LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Haunted Hotel: Who of the Two Was the Visitor?

To the Editor:

Recently, Pim van Lommel (2010) argued that near-death experiences comprise one of several categories of experiences that point to the existence of nonlocal consciousness—consciousness not limited by space or time to a physical body. Another category he discussed was postmortem experiences in which living people have contact with deceased people (van Lommel, 2010, pp. 313–316). He noted that research on such experiences has been limited and that a primary source of data on them remains in the form of anecdotes.

Inspired by authors like van Lommel, I would like to contribute another anecdote to the literature on postmortem experiences, also known as after-death communication. This report is the result of an interview I conducted in 2008 during a trip to Madrid, Spain. My older sister, who lives in the Bay Area in California, is a friend of the subject of the interview, and it was she who brought his amazing experience to my attention years before. From her very first recounting I had wanted to interview “Antonio” (the subject; not his real name) by phone but never got around to it. As things turned out years later, my daughter was studying Spanish in Alcalá, just outside Madrid, and when I went to Europe to spend some time with her in Spain and France, I capitalized on the opportunity to interview Antonio in person. He was very obliging and, at his suggestion, we met in my hotel, over a dinner of paella.

At the time of our interview, Antonio had a doctorate in statistical physics, and he resided in Madrid, where he taught and did research. He was a calm, quiet, unassuming, down-to-earth, sober-minded professor whose interest in psychic phenomena appeared to have been rather minimal until, as a scientist and person, it was piqued by the personal experience related in this article. He was curious enough about it to want to return to the site of the occurrence sometime in the future in order to re-examine the specifics and perhaps validate eroding recollections up close. He had not bothered to make up his mind one way or the other regarding the occurrence, let alone assign mean-
ing to it, and with astonishing detachment was suspending judgment until he could revisit the site again, and even that reexamination of the scene would guarantee no shift in his aloof position. His curiosity seemed to be tempered by detachment.

Antonio reported that he had arrived in Santa Fe, New Mexico in March of 2005 to attend a scientific conference, which ran for several days at La Fonda, the hotel where the scientists were lodged. Arriving at the hotel for the first time around 12:30 a.m., Antonio proceeded to check in, greeted by an elderly white man at the reception counter who was wearing horn-rimmed glasses. They were alone in the reception hall. After the man handed Antonio the card-key to the assigned room, Antonio asked him to recommend a place to eat. Antonio recalled vaguely that the august gentleman was unable to make a recommendation, so Antonio sauntered out into the night to find a place on his own. Unable to find an open restaurant, he returned to the hotel and went to sleep.

In the conference room on the following day, Antonio made his presentation. Afterward, his attention was arrested by a large oil portrait hanging on one of the walls of the conference room: It was of an elderly man wearing horn-rimmed glasses. Recognizing with considerable surprise the gentleman at the reception desk from the night before, Antonio walked up to the portrait and read the years spanning that life which, during our interview, Antonio approximately recalled as 1890 to 1975. Inconceivably, the man had been deceased for 30 years! This is when Antonio realized—or felt, however subtly and perhaps eerily—that the atmospherics of the reception room had changed from the previous night when he had arrived at the hotel; upon his arrival, the room had seemed darker, smaller, older, and perhaps more quaint than it now appeared. He also reflected on the fact that something physically tangible from this world—the world of the living—had passed from hand to hand between the elderly man and himself: the card-key to the hotel room. Still in Antonio’s possession, the card-key had apparently been handed to him by an apparition.

Over the several days of the conference, Antonio remained observant but never saw anyone even coming close to resembling the man whom he had met on that first night and who was portrayed in the painting. Because of the self-evident nature of his experience, he also never asked whether any current employee resembled the man in the painting; he simply knew that on that first night, he had encountered someone not currently alive. Upon reflection, he also knew that the
reception area that first night was from a time period prior to the current one.

