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Guest Editorial: Thoughts of the New World

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ABSTRACT: This is a reflection about the ill-defined dream which impels our work as parapsychologists. The dream is no less important for its vagueness, and is about an incipient, unfolding new world. De-emphasizing the revolutionary implications of our work probably wins us no new friends, partly because it is emotionally dishonest. The problem is to stand by our *sense* of revolution while tolerating its lack of clear content. I sketch some shapes that the new world may embody, emphasizing some cultural underpinnings it could provide, which our current world needs, and needs increasingly.

After all this time, I recently had a fresh encounter with J. B. Rhine. He filled the room of the dream with red-faced ire, bull-head squared away, neck swelling, and thick forefinger pointing at me with accusation. The gist of it was, I wasn't doing his work. He was dead and couldn't do it anymore. Forget the research I *have* done, all the data, the seminars, the chores here and there. What had I been doing for the *revolution*? I awoke upset. I've never accepted being pushed around, and this authoritarian visit was insulting. His work, indeed! Yet, recalling the dream, I could see that it was telling me something I have been trying to realize for awhile: that we have been blurring the fact that parapsychology is revolutionary.

Like many who became caught up in all this, I read J. B. Rhine's books when I was an adolescent, and they hooked me. With sober, scientific methods these people were asking the most astonishing questions and establishing the most outrageous things. I had been looking for a cause, and I found it. This was big stuff!

In *New World of the Mind*, Rhine (1953) described the case for parapsychology as if it were a venture like the voyage of Columbus. (Forget for a moment that the ancestors of most of us followed the explorer and ravaged the Americas, to our eventual benefit. Remember the romance and audacity of it.) With an ego as big as his little ships and his head full of ideas that were grand and wrong, Columbus and his crew plunged like corks into the watery abyss. He didn't really know where they were going,

but he *knew* it would turn out to be important. Remember the story? How they nearly turned back, but stubbornly kept going, past reason into fear and despair. Of course, what he found he misconstrued until his death; but his find led to a correction, and the whole world changed.

The grandiosity of the Rhines and their little band to arrogate such an allusion to themselves! Yet Columbus was a similar kind of fool, and had lubricated his plans with his own great claims on Destiny.

Sometimes I have wanted to soften that audacity. Earlier I wrote some papers coaxing us all to normalize parapsychology. Like all psychologists, we were studying “constructs,” after all, not entities, and we didn’t need to tie ourselves to metaphysical commitments of any sort. I respected psychologists, in general, and I believed that the best of them would surely be reasonably open to a parapsychology that was rigorous and not tied to any spiritualistic bag of tricks. I thought our movement had become isolationist and defensive. I was also aching for the balm of tenure in an academic psychology department in which some senior colleagues had already strongly expressed, to each other if not to my face (an ironic deceit for the Vigilantes of Truth), a lot of hostility and embarrassment regarding my interest in this subject. I wrote and sent around what I saw as a very thoughtful position paper about it. I demonstrated that the anger and divisiveness that the early research had aroused was a product of those particular times and were not necessary in more enlightened days. All of us were interested in reality and truth, and with careful and appropriate methods, any questions about the human beast could be studied. Right?

An old friend, who was part of that debate about my academic fate, let me know later what a puff of hot air that little paper was. “Jim,” he said, “you might as well be a practicing necrophiliac.”

Why? I did good work, published in some “real” journals, trained graduate students with rigor and zeal, served on silly committees with more-or-less of a smile, and was a generally nice guy. Why did a little parapsychology make me as loathsome as those who make love with the dead?

In fact, the vigilantes saw clearly something I was wishing to blur: parapsychology is *really* revolutionary. It isn’t just psychology with a little twist. Strip away the normal, dignified language, the s’s, and t’s, and e’s and ANOVA’s—all that family of initials that the careful recite—and any fool can see that the heart of it is really outrageous, preposterous, outlandish (in Columbus’s sense), and for some it is frightening and embarrassing.

We had used the methods of caution to prove the ravings of lunatics. Our z’s and r’s were little photos. In some we showed people seeing around corners, some of them all the way to tomorrow; in others there were wishes injecting behavior into dice and computers. This is crazy and wondrous, and only some new world not yet invented can contain it!

In recent years we have tried to obscure this fact of revolution. Maybe unconsciously, we have been trying to be straighter, normal, more digni-

fied and dull. Why? I think there are lots of reasons. Like me 15 years ago, we believe that the work will advance best in harmony with other scientists, and we think that harmony may be achieved by softening our peculiarity and emphasizing our commonality. Also like me back then, many are weary of being viewed with suspicion. We long for the acceptance, funding, and respect that we've seen come to our old classmates in college and graduate school just from investing their efforts in more sanctioned areas. In short, we feel sorry for ourselves. We also fear as much as do the vigilantes of CSICOP those enthusiasts to our Left, the junkies of belief, the channelers and frauds and loonies who indulge the intoxication of awe. A last important reason is that, although we have a *sense* that the work is revolutionary, we have a hard time being clear about just what the revolution is and where it will lead, so it's hard to believe in it. Like Columbus and his crew before landfall, we don't really know where we are going, even though we feel it is important, and in the small hours of night we wonder if we are fools and will die with pointless, misled lives.

What is the revolution implicit in this odd voyage of discovery? The answer is far from clear. Some have said that it will be a major overhauling of physics, the "basic science." Personally, I believe that the world in which physics is basic will come to be seen as an Old World. In the perspective afforded by the Newer, it will seem less basic, as true and real as ever, but held in the context of a universe more immediate and personal for each individual than we can now conceive. This Old World is laid out in the latitudes and longitudes of space and time. The New One will contain all that, but will supersede it with other vectors of personal meaning in which each one will be astonishingly at home. A new psychology, one with the phenomena of parapsychology in its core, will be as basic as physics, and the two will be synthesized by ideas not yet invented. This is vague, and may be wrong.

