

OBITUARY

ROBERT MORRIS

By JAMES C. CARPENTER

Robert L. ("Bob") Morris, a leading spokesman for parapsychology to the world, died August 12, 2004. He had held the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh for 19 years. His work in that post was the summation of a very broad and productive career. There he developed a highly productive and congenial laboratory, taught actively and widely in the Psychology Department, and made uncounted friends around the globe for the curious questions of parapsychology, while disarming as many potential enemies with his consummate fairness, his intelligence, and his wit.

Bob was born in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1942. He was a very bright boy, and an only child until he was 17. This did not isolate him, however, because he was largely raised by the extended families of both his parents, and spent much time in these active and sometimes querulous family groups. From those early days he was known as a remarkable peacemaker. His childhood interests ran more to animals than to anything resembling the paranormal, and he tamed a little menagerie of wild creatures. He sometimes wore to school a pet anole (a lizard similar to a chameleon) around his neck under his shirt. Knowing him, I can imagine the shock he bestowed upon selected classmates.

His interest in parapsychology dates at least to the day when, as a boy, he found in a family closet a game for testing ESP that his parents had acquired. The game was modeled after the techniques developed by J. B. Rhine at Duke University, and Bob asked his parents if people could really obtain information in such ways. They said that they believed so, but so far as they knew, science had actually learned very little about it. He then asked why that was so, when such an obviously fascinating question was at stake. They didn't know the answer to that, and he decided that if this important issue continued to be so neglected, he might have to do something about it himself. He took a BS in Psychology from the University of Pittsburgh in 1963, where he had found time to assist in some of the psychokinesis experiments of R. A. McConnell. He also began a lively correspondence with J. B. Rhine himself, and decided to come to Duke to graduate school, where he could ground himself in mainstream methods and concepts in psychology, while seeing more for himself just how those parapsychologists were going about their business.

This is where I met Bob, in the summer of 1964, seated at the table for the weekly research meeting of the Parapsychology Laboratory. He was friendly, intelligent, and took notes in bursts as the ideas seemed to flow out of his ears. Bob and I both belonged to a small group that Rhine hosted for study and work for several summers. The others at first were Dave Rogers, Chuck Honorton, and Rex Stanford, with John Palmer coming in a little later. Rhine lectured us, advised us intensely with interesting projects, flattered us and scolded us, and considered us his heirs. This little band shared a belief that the problems were very important, as well as a sense of admiration for the integrity of the Lab's work and for Rhine's courage under fire. We formed among us the sort of friendships and common sense of purpose that are singular in a lifetime.

Bob developed a close friendship also with Rhine, and that was only strained and not broken when this group's ties with Rhine and his laboratory were ruptured. Many, many people could keep Bob as a friend, but even the most hardheaded and hostile could not keep him long as an enemy.

Besides his parapsychological work, Bob's Duke years also found him involved in the study of animal behavior, as well as research at the university's Center for the Study of Aging and Development. As he would show in later years, his intellectual interests were broad, and his appetite for learning the best methods with which to study fascinating questions was keen. He graduated with a PhD in 1969, with a dissertation on factors influencing pair-bonding in ring doves, or, as he put it, "how birds kiss." Bob's interest in romance was not limited to birds, however, and in 1965 he met Joanna DuBarry. She recalls one day shortly after she arrived at the Duke psychology department to begin her own graduate work. She was walking down the hall asking another student if he knew anything about parapsychology, and where was J. B. Rhine anyway, when a deep voice behind her said something like, "Do you want to know about parapsychology?" He talked with her at length about the things he had learned. She remembers him as very serious but also as having the zany sense of humor and unusual slant on everything that she came to fall in love with. Bob and Joanna were married in 1966. After graduating from Duke, Bob took on a research position at the Psychical Research Foundation led by Bill Roll. There he applied his knowledge of comparative psychology in research on an apparent extrasensory influence of an out-of-body "traveler" on the behavior of some bonded pets, and also carried out careful studies with other human "gifted" subjects.

