Placement of Apparitions

To the Editor:

A recent e-mail drew my attention to the issue of the placement of apparitions of the deceased. My e-mail correspondent quoted a recent report that almost 90 percent of afterlife encounters occur to the left and above the witness’s head:

What is missing from ... all other researcher reports, except mine, is the importance of left... . Nurses in critical care units have noted that between 80 and 90 percent of their patients see spirit visitors manifesting to the left. Hospice volunteers and medical staff have made the same observation. (Atwater, 2007, p. 361)

That claim did not mirror my findings as a hospice chaplain and researcher, nor did it seem to represent the extensive data repositories of the longtime colleagues whom I queried. Furthermore, such an extreme proportion seemed to counter the survival hypothesis. That is, if apparitions routinely appear on one side and at the same height, with different witnesses, that might suggest that encounters were a product of the imagination. Curiosity drove me to carry out a preliminary survey.

Method

Because I wanted to compile a consensus quickly, I developed a brief Afterlife Encounters Placement Survey and e-mailed it to people who were already familiar with the phenomenon. The greater proportion were people who had recently participated in my Afterlife Encounters Survey (Arcangel, 2005), which is posted on the Internet at http://www.afterlife-encounters.com/. As a result, I did not need to define the term or describe the characteristics. The Afterlife Encounters Placement Survey included the following questions and a place for additional comments:
Have you ever had an afterlife encounter? If so, reflect over one. It does not matter in which form it occurred (visual, auditory, olfactory, touch, etc.). Now imagine that you are standing in the center of a giant clock. You are facing 12 o'clock – directly behind is 6. Where is the apparition? Is he/she straight forward at 12 o'clock? On your right side at the 3 o'clock position? Behind you at 6? On your left at 9? Some place in between those mentioned? On what level is she/he? Close to the floor, waist high, ear (or eye) level, higher than your head, directly overhead, or a level in between?

Results

I received responses from 85 persons. Of those, 50 had contacted me through my website (http://www.afterlife-encounters.com/+), the greater number after having read my book (Arcangel, 2005). The remainder were people who had e-mailed me about their afterlife encounters, having been referred to me from a variety of bereavement counseling professionals and organizations.

The survey results suggested that placement of apparitions was a matter of logistics. The afterlife encounters occurred in various positions and heights, each in accordance with the modality and environment. Furthermore, approximately 25 percent of the apparitions were mobile rather than stationary. There was one consistent standard, however, and that was that the placements appeared to be natural.

Location

Modality. In general, when the encounters were visual, the images appeared within the 9 through 3 o'clock placement, essentially the normal field of vision. Whereas most auditory afterlife encounters were heard to the right or the left side of the witness, a small portion of witnesses reported hearing someone behind them. Encounters that occurred in the 6 o'clock position regularly encompassed the sense of touch or visceral sensations.

When the apparent discarnate personalities were within close proximity, within two feet of the witness, respondents generally saw them in the 12 o'clock position, but heard them at the 3 or 9 o'clock position.

Lighting. When the setting was dimly lit, the figures typically stood in or near the light. For example, in the inpatient unit of our hospice, the main light was at the foot of patients' beds, and most of the
patients' visual encounters occurred straight ahead at the 12 o'clock position, where the visitors could be best seen. The patients' doors, usually closed, were in the 1 o'clock location. When opened, the light shining in was brighter than at the foot of their beds, and that was the second most likely place for encounters. Survey respondents claimed that in similar circumstances their afterlife encounters occurred nearest the light as well.

Other environmental factors. One octogenarian respondent wrote that the church where she had been baptized some 50 years prior had been scheduled for demolition. The moment she heard that the contents were for sale, she called the pastor and purchased one of the pews. As she walked inside the front door of the church to retrieve her memento, she saw to her left the only remaining bench, and on it sat an apparition of a former slave.

A narrative containing an opposite location came from a woman who wrote: "The only chair in the room was on Dad's right, beside his bed, and that's where my [deceased] uncle sat as they talked for a while."

Not all visitors remained in one place, however. Nearly one-fourth of survey participants commented that their afterlife encounters began in one spot and then moved to another. A widow described her account as follows:

I was cooking dinner, almost in tears because sitting down to eat is the loneliest time for me. I felt someone staring at me and when I turned around it was my husband standing inside the back door like he always did when he came home. He went right on over across the room and sat down at his place at the table. It was casual and normal, as if nothing had happened.

**Height**

The theme of natural placement was even stronger with regard to the question about height of the apparitions. Many survey respondents wrote in descriptors such as "reality," "realistically," "real-life," "normal height," "our natural levels," and "the usual level." Here are three typical annotations by these respondents describing apparitions that appeared above, below, and even with the witness:

My dad stood in the doorway exactly like he always did when he'd check to see if we kids were asleep, and I was in bed so the level was ordinary. All of it was ordinary, except that I could see through him.
It was normal... . He was sitting at his desk and I was standing.

Mother was sitting in her usual chair, and I was sitting in mine ... across the kitchen table from each other ... so we were eye-to-eye as usual.

Based on the survey commentaries, the levels duplicated real-life situations. When the witnesses were sitting and the apparitions were standing, the witnesses were looking up; and if the witnesses were standing and the figures seated, then the witnesses looked downward. When their heads were at the same height, neither was elevated. Accordingly, the levels were realistic.

Conclusion

Upon reviewing the 85 surveys, I found no consistent template for location or height of apparitions. The afterlife encounters did not appear on one particular side of the witnesses, nor did they occur at a routine height. The varied and natural placements may suggest that these afterlife encounters were not hallucinations but were evidence of a consciousness that survives bodily death and is able to manifest in some form.

References


Dianne Arcangel
e-mail: DianneArcangel@yahoo.com
www.afterlife-encounters.com