever factors may have contributed to that lack. Also, some of the decline in the interest of investigators may now result from

a falling off in the amount and quality of the phenomena available for study. For judging the truth of this conjecture we have little reliable data. I can assure you that claims of the major phenomena that warrant investigation have not ceased altogether, because our unit at the University of Virginia continues to be notified of them from time to time. However, our informants are not a random sample, both because they have the initiative to telephone or write to us and because they know of our existence in the first place. Surveys conducted during recent decades (Haraldsson, 1985, 1988-89; Kalish and Reynolds, 1973; Palmer, 1979) tell us that the proportion of the general population who *believe* that they have experienced some paranormal phenomenon has not declined from that found in earlier surveys (Sidgwick, H. and Committee, 1894; West, 1948). Unfortunately, the modern surveys have elicited reports of beliefs *about* paranormal experiences, not evidence that the reported experiences are paranormal. Haraldsson (1988-89) is the only modern surveyor of psychical experiences who has also investigated some of the claims his respondents have made. In Iceland, at least, veridical and death-coinciding apparitions seem to be reported with a frequency not appreciably less than that observed in nineteenth-century England (Sidgwick, H. and Committee, 1894). However, I believe that Iceland may not be typical of Western countries, and I think—admittedly on insufficient evidence—that a real decline in major paranormal phenomena has occurred in the West during this century. In the remainder of this Address, I propose to accept this assumption and consider some of the possible reasons for this decline.

Physical theories about the nature of extrasensory perception have been proposed since the late nineteenth century (Barrett, Gurney and Myers, 1882); they achieved some prominence from Berger's (1940) conjectures and in recent years have become fashionable. They have gained many adherents without winning universal acceptance among persons whose opinions we should respect. If we were to decide that some physical feature, such as extremely low frequency electromagnetic waves (Persinger, 1987), correlated reliably with manifestations of extrasensory perception, we might decide that the increase during recent decades of "electronic smog" (Fox, 1988) (at least in regions having much electronic equipment) has been an important cause of the decline in major paranormal phenomena. This would lead us to expect that manifestations of extrasensory perception would vary from region to region with differences in the amount of electronic smog. Unfortunately, with our present meager resources we cannot undertake a project of the magnitude required for adequately testing this hypothesis.

I recognize in myself a bias against physical theories of extrasensory perception, because I believe that we can understand it better by a dualist concept of brain and mind that permits minds, under certain

circumstances, to communicate directly with each other (outside known physical means of communication). Accordingly, my search for causes in the decline of the major paranormal phenomena has concentrated on possible psychological explanations. I have tried to think of features in which life in the West now differs from what it was one hundred years ago and from what it is in other parts of the world today. I shall consider the changes that seem to me important under the two headings of normal processes and paranormal ones.

The normal processes I further divide into changes in our conditions and manner of living and changes in our attitudes. To take the former first, I think that we have learned from the study of spontaneous cases the importance for their occurrence of both love and death. The participants are nearly always persons having bonds of affection, and the event communicated is most often some peril endangering the agent. We can say that the percipient has a need to know what is happening to the agent and the agent a need to let the percipient know (Murphy, 1943).

When normal communication is infeasible, the need for paranormal communication increases. The authors of *Phantasms of the Living* (Gurney, Myers and Podmore, 1886) may not have realized that violent death occurred frequently among the events communicated in the cases reported in their great work. At least they did not draw attention to the fact. Nevertheless, among 314 *Phantasms* cases involving death, it had occurred violently in 28 percent. Furthermore, among the approximately two-thirds of the cases in which death had occurred naturally we found that in one-third the death had occurred suddenly (Stevenson, 1982). (We defined a death as "sudden" if it occurred within 24 hours of the deceased person's being thought well or at least, if ill, in no danger of dying.) A violent death in the nineteenth century was nearly always also a sudden one, and, if this be agreed, then almost 53 percent of the deaths involved in the *Phantasms* cases occurred suddenly. Furthermore, the persons concerned were often physically separated by long distances and normal communications were, by modern standards, extremely crude. (The telegraph was not adequately developed until the second half of the nineteenth century, and the telephone not until its last quarter.) The slowness and sometimes the impossibility of a normal communication would, I believe, increase the need to have a paranormal one. In the hundred years since the founding of our Society normal long-distance communications have greatly improved. Advances in medical care and their better deployment have also resulted in delayed deaths from violence, so that although violent deaths still occur they are not so apt to be sudden as they once were. These changes, I suggest, have reduced the need for a person who dies violently, or is accidentally injured, to communicate paranormally with those who love him or her.

