Family Reunions: Visionary Encounters with the Departed in a Modern-Day Psychomanteum

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ABSTRACT: A poignant feature of many near-death experiences is a visionary encounter with deceased loved ones. Over the centuries, researchers have sought safe ways to replicate near-death and related experiences, hoping to induce the powerful aftereffects of these events. The ancient Greeks contructed psychomanteums, or oracles of the dead, where seekers could consult spirits of the deceased. I describe a modern attempt to recreate the psychomanteum. Like near-death experiences, visionary encounters in this modern psychomanteum are experienced as real and not as hallucinatory, and have profound personal aftereffects. This novel experimental technique may permit the scientific study of phenomena that previously occurred only spontaneously and under uncontrolled circumstances.

The wish once again to see and to be in the presence of a loved one who has died is among the most poignant and deep-seated of human desires. This wish is sometimes fulfilled in the form of visions or apparitions of the deceased. Many persons who have near-death experiences tell us that as they enter into a realm of light they are met by the spirits of relatives and friends who have previously died. Furthermore, several independent studies have established that an appreciable proportion of bereaved persons experience apparitions of the departed or vivid episodes during which they are overcome with a pervasive sense of the presence of the lost loved ones (Rees, 1975). All these kinds of

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encounters typically are convincing, even self-certifying; these persons usually are left with no doubt that their experiences were real.

Alas, although apparitions of the deceased are remarkably common, they do not lend themselves very readily to systematic study on other than a purely demographic and after-the-fact basis. For one can hardly count on being there just at the right moment to watch an apparition-watcher watching an apparition, and to talk with him or her about it soon thereafter. And it is, we assume, impossible to precipitate them at will at a predetermined time and place. Yet, in the spring of 1990 several independent lines of research, thought, and experimentation converged in such a way as to suggest to me otherwise, and I conceived of a method by which, I believed, this could be done.

The very fact that apparitions of the deceased occur so frequently alerted me to the possibility of finding a way of encouraging them to take place under controlled circumstances of observation. It stands to reason that if we human beings are highly predisposed to such encounters anyway, a method might be devised to trigger them.

Among other advantages, this would make it possible to monitor persons experiencing apparitions of the departed while the episodes are in progress, and to interview them about the events immediately afterwards.

I had long been intrigued with the prospect of replicating near-death experiences. The popular fascination with this idea is reflected in the success of the recent Hollywood film Flatliners (Schumacher, 1990). However, no sane person would attempt to do this by the method sometimes imagined, viz., the induction of cardiac arrest in the hope that survivors of the procedure could bring back the latest dispatches from the other side.

One accepted way of proceeding when investigating a complex phenomenon is to analyze it into its component parts and to study some or each of these separately. Since meeting with departed loved ones is a feature common to many near-death experiences, demonstrating a way of calling forth the former phenomenon may well shed light on the latter.

For almost four years I had been experimenting with one form of facilitated visionary experience, specifically crystal or mirror visions. This research opened up a promising approach to the problem of enabling volunteer subjects to experience visionary reunions with lost loved ones.

Finally, while I was looking into some of the ways in which human beings have within institutional settings used altered states of consciousness for personal or social ends, I came across several accounts that raised the possibility that on a number of historical occasions