And it may be that a vast dialectic is at play. Remember Hegel's thesis, antithesis, and synthesis? The thesis here is the world of pre-science, the antithesis is the one of physical science, and the synthesis is still unknown as we bob in our own sea of confusion but follow the rumors and reflections coming back from the experiments of parapsychology.

At first the world was alive with spirits and full of meaning, personal and intimate. Gods, angels, demons, and humans conversed, had sex, fought, and made deals. Egocentrism held sway, time was outlined beginning to end in a Bible story, the universe spun about the earth, and it all turned in the hand of God. Anything might happen, and only reason was bridled. At the same time, like the first embers of fire humanly struck, the dull practice of systematic observation had begun in some cold cave, and over time it gained momentum. By the Age of Enlightenment, truths were turning into questions and doctrines giving way to tests. The world stretched and fell apart. The human span became a tiny, accidental neighborhood on infinite axes of abstraction. Microscopes and telescopes stretched space into smallness and largeness whose boundaries are hope-

lessly out of reach, and paleontology, geology, and cosmology stretched time in both directions until the little Bible story fell like one more dead leaf in one of the infinity of autumns. Now we know the inside-out of matter, energy, and time. It all has nothing to do with any self. Minds and spirits are language-relics, fossils from the days of homey darkness. Thesis. Antithesis.

And synthesis? Who knows? But parapsychologists are as zany as Columbus, and are attached to some *other* observations that are disturbingly resonant of that old, irrational world even while, like the new, they are wrapped in the methods of science. They belong to both worlds, with profound contradiction. These say that something like minds *are* real, that something like spirits *can* speak, and that something like human needs can pop switches right in the chain of physical causality without touching them. Face these observations, live with them, and selves become palpable and deep with mystery, and the Sacred once again gathers together the stars in the sky.

Most scientists, bless them, have the imaginations of accountants and will never like these observations, so reeking of atavism. But they are *observations*, not doctrines, and the conscience of science cannot sleep easily with their denial. We have taken them as our cause because they seem to promise some new synthesis of the world. And because they are fun and as wide open as the western ocean in 1492.

Are there important implications of this revolution, or is it only academic sport? I am a psychotherapist, and I treat emotional damage. I have not been raped, or shot by a stranger on my own street, or beaten to a pulp for someone's fun, or pinned down in the explosive embrace of incest, but I speak daily with people who have had these experiences and others like them. They appear to be increasing. There is a brutalization that is spreading across the land of which these actions are only the least subtle expressions. There are countless expressions, all corrosive. We celebrate the fall of Communism, but even this happy collapse of tyranny is an event in a broad current that is still more disturbing. This is an era of falling-apart. Heidegger has called it the world's twilight. We are becoming more separate and less dear to one another. Cultures have great, implicit visions that provide a fabric for cohesion, collaboration and mercy. Our guiding visions are no longer compelling to the brightest, most educated, and most influential. Nor are they to the loneliest, poorest, or craziest. Along with the ascent of science and the death of the old visions, we see accelerating indications of greater separateness and disharmony, lonely individuals and angry clans, factions whose only basis for union is mutual self-interest. The fear and suspicion that are powerful parts of our human potential are less moderated by any overarching conceptions of existence as sacred, of a human family, of great, common tasks and imponderable relatedness, in the light of which decency feels necessary and sensible. In place of such conceptions, we see a desacralization of humanity, and lately a mean madness that is spreading to each doorstep. All three candidates for pres-

ident of the U.S. in 1992 ran on the platform of selfishness, more or less; the mass media breathe cynicism into each syllable of news and entertainment; doors lock up the second they close; people seem empty, and community seems silly. There is no convincing vision in our time in the light of which we can be real and deep and important to each other, beyond our selves and our clans. A moral poverty is growing, but most deeply, there is a poverty of vision.

Certainly there are countercurrents, forces of humanity and creativity and compassion. But they are fragmented and isolated, lacking an undergirding conception that could unite them and empower them in our collective mind. Even our smartest and most effective have no respite from nihilism that is really compelling to them, no matter how much they yearn for it. They have learned that only a scientifically constructed, empirically valid position can be trusted. The old structures of faith are kept from sentiment, like useless heirlooms, but not relied upon. A fact of our time is that only conceptions that have scientific validity can compel the respect of our collective reason.

Parapsychology, humble and lonely, is at a singular place. We generate scientific information about a miraculous connectedness of humans to each other and to their universe. Albeit slowly, we are assembling a reliable and valid picture of the capacity of selves to be intimately related to one another and to the physical world from the inmost centers of their minds and outside of the normal constraints of space and time.

We walk a line in which few are interested. We believe far too little for some, even as others find our observations hateful because of their revolutionary implications. We persist because the picture we assemble will help build a new ground, compellingly scientific, upon which the human family can conceive its relationship again.

For now, why not celebrate our oddity and its potential revolution, and proclaim it openly? It is what captured us to begin with. We can't really be much worse off than we already are, and greater frankness will be refreshing. Some people will better understand why we bother, and perhaps be moved to join or support us. Still, do not expect this work to pay the bills or get big grants or earn the attention or respect of most scientists. Get as much of all of that as you can, of course. But this work, this parapsychology—? Do it for the adventure, or don't do it.

REFERENCE

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