

BOOK REVIEW

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Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones, by Raymond A. Moody, Jr., with Paul Perry. New York, NY: Villard, 1993, 213 + xxi pp, \$20.00, hardcover.

Raymond Moody, the scholar and storyteller who introduced to us—and named—the near-death experience (NDE) two decades ago, has now taken another leap forward in our understanding of the human mind. Moody's pioneering collection of NDE accounts awakened both medical science and popular culture to inexplicable experiences that normal people have *spontaneously* when they approach death. With his new exploration into mirror gazing, he presents to us, with the help of co-author Paul Perry, equally startling experiences that can be produced reliably in a *controlled* situation.

Humans have always longed for reunions with deceased loved ones, and throughout history we have fulfilled that wish through visions. Most societies entertain, frighten, or inspire themselves with ghost stories, and today up to two-thirds of widows see apparitions of their deceased husbands. The ancient Greeks went so far as to create the institution of the oracle of the dead, or psychomanteum, to facilitate these visions for the masses.

Moody identified three visionary techniques that would be considered safe and legal today: "pareidolia," as when we see faces in clouds, which rarely produces visions of the departed; "dream incubation," popular in many cultures, which requires at least drowsiness; and mirror gazing, which often yields apparitions of the deceased, as well as scenes, dramas, and life reviews. Different re-

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flecting surfaces may be easier or harder to see into, but the power to produce visions seems to lie in the individual and not in the surface used.

Moody also identified six elements of what he calls the “mirror-gazing complex,” a collection of curious phenomena associated with mirror gazing throughout history: the mirror as a window to oneself, frequent accounts of the “marvelous” acquisition of a mirror, the mirror as portal to another realm, special entities associated with a mirror, superstitions and phobias about mirrors, and spontaneous mirror visions. The consistency of these phenomena suggested to Moody that mirror gazing might be a reliable way to facilitate our natural visionary ability.

Moody and Perry guide us on a tour through the centuries of various people’s success in seeing apparitions in a variety of reflective surfaces, including mirrors, crystal balls, ponds or bowls of water, and magic lamps. They might also have mentioned contemporary parapsychological studies of extrasensory perception in a *ganzfeld*, or homogenous visual field, which are modern analogues of mirror gazing. The apparitional experience at issue here is not a seance, in which a purportedly gifted “medium” provides sitters with a second-hand encounter with the deceased. This is, rather, a direct firsthand experience that ordinary people have had over the centuries, and, Moody claims, still can have, almost at will, with the proper setting and preparation.

If mirror gazing was widely practiced in the ancient world, why was that skill lost to us until now? Moody argues that practitioners maintained professional secrecy so that unsupervised seekers wouldn’t get hurt, and that both secular and religious bureaucracies sought to repress these techniques to safeguard their own authority over the masses.

To investigate this visionary ability of people, Moody designed a modern psychomanteum after the Greek model, even to the point of locating his Oracle of the Dead at Choccolocco, Alabama, far off the beaten path, as was the Greek Oracle of the Dead at Ephyra, so that the difficult trip there would allow pilgrims ample time for reflection. He and Perry describe the elaborate physical set-up, preparation, and subsequent “processing” sessions that he uses.

Contrary to Moody’s expectations, over half his subjects, who were selected for their emotional stability rather than their psychic ability, report mirror visions—and not necessarily confined either to the mirror or to the mirror-gazing session! Every one of his subjects who

experienced visions of the deceased emphasized the realistic nature of these visions and regarded them as healing experiences. Though profoundly moving, these encounters with the deceased are experienced as neither frightening nor eerie, but as comforting and inspiring.

Moody also shares with us his own visionary experience, which occurred not in the psychomanteum but hours after his visit there, and with a deceased relative other than the one he wanted and expected to see. He concluded that, as many people have said about their NDEs, he got not what he wanted, but what he needed.

Are these apparitional experiences “real” encounters with deceased spirits? Mirror visions are no more proof of an afterlife than are NDEs. In fact, it is not at all clear that there can be a “scientific proof” of an afterlife. While Moody and Perry write of his “experiment” with mirror gazing, they use that term to mean not a rigorous scientific study with matched subjects randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, but rather a systematic demonstration, under repeatable circumstances, of the common human ability to see visions. They emphasize that Moody’s goal in this study was not to *prove* communication with the deceased, but rather to *evoke* it, and to allow the visionaries to decide for themselves the reality of the experience.