The late '60s and early '70s were rather magical years in many ways, in Durham no less than the rest of the United States. Bob and Joanna's home became rather magical itself, as they developed the pattern of entertaining, remarkably generous and fun, that they later transported to widening circles of friends around the country and then to Scotland. There were many dinners with oddly improvised dishes, and parties in which Bob

danced the boogaloo in a manner apparently modeled after the mating behavior of ring doves, and a loud and rowdy psychic healing might suddenly befall the unwary. And there were many long conversations about parapsychology, a few lasting through the night. At the end of these, Bob would generally summarize and organize and note some possibilities that hadn't been covered.

In 1974 Bob and Joanna left Durham for California, first to teach at UC Santa Barbara, and then at UC Irvine. He taught courses in animal behavior, abnormal psychology, and learning, as well as parapsychology. He not only sought to accommodate parapsychology with other areas of psychology, he developed a genuine appetite for making these domains speak to one another, help, and fertilize one another. This pattern served him well in the ensuing years. During this period his publications focused mostly on the possibility of psi in animals, and the relationship between biology and parapsychology. The '70's were flowering even more colorfully in California than in North Carolina, and Bob also came to be increasingly concerned about the dangers of excessive, uncritical belief. I recall his mentioning that students in California at the time made great subjects but impatient experimenters. Lila and Vanessa, the Morris's twin daughters, were born in Santa Barbara in 1977. In 1978 Bob moved to Syracuse University to teach and do research in the School of Computer Science and Information Studies. He conceptualized parapsychological "abilities" as problems of exceptional human performance, and developed a model of psi as communication. His writings increasingly showed his knack for analyzing complex conceptual problems, breaking them down into essential parts, then laying out multifaceted but very sensible schemata of ideas. He also began a series of studies that lasted until his death in which he gathered from all corners ideas about how psi functioning might be enhanced, and developed ingenious ways to test them empirically.

In 1985 the Morris family moved to Edinburgh, where Bob accepted the Koestler Professorship of Parapsychology. This chair had been established by the author Arthur Koestler, and its location at the University of Edinburgh had been facilitated by Dr. John Beloff. At the time of this decision, Bob confided in his friend Stephan Schwartz that he planned to take the long view with this post, investing the time and effort to build good relations with other academic disciplines, and developing a quality program that could generate excellent scholars who would then go on to take academic posts at other universities, seeding the intellectual landscape of Britain and Europe with parapsychological experts in a way that had not yet proven possible in the US. He did just that. Although the terms of his appointment did not require it, he pitched into teaching and other departmental duties with zest and his characteristic warmth and humor. When he discussed parapsychology with his colleagues, it was thoroughly undefensively, with much listening and care. He also entered more into public discussions about the field, about what it was and was not. He defined

the field for many people, particularly in Britain and the rest of Europe: what its questions were, its difficulties, its boundaries, its dangers. He did all of this quite deliberately. Some of his ideas about this project of placing parapsychology in some useful social context are spelled out in his second presidential address to the Parapsychological Association (Morris, 1986a). This is one of his many papers that should be read by any serious student of the field. He also came to realize that the caution with which academic psychologists approach parapsychology is not a nuisance, but an asset. He had always been interested in the capacity of people to be deceived or to inadvertently deceive themselves, and he became an expert in this area of psychological study. With this knowledge in hand, he could disarmingly show the most skeptical audience that he was as genuinely cautious as they, and knew much more than they probably did about how easily and in what varied ways one can be misled, and what must be done to avoid it. This was far from a mere ploy for disarming skeptics. He believed that it was an essential attitude for anyone who hoped to do meaningful work in this difficult field and communicate it effectively to the larger community. He believed that knowledge should be built up in a very careful, empirical way, and eschewed metaphysical positions of any sort. He summarized many of these ideas in two other essential papers, published in the text he coauthored with Edge and others (Morris, 1986b), and in the *European Journal of Parapsychology* (Morris, 1987). Many of his important ideas about how the field should try to shape itself in the future are summed up in a more recent paper (Morris, 2000).