The *need* to communicate paranormally has therefore diminished.

Can we say that the *desire* to communicate has declined also? I said above that percipients and agents in spontaneous cases are nearly always linked in a loving relationship. No one has found a way to measure love, but certain social indicators, such as the increased rate of divorce, of crime, and perhaps of child abuse, suggest to me that our society has become, on the whole, more selfish, that is, less loving than at least some societies of other times and places. If so, this may be another factor in the decline in paranormal communications.

A third normal feature of Western society that has changed markedly during the past one hundred years is the growth of philosophical materialism. Most scientists, for example, believe in materialism as unquestioningly as they believe in Copernican astronomy. A survey of the belief in life after death conducted in 1981 showed that in the United States 67 percent of the general population believe in life after death, whereas only 32 percent of leading physicians and only 16 percent of leading (nonmedical) scientists do (Gallup, 1982). Most of us are probably familiar with the prevalence of materialism among scientists. What is not sufficiently recognized is that, although about two-thirds of respondents among the general public believe in life after death, almost one-third do not. It is to that substantial minority that I wish to draw your attention. I am not familiar with any surveys of belief in life after death in the nineteenth century, and I think there were none. However, a question posed about the belief in life after death would have shocked nearly all respondents of that time. Galton's study of the efficacy of prayer assumed that most persons attended church, prayed when they were in church, and believed — some perhaps only perfunctorily — in the power of their prayers to preserve the life of the British sovereign (Galton, 1883). I think we may assume also that everyone who engaged in prayers for the sovereign believed that the sovereign had a soul that would survive physical death; and they believed the same of themselves.

Some persons can segregate beliefs about different aspects of non-material existences and events. This would be particularly likely to be true of persons who have made a special study of psychical phenomena. We know that at least two (and probably more) former Presidents of our Society have believed in paranormal cognition but not in the survival of human personality after death (Dodds, 1934; Richet, 1922). However, I think that members of the general public do not usually make such a distinction. For most of them, a belief in life after death almost entails a belief in miracles, such as the phenomena described in the Bible, and also a belief in what we call paranormal cognition. Conversely, members of the general public who do not believe in life after death are also likely to be skeptical about all kinds of paranormal phenomena, the recognition of which would imply for them a soul that would survive bodily death. If these assumptions are justified, we can conclude that

the belief in paranormal phenomena has declined during the past century. (I realize that this is contrary to what the surveys that I cited earlier suggest.) Beliefs influence expectations, and numerous experiments in psychology have shown that expectations influence perceptions (Allport and Kramer, 1946; Dixon, 1981). This must also be true of extrasensory perceptions. A disbeliever in apparitions is less likely to see one than is a believer. Some disbelievers may see apparitions despite their skepticism, but the overall effect of an increased skepticism would be to reduce the number of persons sensitive to apparitions and other paranormal experiences also. In addition, disbelief may cause dismissal of a paranormal experience that does occur through quick interpretation of it as "just a hallucination" or "only a coincidence". From the consequent reduction, both of the perception of paranormal experiences and of their recognition as being paranormal when they do occur, fewer of them would be reported.

Indications of interference with paranormal phenomena may be exceedingly difficult to detect. To illustrate this point, I shall mention an observation from our study of the features of persons who claimed to remember experiences when they were recovering from being near death. Greyson and I (1980) found that such persons were much more likely to say that they had had what I call the advanced phenomena of these experiences, such as meeting deceased persons or "beings of light", when their near-fatal crisis occurred at home or outdoors than when it occurred in a hospital or other public place. I want to emphasize that I completely overlooked the importance of this finding for several years, until I happened to have occasion to review our data and suddenly realized the possible significance of this correlation. I have long thought that the attempt of some experimenters to simulate in their laboratories a home-like atmosphere by putting in deeply upholstered chairs and some well-known prints of Picasso's paintings was downright silly. To reach this mock living room, the subjects of such experimenters would usually have had to traverse half a mile of hospital or other institutional corridors which would effectively tell them that they were far from home. The results of our comparison between the experiences of persons having near-fatal crises in their homes and in their hospitals confirmed me in my bias against the use of laboratories to study paranormal phenomena, except for a few restricted purposes.

