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*Afterlife Encounters: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Experiences* by Dianne Arcangel. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2005. 332 pp. \$15.95 (paper). ISBN 1-57174-436-3.

Some weeks after 9/11, Dianne Arcangel was waiting to meet a bereaved family at Ground Zero when she noticed an elderly gentleman. “He kept glancing towards the ruins and then staring into my eyes” (p. xiii). She approached and he said, “Would be intolerable if I hadn’t been here before...it happened.” He said that his deceased wife had come to him beforehand and showed him the scene on a big screen. He first thought that he was reliving something from World War II, but then a closer look told him it was something else.

In the course of her work as a hospice chaplain, director of the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross Center of Houston, and the Gateway Center in New York, Arcangel noticed that an afterlife encounter may not only bring comfort to the survivor but also spiritual evolution. Arcangel’s exploration began early, the first day of first grade. The teacher asked the children to tell the class something about themselves and their family. A boy volunteered, “My grandpa died and then he came into my room and went by my bucket of—” (p. 2). The teacher interrupted telling him not to be silly and to sit down. When Dianne sought him out afterwards, he said that he saw his grandpa by his bucket of toys, “He smiled and waved at me and I smiled and waved at him. Then he left” (p. 3). After Dianne had mentioned the incident at home, her father said that when he and her mother visited a fair with her aunt and uncle, a fortuneteller called out to the uncle that his wife and baby were there, that they had dark eyes, hair and skin, and that his wife wanted to tell him, “Harry, it’s me Ernestine...I’m so sorry” (p. 4). The name, Harry, was correct, but the rest seemed to make no sense. Harry had evidently not been married before and he was not dark. He then revealed that he had in fact been married when he was 16, that the name of his wife was Ernestine, that they had a baby boy, and that she had killed him and herself. A picture in a locket showed her to have dark hair and eyes, and there was a wisp of hair from the boy that was also black. Could the fortune teller have known about Ernestine and the child or seen a picture of them? This was unlikely. They lived in a small settlement in Canada and the single picture of Ernestine was in the locket. Only the midwife, Harry and their neighbors had seen the baby and he never told anyone about Ernestine. The story has a sequel. From always being withdrawn and morose, Harry turned outward and became cheerful. As for Dianne, “the possibilities his story posed were forever etched into my psyche” (p. 7).

Dianne heard more such stories from her schoolmates, and then she herself had an encounter. When she was home from college for a visit, her mother was awakened late at night by the phone ringing in her daughter’s room. Thinking it might be someone calling with bad news, she went in and found Dianne sitting up in bed apparently talking on the phone to her dead grandmother. Dianne said she was having a dream about her grandmother but was unaware of having picked up the phone and actually spoken. She told her mother that someone must have dialed their number by mistake, had hung up and that she dreamt the rest, but the incident left a strong impact.

I used to think that phone incidents of this type were too strange and too infrequent to be of much interest until I read *Phone Calls from the Dead* by parapsychologists D. Scott Rogo and Raymond Bayless (Prentice-Hall, 1979). Whatever the explanation, the phenomenon is quite common.

To find out more about encounters with the departed, Arcangel read works in parapsychology, including the books by Karlis Osis (1961) and Osis and Erlendur Haraldsson (1990) who included the emotional component of afterlife encounters. Psychological and religious studies told her more, but Arcangel could find no large-scale longitudinal survey, so she conducted one herself. She received 827 completed questionnaires of which 596 described afterlife encounters. An afterlife encounter, a term introduced by Arcangel, refers to “any sense of being connected to, or in the presence of, a discarnate entity” (p. 17). The entities include individuals familiar to the person, such as deceased friends and relatives, but also spiritual figures, famous personalities, and unknown individuals.

A ghost is one type. Again Arcangel draws on her own experience. A man named Dyer worked as a dry cleaner in her parents’ cleaning establishment. He was a compulsive worker, arriving before daybreak and staying until after dark, seven days a week. This went on for some 30 years until he died in his apartment from a heart attack. Later, a female coworker said she saw him working behind his spotting board. He smiled and waved at her, but when she looked again, he was gone. Customers and other employees reported similar incidents. The apparition was even seen by lodgers of an apartment that Arcangel’s husband had built over the cleaners’ after her parents had retired. The occupants said that a corner of the apartment always felt cold, even on hot days. The area was directly over Dyer’s spotting board and should have been especially warm. Arcangel says that neither the lodgers, the present workers at the cleaners, nor her husband knew about Dyer.

Arcangel makes a distinction between ghosts and apparitions. A ghost is seen in a particular location but shows no intention; it seems to be only an imprint left by someone when alive. In contrast, an apparition does not depend on a special location and usually “radiates personality, color, and energy” (p. 20). Arcangel believes they come with a purpose, to stimulate mental growth in the percipient and that they chose their form (visual, auditory, and so on) to best achieve this aim.

