

GUEST EDITORIAL: WHY PARAPSYCHOLOGY NOW?

BY JAMES CARPENTER

More than a year has passed since September 11, 2001. The anniversary of the event brings it back to mind. The world had seemed one way, and then suddenly another. We also remember the days following that day, when all our projects and preoccupations, so demanding and self-important, were thrown into a doubtful new light. Then we tried to remember what we had believed was normal, to imitate it. We are still left with new questions. In this shrunken and dangerous world, what should we do? Now that we know more intimately about real violence and real hatred, with what attitude should we face them? And what about this work some of us have chosen. What does it mean to do the work of Parapsychology now? The monsters rose up out of our dreams and toppled our great buildings. Thousands of our countrymen and women were crushed and lost. Their cries fled deeply into the ground beneath the rubble. Now they will live there forever in the unlit stone that holds the subways.

Some glorious things happened too. We found a new class of heroes: those who march into danger to help. The strangers of New York City discovered that they were neighbors. And there is still a dark side too: a relentless mood of worry, and a thrilling appetite for war. Given all this, why study the mind the way we do?

Because people know I care about parapsychological things, I heard so many stories a year ago about people who seemed to know something about the tragedies a bit before the rest of us did. These stories have continued to find me. Perhaps they have found you too.

A week and a half before 9/11, I spoke with a man who says he has told many people things that they didn't want to know about future events. He excitedly described his feelings that America was in great danger, that we had enemies much more hateful than we think, that our oceans do not protect us as we imagine, and that something terrible was coming. He mentioned the earlier World Trade Center bombing, and said "That was a shot across the bow, believe me, just a shot across the bow. It's the tip of an iceberg. A whole lot worse is coming. We'll see a fiery ruin." This man had no connection with terrorist groups, and did not think he was predicting a

particular event. The reference to the World Trade Center simply leapt to his mind in the course of his invective.

On the morning of September 10, a 12-year-old boy I know woke from a terrible nightmare. In the dream, he and some friends were in a nearby mall when a huge jetliner zoomed down out of the sky right on top of them. There was great destruction, and perhaps he was being killed. He was very hard to comfort, and missed a morning of school from being so shaken. His parents assured him about the harmlessness of dreams, the safety of airplanes, the security of malls. The next day came the planes and fire and horror. Afterward he was having anxiety attacks and trouble knowing what to believe.

On the night of the 10th, a friend of a friend awoke after only an hour or so of sleep after a terrible dream. She was in a large building with many other people when suddenly the whole thing gave way and tumbled into space. She thought, "an earthquake!" Then she was in the dark, crawling among broken pipes and electrical wires. She woke up shaking and crying. Her husband held her until she could breathe. She went back to sleep, and shortly woke again with the same dream. This happened twice more, and finally only some medication salvaged a few hours rest. She had never had such a night before in her life.

On September 15, I got a call from someone who wanted to talk a bit about the terrible week. She mentioned that she was struck by a strange occurrence with her elderly mother, disoriented from strokes, whom she visited in the nursing home, as she often did, on the evening of the 10th. Her mother was unusually agitated and could not be calmed when the television was turned to the news. She cried out, "I'm afraid of the news! The news is bad! The news is bad! The news is bad!" She could only be calmed down when it was turned off. This in spite of the fact that nothing upsetting was being shown at the time and she often seemed to enjoy the news and liked to have it on most evenings. As far as her daughter could determine, nothing upsetting had been on the television earlier that evening, and she wrote it off as an inexplicable piece of ranting by her confused mother.

Around the same time, another friend told me that personally he had lost no one in the tragedies, but his uncle, in Tower Number 2, barely got out from the 60th floor. A striking part of the story, according to his aunt, was the fact that at the precise time of the first collision across town, their little dog began barking and whining inconsolably in their apartment for no apparent reason. Neither could recall her ever acting this way before.

And I heard happier stories: a man who uncharacteristically took a wrong turn on the way to work at the Pentagon and arrived late to see his office crushed in flames. A woman who developed a strange headache and missed a plane that was commandeered. A man who decided on a whim to exit his train to buy a small gift for an office mate, making him a precious few minutes late to the World Trade Center. There were many of these.

Do they mean anything? To those telling them, the stories feel puzzling and deeply meaningful. At the same time, reason might tell us that they are arbitrarily selected coincidences. After all, nightmares happen to many people every night, and surely there are hundreds of unlucky stories we will never hear, that led instead into tragic airplanes and doomed buildings.

This takes us back to the question of why we do the work of Parapsychology. One reason is to find real answers to questions like these. The methods of science relieve us of the need to make decisions like this one emotionally. What have we learned? Although we can't say anything for sure about any particular instance of possible ESP (it could in fact be just a coincidence), we know as a scientific fact that people *can* acquire information about things beyond their small, solid skulls to a degree well beyond chance. We also know that, like these dreams and hunches and odd whims, this is generally a crude and partial form of knowledge. In addition, we are beginning to know many things about when and with whom this sort of knowledge is most likely to be expressed. What we know would take volumes to describe, but what we don't know is enormously greater than what we do.

Here is a second reason we pursue Parapsychology. Perhaps we could come to learn enough about this peculiar form of knowing that it could be made reliable and usable. For at least a few of us, the unconscious mind seems to hold within itself a kind of early-warning system. While it may help guide an individual out of harm's way (as some of our research suggests it may), in general its intimations are so whimsical and symbolical and fragmented that they have no general usefulness. This is a pressing question for our science. Could it be better understood, and made useful? Many hundreds of premonition stories have come into the parapsychological centers in the last year, and most of the queries contained one central concern: If somehow I knew something, why couldn't I help? If you speak with these people, you know they are not attention-seekers and fakers. They are good citizens with broken hearts. It does not seem far-fetched to imagine that if we can come to understand this faculty better, we can in fact come to use it to protect ourselves from future tragedies.

And finally there is a third reason to study these phenomena – they lead us to some very important truths about our nature. If we deeply consider the implications of our data, they take us beyond our selves, past our concerns and our bodies and our clans. Larry Dossey, a member of our Board, has been writing persuasively about the real, empirical effect that prayer can have on medical conditions, even when the patient has no knowledge of being prayed for and the prayer is at a distance. Other parapsychologists have accumulated considerable research showing that the intentions of one person toward another can have measurable effects on the latter's physiological functioning, even when the two are physically

separated. Shut securely into a sound-proofed chamber, the ganzfeld percipient muses and utters images nicely descriptive of unknown material being looked at by someone in another building. We are more connected to each other than we think. Strangers spun across the globe, we are also as close as the breath of one, the skin of the other. As we define the odd potentials of Parapsychology, we find our singular humanity. As we learn more about our deep inter-connection, we can see violence and terrorism not only as horrible, but also as misguided. They are based on a false understanding of our nature. Facts can be taught, and they are ultimately more compelling than doctrines. Learning more about this inter-connected nature of ours is Parapsychology's business. The facts we find may help heal the hateful, fearful separations that threaten us all.

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