I shall next consider the possibility that spreading materialism has had an inhibiting effect on paranormal phenomena through paranormal causes. Critics tell us that allegations of their having an adverse effect on the phenomena are mere evasions of the painful truth that they have improved vigilance and tightened controls, so that the alleged phenomena do not occur in the presence of the controls they recommend. This may be true in some instances, and I am far from saying that we can learn



nothing from critics. However, we for our part have obtained abundant evidence of the effect of the participants' beliefs on the delicate balance for or against paranormal effects in experimental situations (White, 1976). An atmosphere of completely unqualified belief appears to facilitate and may indeed be essential for the occurrence of paranormal *physical* phenomena (Batcheldor, 1966; Owen and Sparrow, 1976), and I think this may be equally true of paranormal *mental* phenomena. If belief facilitates them, disbelief can block them, as Schmeidler's (1943 a, 1943 b) experiments showed many years ago.

A person adversely affecting an experiment in extrasensory perception does not need to be physically present with the percipient. Schmeidler (1961a, 1961b) showed that the scores of percipients at card-guessing tended to be high or low according to whether an agent was wishing the percipient to succeed or to fail. Some experiments even suggest that unfavorable influences may not reach the level of an overt wish that a percipient would fail; much more subtle negative qualities may come into play (West and Fisk, 1953). Several experiments, principally of the late nineteenth century, have demonstrated a capacity for certain subjects to be put to sleep by suggestion directed at them from a long distance (Adams, 1849-50; Janet, 1886 a, 1886 b; Richet, 1886; Vasiliev, 1976). There are even cases on record whose authenticity we have no reason to doubt of persons having died suddenly after they were wished to death at a distance, the victims being unaware of the fatal wishing aimed at them (David-Neel, 1961; Rose, 1956). These observations warrant us in thinking that disbelief can inhibit the occurrence of the phenomena whose authentic existence it denies.

I have made a diagnosis and, as a medical man should, I have also indicated what physicians call etiology, that is, causes. However, I am reminded now of Hilaire Belloc's slighting reference to physicians who

... answered, as they took their Fees,  
There is no cure for this disease.

Therefore, I should propose some remedies. We cannot—I say with some regret—return to all conditions as they were in the West a century ago. However, our studies may benefit from a new cycle of belief in paranormal phenomena. Perhaps the current wave of gullibility toward alleged paranormal phenomena that we see among many members of the general public, and which most of us deplore, may, by the processes I have conjectured, once again facilitate the occurrence of the major paranormal phenomena.

Let me, however, suggest three other means of finding major paranormal phenomena today. First, we can go to the countries now called undeveloped. I mean most of Asia and Africa, where social conditions are in many respects similar to those of the West in the nineteenth century or perhaps the eighteenth century. In these regions normal

communications still depend largely on conveyance by word of mouth. One's own feet and perhaps the bullock-cart are the main means of movement from one place to another in rural parts. Family ties remain close,<sup>4</sup> everyone believes in the reality of telepathy, and the dead are conceived as having survived and being still sometimes able to intervene in terrestrial affairs. Thus impaired normal communications exist along with both a still strong desire to communicate with other persons one loves and a widespread belief that paranormal communication is possible. In these regions the major paranormal phenomena are said still to occur abundantly.

I have myself no personal experience with any form of paranormal phenomena in Asia and Africa other than that of the children who claim to remember previous lives, but I do have much experience of these cases. I have often asked myself why we find such children so much more easily in those parts of the world than elsewhere. An obvious first answer to this question is that the people of these regions nearly all believe in reincarnation, and this belief somehow facilitates and even promotes the children's narrations about previous lives. This is certainly true, but I think it is insufficient as an explanation of what we are trying to understand. There must be other factors contributing to the occurrence of these and other cases of apparent paranormal phenomena in Asia and Africa. I suggest that one cause is that the peoples of these regions still take as normal what we in the West have come to call paranormal. If I were advising a young scientist entering psychical research today, I would reverse Horace Greeley's<sup>5</sup> advice to young Americans of the mid-nineteenth century and say "Go East, young man."<sup>6</sup>

My second recommendation is a careful search for special subjects who have unusual paranormal capacities and are also willing to cooperate in scientific investigations. In the last few decades several persons with alleged or self-proclaimed gifts have appeared in our arena. Unfortunately, nearly all have tended either to become figures in the world of entertainment and mass media or to welcome and attract a

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<sup>4</sup> This is not just one more datum for dissertations by graduate students in anthropology. There are grounds for believing that the more rapid and more durable recovery from severe mental illnesses in undeveloped countries (compared with Western countries) may be due to the stronger family ties that exist in these countries (Waxler, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> This well-known phrase is correctly attributed to John B. L. Soule. Horace Greeley borrowed it and used it, but with due acknowledgment to Soule.