A friend of hers, Martha Sherman, the widow of Harold Sherman, the ESP researcher and author, was asked to introduce the speakers at a conference he had arranged before his death. She was standing in front of the audience, “my knees shaking when I saw Harold enter the back of the room. He was glowing, even more alive than when he was alive. I was so happy to see him that I relaxed and went right at it” (p. 24). Of the respondents with encounters, 98 percent said they felt comforted by the experience (p. 285). Interestingly, they were rarely hoping for anything like this to happen while most of the respondents who had no experience described “intense longing” (p. 277).

Twenty percent of the encounters were visual and 52 percent combined visual with other modes (p. 25). Encounters also occur through physical objects or animals. A man, in deep grief about his mother’s death, was reading an article about survival on his computer when he remembered a conversation with her. He had put his hands in his lap to think about it when the article faded from the screen. Instead a portrait of his mother,

which he had stored in the computer, appeared. This was replaced by a flower, then the portrait, another flower, and so on for several minutes. The man said he regarded his "computer encounter" (p. 41) as a greeting from his mother and was helped by it. Messages have also appeared in e-mails and by electronic devices such as answering machines.

The father of Ryan, a four-year-old who was killed in an auto accident two weeks before, heard a humming sound and saw "a funnel-type thing" (p. 96) come down from the ceiling in his living room and drop his son to the floor and also a little girl he did not know. The boy said, "I was sent to tell you that I'm okay, and that I'm with my friend Kelli." The family was comforted by the encounter but wondered who Kelli might be. Several weeks later a couple knocked on their front door saying that they had just moved into the neighborhood, that they too were bereaved parents, and invited Ryan's parents for coffee. When Ryan's father entered their neighbors' home, he was startled by a large picture and blurted out, "Oh my God! That's Kelli!" The neighbors were amazed and asked how he could know about their daughter because Kelli had been dead for three years and they had lived in another state. Cases like this are difficult to reconcile with the idea that they are due to simple imagination or even to telepathy.

The same is true for other cases. A man named Murphy had turned the front of his small house in Houston into a vacuum cleaner store where Arcangel's mother used to send her for cleaning bags. Murphy died when she was grown, and a man told her that when he was 17, he had done repair work for Murphy in his store and that they had become close friends. After Murphy died, the man had a dream where he saw a youthful version of his friend in front of a brightly colored house with a sign in front that read, "At Peace with Jesus" (p. 78). Murphy said, "I've made it. I'm here," and asked the man to tell his wife that he had hidden something in a certain wall of their house that he wanted her to have. After the man had the same dream several more times and still had not phoned, his wife made the call. The woman called back shortly afterwards, saying that she had dug into the wall and found several thousand dollars. She called her daughter in Florida with the news and the daughter said that she too had been having dreams of Murphy and described the identical house and sign.

Arcangel tells of Tommy, a young man in New York who was murdered one winter, his body having been found in an abandoned van. There was no blood outside the van and not enough inside for him to have been murdered there, and the perpetrator had left no clues that the detectives might follow. Then after five days, his mother was awakened in the early morning by Tommy telling her to wake up. She could not see him but he said for her to go to a certain address where she would find his blood in the snow. She went to the place and found a mound of red snow. She called the police saying she had received a tip; they came and located witnesses who identified the murderer. The woman then had a visual encounter with her son. She was taking his dog for a walk when it suddenly barked and pulled the leash towards a man some 30 feet away. She put on her glasses and recognized Tommy looking at her and smiling. She and the dog ran towards him but he turned around and glided away, the dog pulling her ahead. This went on for three city blocks but they never got closer, which made the woman realize that it was not her son's body she was seeing but his spirit. Her sight was then obstructed for a moment by schoolgirls passing by, after which the vision was gone. She said, "My beloved son appeared to me during my deepest sorrow to ease my incredible pain" (p.

73). The apparition was remarkable also because it was seen by his dog and because it seemed to obey the laws of optics; the woman had to put on her glasses to see the apparition clearly and it was obstructed by passersby.

Seventy-eight percent of the respondents had two or more encounters. To discover the type of person most likely to have encounters, Arcangel gave the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to 68 individuals. According to the MBTI, a person is a combination of four opposing personality types, extrovert or introvert, sensor or intuitive, thinker or feeler, and perceiver or judge. She expected that extroverted, intuitive, feeling, and perceiving individuals would be more likely than their opposites to experience the departed. What she found was that 96 percent of the encounters were had by intuitive-feeling people while none of their opposites, the sensors-thinkers, had such experiences. Arcangel suggests that by practice people can become more intuitive and feeling and thereby more likely to experience visits from the departed.

Another factor that may facilitate encounters is closeness to death. Arcangel has found that as death approaches, afterlife encounters (AEs) increase. This happens so often that "hospice staff and volunteers consider AEs a signal that death is drawing nearer and increase the frequency of their visits" (p. 110). This may not only be true for the terminally ill. A young widower told Arcangel that he was washing his car so he could trade it in, when he saw his wife, "She said, 'Don't bother. Just enjoy your family and friends because you'll be with me soon'" (p. 112). This did not make sense because the man was in good health and again happy. One morning, he stopped by at Arcangel's office with his new car, saying that his encounters were becoming more frequent and wondered why. Later that day, his employer phoned to say that the man had been killed in a freak car crash. In her exploration of factors that may facilitate encounters, Arcangel has found that widows and widowers who experience encounters with their spouses make up 65 percent of her cases (p. 112).