Antonio was raised Roman Catholic in Spain, and even though for a long time he had been an avowed atheist, he admitted to always having been a little curious about the paranormal and psychic phenomena in general. He did not see the “ghost” again at La Fonda during the following days, nor did his experience occasion a desire to investigate further or to reason through the occurrence in any way. He made no effort to find an explanation and gave the incident no further thought. Notwithstanding this genuinely astonishing attitude of detachment, the seed—I am not certain whether of doubt, of scientific curiosity, or of germinating insights—had not gone un-nurtured in the subconscious recesses of this scientifically aloof mind. If this aloofness and mild interest in the paranormal appear to contradict each other, Antonio didn’t seem motivated to reconcile the two positions. This dynamic may reflect a materialistic grounding so common among mainstream scientists that, philosophically speaking, either negates pro forma or assigns little or no importance to the paranormal, and Antonio would have to discover and decide for himself what position to take regarding his extraordinary experience.

About a year after the Santa Fe conference Antonio Googled La Fonda and learned that the hotel had for some time had the reputation of being haunted and that “ghost-busting” personnel had been called in at one time to cleanse or clear the ghost-infested atmosphere. Antonio did not read of any reported experience or haunting resembling his. While alluding to the popular movie Ghostbusters, starring Bill Murray, Antonio seemed mildly amused but without dismissing or mocking this aspect of La Fonda’s recent history.

I am a self-taught, self-styled psychic investigator admittedly at the very beginning of this type of work, which I am currently conducting through reasoned inquiry rather than through experiments involving technological equipment and statistical analysis. I believe that a wealth of work can be done mentally by the mentally curious, and Einstein’s tireless mental experimentation has been well-nigh relegated to the domain of the proverbial. The information at the disposal of the psychic investigator is, moreover, almost never conducive to repetition, one of the tenets and precepts of scientific investigation. Thanks to creative human reasoning, the fields of formal logic, mathematics, and scientific methodology have evolved to lofty levels of abstraction and have amplified the scope of our understanding beyond what was previ-
ously thought possible. Imagination is the catalyst, according to many revered scientists—the flash, the leap of intuition and pure art—that opens up marvelous terrains of new understanding and application; imagination is the vehicle that imposes no limits on the thinker at work, the vehicle carrying human consciousness to the furthest reaches of discovery, both with respect to abstract thought and human design. Returning to Antonio’s experience in Santa Fe—where I have lived and am familiar with the physical structure of La Fonda—reasoning, rather than controlled repetition, is the appropriate, and in fact the only, available tool of investigation at the moment.

Apparitions are usually (and usually here is not meant to be synonymous with normally) witnessed within the three-dimensional background of a fixed environment. You have a room in a house or mansion or hotel, and a ghost floats or traipses through. You lie in bed, and inches past your feet a disembodied figure materializes mid-air and makes eye contact with you for a few indefinable moments. You are a witness in your world, and the revenant is a visitor, a denizen of another world or dimension. But there is another side, or flip side, to witnessing that is far more puzzling: When the environment changes with the corresponding apparitions, perhaps you are the visitor and witness transported to another realm or reality. Now let’s consider the other well-known, but more puzzling, interpretation for such phenomena.

It is thought by some researchers that experiences like Antonio’s are replays of recorded phenomena. This interpretation has always been highly speculative, and it is suggested that when the “real thing”—or perhaps, depending on one’s viewpoint, the adjective unreal could be considered as equally valid—happens in our “reality,” that is, in the physical and psychological reality we so stubbornly and naively take for granted as the only reality, a recording of the happening is left behind like an imprint. The crucial difference in this analogy is that the “imprint” shouldn’t be limited by comparison to something like a footprint on moist sand but rather, should be compared to a three-dimensional movie that replays itself periodically (with regularity or randomly) and is triggered by considerations lying outside the scope of our current understanding. We can’t go behind the scenes of what happened to Antonio with a psychic Watson by our side to lend moral support and real-time running commentary, but we do know from the facts recounted that something extraordinarily otherworldly and eerie did occur to a scientific sensibility so indifferent to his experience that he felt no motivation to follow up on it and investigate on site while the
facts were clear and fresh in his mind, whereas others of a different temperament would have felt as if they had psychic currency burning holes in their pockets.