<sup>6</sup> During a rehearsal of this Address my colleagues quickly told me that the direction to go East was too narrow. They reminded me that the northwest area of North America is not East, while Africa and South America are South. All these are regions where we may still find major paranormal phenomena.

circle (or crowd) of adulating and uncritical followers. The former outcome occurs most often in the West, the latter most often in Asia. With both of them conditions for quiet scientific inquiry become ruined. But we should not despair. Our predecessors had the good fortune to work with Eileen Garrett, Olga Kahl, Gladys Osborne Leonard, Stefan Ossowiecki, Eusapia Palladino, Leonora Piper, and a few others of their quality. Their like will surely be seen again; some may even be among us now, if we would just look for them. There will be no quick results in this endeavor. It may take years of sifting before an investigator finds an outstanding subject and perhaps some further years before investigations with the subject can warrant a publication. Still, the rewards from this effort in gains of knowledge might be immense.

My last suggestion might seem like a rebuke to present members of the Society, but I certainly do not intend it as such. I cannot, however, forbear from telling you that in some respects the domain of the Society for Psychical Research has broken up rather in the manner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire after World War I. If we were to pursue this analogy we might say that regions formerly held under one sovereignty have asserted their independence and gone their own ways. The departure of hypnotism after it received at least a modicum of official recognition from medicine was not regretted in the Society; some members even welcomed it as a sign of progress, because the studies of some of our early members, such as Gurney, had signally contributed to the legitimation of hypnosis. So far so good. Consider, however, the following categories: unusual healings, lucid dreams, multiple personality, mystical or religious experiences, and experiences during near-fatal injuries and illnesses. Each of these topics had the attention of our pioneers, and reports of them appear in the early volumes of our Society or in related publications by early members of the Society. And yet today each of these five categories of research has a separate society devoted to the special study of a particular type of experience.<sup>7</sup> I cannot explain why this happened, but I deplore it. I do not think the secession, as I see it, of these territories that we first colonized is beneficial, either to the small newly-created states or to the mother country. Some of those who have founded these smaller societies seem misguided to me, and they may find themselves more isolated from other scientists than we are.

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps I should add to this list of secessions that of the skeptics, who have now formed their own group. The Society for Psychical Research has always had—from Frank Podmore on—one or more members who could be described as “skeptics in residence”. However, so far as I know, these members, although they often doubted individual instances, never adopted the stance that paranormal phenomena could not be possible; and none ever advocated stopping the search for more and better evidence of the phenomena.

However, our Society may have been as much at fault as those who have failed to find it an appropriate forum for their interests. The Society for Psychical Research may insidiously have come to identify the field of its endeavors as narrower than it once was or should now again become. Some may even say that the Society has begun to resemble a particular chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States, which gradually became so exclusive that it eventually denied membership to certain applicants on the grounds that they were drunkards. Some of the recently founded groups with more specialized interests than ours may have taken with them, so to speak, some of the major phenomena of which I lament the decline in our reports.

We must ask ourselves what should be the task of the Society in the remaining decade of this century and in all the decades of the next. It is certainly that of continuing to act as a third force between persons who are too credulous and those who are too skeptical. If we maintain the high standards for which we have been known and esteemed, we may once more attract first-rate scientists and scholars. So long as our Society exists, fanatical skeptics cannot say there are no paranormal phenomena to study. Also, so long as it exists, intelligent persons will have some resources against the claims of the self-deceived and the deceivers who abound around the edges of psychical research.

Our survival cannot, however, rest on an assumed position of magisterial authority. We may not be the best judges—we are almost certainly not—of the place from which the next advances in our field will come. Therefore, in maintaining our standards we must avoid any hardened dogmas that allow only familiar ideas to find expression. An open mind is not necessarily an empty one. Let us try to seek out again the major paranormal phenomena—wherever they may be. Careful investigations of these phenomena brought this Society its early fame; and such investigations can bring it a new fame as well.

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