A man and his wife were "almost always together. My children referred to their mother and me as Peanut Butter and Jelly" (p. 111). He was devastated when she suddenly died and had encounters with her at the cemetery. He once brought "three beautiful pink roses" (p. 112) and placed them in a vase on her grave. As he was sitting down on a marble bench about 50 feet away, he saw one of the roses lift up and out of the vase itself. He rushed over to catch it before it fell to the ground. "But the second I reached the grave, a bolt of lightning came down and literally destroyed the bench I had been sitting on and the tree that shaded it. The lightning was so close that it burned the right shoe off my foot."

Arcangel says postmortem sightings tend to occur when people are in transition, death being a major example. The daughter of one of Arcangel's hospice patients phoned saying that her father wanted to see her. When she came, the man said that his deceased uncle had visited, that he had told his uncle that he was scared of dying and that the uncle said for him to ask for Arcangel because, "You were there and know what it's like. I'm scared and don't know what's ahead, so tell me" (p. 118). Arcangel replied that when she was in the hospital after surgery, she stopped breathing. She then "rose into a tent of pure golden light. Only good was over there...love and acceptance...No pain or suffering" (p. 119). This calmed the man. His deceased grandmother came shortly afterwards, "She stood at the foot of my bed with her hands reached out for mine." He died the following day.

Arcangel says that she has never been with a dying patient who was not accompanied by an apparition. Space does not allow me to discuss other cases nor two chapters wherein mediums facilitate encounters, one about Arcangel's study of George Anderson, "the Stradivarius of mediums" (p. 176); the other about her work with Gary Schwartz, one of the few contemporary researchers to make a serious exploration of mediumship. Schwartz wrote the Foreword of the present book.

### **Survival and Science**

The possibility that lives persist after death is usually regarded as incompatible with science. It is not. A basic tenet of physics is the concept of space-time according to which the past endures and can be examined. Photographs by the Hubble telescope of stellar formations in the early universe are concrete evidence for this. The photos do not show dead hulks by dynamic entities giving birth to stars. It would be strange if events on Earth, including the lives of the departed, do not also persist in space-time. It should even be possible to take photos of people and events in the past, given the right technology. In fact, all photos are of the past rather than the present because of the time it takes light to travel from object to camera.

Arcangel's proposal that afterlife encounters are natural and normal is consistent with science. The details of afterlife encounters are also compatible with science. As previously stated, according to Arcangel, people who have encounters are nearly all of the intuitive-feeling type rather than the sensing-thinking type. She observes, "Feeling types...decide with their hearts...and consider everyone involved" (p. 109) while "Thinking types decide with their heads...remaining detached from other people." Intuition and feeling appear to be functions of the right brain hemisphere while sense-perception and thinking are functions of the left. The right brain comes the fore during dissociation from everyday activity as in dreams and other altered states. In contrast, the left brain dominates during interactions with the sensory environment and is characterized by waking consciousness. According to Arcangel, encounters tend to occur when the percipient is sleeping, dreaming, daydreaming, between sleep and awake, or otherwise disengaged from ordinary activity.

After the death of her mother, a young woman said that she was "totally overcome with depression, grief, anxiety" (p. 113) and that it took her hours to fall asleep. Then "one night as soon as my head hit the pillow I felt something like a trance. I couldn't move or open my eyes. Suddenly, I knew my mom was in the room...then I felt the side of the bed go down as if there was someone sitting on it." She felt her mother lean against her cheek and heard her whisper. There are also cases wherein the person is wakeful but they often seem to involve activities that take little thought, such as mowing grass, taking a walk with the dog, washing the car, and sitting down. Encounters seem to be more likely when the brain is in its non-thinking mode.

Another characteristic of afterlife encounters suggests that they are functions of the right brain. Arcangel says that ineffability is typical of many afterlife encounters. The left hemisphere has centers for language and thereby for the logic inherent in language, while the right hemisphere is mute and largely expresses itself by mental constructs that are immune to ordinary logic. Encounters "reach a depth that transcends language" (p. 151). The right brain, being unobstructed by language and left brain logic, may operate

at this depth. Most parapsychologists who have explored psychic experiences in relation to the brain believe that they originate in the right brain.

Some of the encounters may illustrate another neurological finding, the hour at which they occurred. Two respondents said their encounters were in the early morning hours and three mentioned 3 AM or 4 AM. The hormone, nocturnal melatonin, which is usually released into the bloodstream between 2 and 4 AM, facilitates visionary experiences.

Arcangel's hospice experience has told her that "No one ever dies alone" (p. 120). She summarizes two principal themes of her work: "Pre-death encounters facilitate the dying as they make their transition to the other world. Life-continuing visions help the living continue in this one" (p. 121). Anyone who is liable to die in the near or distant future or to suffer the loss of others will benefit from reading this book.

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