Bob blossomed in Edinburgh, and so did the program he built. He was highly productive. He had over 100 publications, including coauthorship of two books, and for awhile he coedited the *European Journal of Parapsychology*. He supervised 30 PhDs in parapsychology, 12 of whom have gone on to permanent academic positions in other university departments, where they teach and conduct research in the subject. Some of his students have themselves graduated other PhD students, increasing the number of his academic progeny to over 40. He taught thousands of undergraduates, developed and taught over 20 different courses, and supervised over 100 honors theses. Even more remarkable than his workload was the effect he had on his department and colleagues. One of these colleagues, a social psychologist, took me aside at a conference a couple of years ago and said, in roughly these words: "It's true that Bob has facilitated an extraordinary openness toward parapsychology. More important for us, though, is what he has done for the whole department. He has made it an enormously friendlier and healthier place." A measure of the esteem with which he was held is the decision by the principal of the university, Professor Timothy O'Shea, that on the day of Bob's memorial service, the flags on the university buildings all over the city would be flown at half-mast.

While Bob was developing his program at Edinburgh, he was also quietly becoming parapsychology's foremost "ambassador to the world," in

Richard Broughton's phrase. He held posts in the Bial Foundation of Portugal and the IGPP in Germany, and he served for several years on the board of directors of the Rhine Research Center. He published in many venues and lectured around the world, educating, challenging, provoking, and amusing his listeners, and assisted in the development of research programs in many different settings. To say that he did all of this "quietly" may seem odd, but it is correct in Bob's case. He was so modest, so remarkably lacking in self-aggrandizement. If there is a spot in the brain which secretes narcissism, I am sure that an autopsy would have found it quite undeveloped in Bob.

Still, the fruits of his efforts were visible enough that he was honored. He twice served as president of the Parapsychological Association, and received that organization's Outstanding Contribution Award. He served on the Council of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and for two years was President of the Psychology Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He served on the Council of the Society for Psychical Research in London, and received its Myers Medal (named after F. W. H. Myers). A different prestigious award with a similar name, the Charles Myers Award, was presented to him by the British Psychological Society in 1999.

Bob's chosen field of endeavor is as internally contentious and externally embattled as any that one could imagine. And yet he worked in it and led it and promoted it in such a graceful way that I cannot recall anyone saying a negative word about him. The only faint moments of irritation with him that I can remember were on the part of someone who wished he would be more partisan (on their side of some pet issue, of course).

And then there was his legendary, zany sense of humor. A large, funny book could be collected on this topic, but one example will have to suffice. Rick Berger recalls his "first close encounter with Bob Morris" in these words: "I first met Bob at the Syracuse PA convention in 1981. . . . For some reason (he) decided to play charades with a car full of us while he was driving. We had to figure out the name of the character he would act out. He started driving around a roundabout until we were all dizzy and wanted to get out. I believe he relented when no one could guess the answer, 'Baba Ram Dass.' How were we to guess this? The clues BOB, AROUND, DATSUN."

To this unique eye, to this remarkable mix of intelligence and kindness and fun, we must all say goodbye. We have his achievements to comfort us. J. B. Rhine and his contemporaries, such as Gardner Murphy, Hans Bender, R. H. Thouless, and others, dreamed of the day when scientific work in parapsychology might have a secure home in vital, academic environments where it could grow, cross-fertilize with other disciplines studying the human beast, and contribute its piece to our understanding of nature. For all their efforts, they could not achieve this goal, and Rhine himself retired from academic battles to the insular peace of a private

research organization. Many other very able scientists have also pursued such visions, but the results have been partial and transient. Bob Morris succeeded at this. If parapsychology has a future, it is because of him.

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