If these visions don’t prove anything, what good are they? Moody’s near-death studies, corroborated by those of investigators who followed him, showed that reunions with deceased loved ones in the NDE usually resulted in transformations that eliminated fear of death. Moody wondered whether replicating NDEs safely would also lead to personal transformation, and developed his psychomanteum as a vehicle to reproduce at least one part of the NDE.

The numerous cases described in detail in *Reunions* suggest that mirror gazing can be a useful tool for enhancing creativity, for psychotherapeutic exploration of issues, and for consciousness research. The mirror has traditionally been called a window to the soul, and these cases show that it indeed can be used to explore inner depths. It also appears to serve as a portal to another realm of whatever name, and as these cases demonstrate, it can be a two-way portal: we can follow Alice through the looking-glass, and apparitions can emerge from the mirror into our world.

Beyond Moody’s inspired explorations into mirror gazing, he and Perry also treat us to his novel reinterpretation of parapsychology. Science, they write, is limited to the physical realm and therefore

cannot address the interfaces between worlds. But other human endeavors do address that interface, specifically play and theater. If parapsychology, the study of the interface between realms, cannot be accepted as a scientific discipline, perhaps we should try regarding it instead as a performing art! After all, parapsychology is a leisure-time activity for many of its practitioners, and uses toys like playing cards and Ouija boards; some phenomena like children's imaginary playmates may be considered either amusements or paranormal phenomena; and skeptical "debunking" of parapsychology bears more resemblance to heckling a performance than to scientific critique.

While his modern psychomanteum includes the best features of the Greek oracles of the dead, Moody also capitalized on this kinship between play and the paranormal and added his own touches. He calls his oracle of the Dead at Choccolocco the "Theater of the Mind," and designed it to include elements of a theater, a temple, a fortune teller's parlor, a spiritual retreat center, an art museum, a school, a library, and a funhouse.

Moody presented the fundamentals of his mirror-gazing studies in his earlier article in this Journal (1992), and with his typical humor he refers to this book with coauthor Paul Perry as the "colorized" version, written intentionally in a less rigorous style to be more palatable to the general reader. Toward that end, they included a chapter entitled "Creating Your Own Psychomanteum." Without trying to sound like the elitist necromancers of past centuries who tried to hide these techniques from the masses, let me suggest that there is some virtue in the traditional warning against casual attempts to "try the spirits."

Just as psychedelic drugs in the 1960s, valuable tools for exploring the farther reaches of the mind, resulted in "bad trips" for many poorly prepared users, so too the basement psychomanteum may have negative emotional effects on unsuspecting adventures without the advantage of a "guide" to prepare them for the experience and to debrief them afterwards. While we may find that mirror gazing is not nearly as powerful a tool outside the context of a Theater of the Mind, we should be prepared for both some enlightenment and some "bad trips" if the homemade psychomanteum becomes a fad.

Although *Reunions* was written for a popular audience and not a scholarly one, it still contains much of serious interest, including the rationale for a scientific study. Moody's essential argument is that, since apparitions are commonly seen by normal people, that experience must be a human propensity that can be studied. Furthermore,

if such study can identify the factors that predispose humans to see apparitions, then such visions can be facilitated and made reproducible, rendering them amenable to controlled study. Science has pretty much ignored spontaneous apparitions of the deceased, because experiences that cannot be predicted or controlled cannot be observed systematically. But with mirror gazing as a reliable way to facilitate apparitional experiences, we can systematically study both the vision and the visionary.

Fans of Moody's previous works will be pleased to see his various facets come together in this book. Moody as professor of classical philosophy, as medical scientist, as psychotherapist, as entertainer, as awestruck child, and as spiritual seeker all have their say in these pages. Judith Miller (1989), in her review of Moody and Perry's first collaboration, *The Light Beyond* (1988), lamented that Moody had not shared much of his own personal experiences, intellectual insights, and clinical perspectives in that book. In *Reunions* he has.

References

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