Returning to the plausible but inherently difficult interpretation of the environmental recording that replays itself, we face insurmountable, intrinsic problems. That a physical object—the room card-key—exchanged hands between a psychic recording and a living man certainly complicates this interpretation—and precisely because of the fact that this was not a recording that simply played before a witness who remained objectively “outside” but one in which the witness interacted in real time with the recording and with another apparently conscious human (or perhaps we should say post-human) agency central to the entire occurrence. If the two incongruous components of the “recording” interpretation—the precisely repetitive (mechanical?) and non-interactive nature of such hypothesized psychic recordings versus the conscious, rather than repetitively robotic, contact made with a flesh and blood person by an agency from beyond, in this case the personal agency of the old man who interacted with Antonio (in whose environment?)—to repeat, if these two incongruous components were reconciled by parapsychologists, perhaps by agreeing that both do indeed occur, would such open-mindedness begin to explain (and there are limits to what can be explained when working in psychic gray areas) what happened to Antonio? We must in all fairness to the facts reason that this explanation is a distinct possibility, and in fact almost no experiences studied by psychic researchers fit neatly into the composite models constructed to classify such phenomena. What we know with certainty is that Antonio was not asleep and didn’t dream what happened to him, aside that we’ve reviewed his scientific credentials and bent of temperament—a psychologically cool and detached person requiring physical explanations and analogies and not given to frivolous flights of fancy.

Do we know what happened to Antonio beyond the faithfully objective but anecdotal recounting of intriguing facts? This is an intrinsically complicated, paradoxical, and as yet unanswerable question. How can we ever claim to have answers when dealing with such eerily mysterious, otherworldly, and transcendental phenomena—occurrences in our physical reality that in practice, and in principle, escape comprehension? We can conjecture and be intrigued and offer reasonable explanations and pray that the accumulating research and evidence of future decades may bring us closer to the truth, but we can’t claim to have found the Rosetta stone of psychic investigation—yet.
I consider this state of affairs in psychic research akin, through interesting parallels, to the accumulating absurdities in theoretical particle physics research. For much of the work being conducted in both fields, the real laboratory is the mental terrain of experimentation and conjecture, as Einstein so intuitively knew; much of science is mental art, pure and simple, and all scientists must surely know this. But as we return to Antonio’s experience, can we hope to do more than make educated guesses? It would be defeatist to take such a pessimistic stance at this watershed period in time when the future of human consciousness beckons with undreamed-of possibilities and spiritual potential. Our understanding of psychic experiences is evolving rather rapidly, considering the long haul from prehistory to the present, and as more experiences like Antonio’s surface, I submit that consensus among psychic researchers will increasingly become an investigative tool in itself.

This is what we have for now, given our limitations, as we strive to understand more, to know more, to divine as much as possible about psychic occurrences. Antonio’s very unique experience fascinates us with its eerily beautiful features and contradictory complexity, but we mustn’t jump to conclusions recklessly and make unsupported inferences. We’re itching to know what happened to this unsuspecting scientist who unexpectedly ventured into forbidden terrain, but the most that we have for now is the certainty that this and all the other questions and issues psychic investigators toil to answer and resolve Here, will be answered Yonder, as so many near-death experiencers insist, having experienced transcendental truth first-hand, and the point is well taken. By honestly and intelligently attempting to answer the questions on this side of death’s divide, we place ourselves in direct communion with the Sacred, hokey and corny as that might sound to die-hard materialistic and/or atheistic sensibilities. Their conversion requires proof that something from beyond is staring them right in the face. Perhaps in Antonio’s case it was all caused by a bit of incompletely fried and undigested churro he had eaten on the plane from Madrid to Santa Fe. Yet many living people know, through personal experience, that spirits walk among us. Yes, some of us have even been blessed, and astonished, by visits from loved ones who have crossed over. You cannot continue to be the same person you were prior to one single otherworldly experience, to say nothing of some of us who have been at the resonant center of multiple occurrences. In most cases the experiences do not make you saintly or more moral, however much they may change you spiritually. Instead, they open a door left perma-
nently ajar on the whispering world beyond, and, thus, open you up to the all-knowing, all-conscious, all-loving luminosity of God that I do not doubt in the slightest awaits us all.

References

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