

Who Believes in the PARANORMAL and Why?

BY JOEL MARTIN

I was chatting with a neighbor one evening, exchanging small talk, when the conversation turned to my work—broadcasting and writing about the paranormal. Unexpectedly, my neighbor surprised me with a personal psychic experience he had had. He told me of a vivid dream about his late grandfather. Only later did he and his sister discover they'd separately had the identical dream on the same night. I wasn't surprised by the details of his psychic dream; I'd heard many similar accounts. What I found interesting was that I was so matter-of-factly told a paranormal incident by someone who is technically and scientifically oriented, a typical young suburban father of two small children. There was no question that my neighbor was open to psychic experiences, something I would not have expected of him.

Two days earlier I had attended a wedding reception for a friend. Among the guests was a Protestant minister and educator. To my surprise, when our conversation turned to the paranormal, he expressed openness to psychic phenomena—specifically, contacts with deceased loved ones by bereaved people.

Incidentally, my newly married friend is a psychiatrist who has long been interested in and accepting of the paranormal. In fact, he too has had personal psychic experiences.

What is significant about these three inci-

dents is that here were professional, educated individuals who do not fit the stereotype of "psychic believers."

Who then are the people who believe in the paranormal, and why? What do polls and surveys tell us about the people who are open to psychic and unexplained phenomena, and those who have had psychic or UFO experiences?

The polls tell us how many people are reporting experiences. For instance, a 1993 National Opinion Research Council (NORC) survey from the University of Chicago found that four in every ten Americans "reported

having experienced some form of communication or contact with the dead." One nationally recognized bereavement expert said she'd found that as many as 80 percent of bereaved survivors claimed to have had

direct communication with a deceased loved one. Of widows questioned, 65 percent said they had "witnessed apparitions or had some form of post-death contact with their deceased spouses," and 78 percent believed in life after death. Twelve million Americans reported having had near-death experiences, according to a 1991 Gallup poll.

The New York Times reported recently that "nearly half of Americans believe in ESP. A hundred forty-five million think they've had a psychic experience."

Nine of every ten Americans believe in God

Debunkers and skeptics would have us believe that those of us who are interested in psychic phenomena are gullible, superstitious, naive, unscientific—even irrational!



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Well-known anthropologist Margaret Mead pressed for scientific recognition of parapsychology.

and seven of every ten believe in miracles.

In 1993, a Time/CNN Poll found that an astounding 69 percent of Americans believe in angels, and 46 percent of them think "special guardian angels" exist. Fifty-five percent think "angels are higher spiritual beings created by God," and 32 percent "think they have actually felt an angelic presence in their lives." In 1995 there were 354 shops devoted to angels in the U.S.

According to a 1991 Princeton Religion Research Center survey we even know that Roman Catholics are more open to the paranormal than Protestants. Twenty-five percent of both Roman Catholics and Protestants believe that "the affairs of their lives may be governed by the movement of the stars."

Another recent survey found that the most frequent "exceptional experiences" reported by Americans were déjà vu (more than 60 percent); ESP (more than 50 percent); visions of faraway events (nearly 30 percent); out-of-body experiences (20 percent); seeing a ghost (10 percent).

A recent *Newsweek* poll found nearly half of Americans "believe UFOs are real." About 20 percent of Americans said they believed in reincarnation, far less than the 60 percent who

believed in eternal life. Finally, New Agers who believe in the power of crystals may be surprised to learn that one survey found only about five percent of those questioned shared their belief.

While these statistics provide us with a glimpse of the great number of Americans open to paranormal events, the polls stop short of telling us who these people are and why they believe as they do. This is a problem that has long plagued people involved with psychic phenomena. Professional debunkers and skeptics would have us believe that those who are open to psychic phenomena are unscientific, gullible, superstitious, even irrational. Many skeptics have taken to labeling the paranormal "pseudo science."

One such voice against the paranormal was astronomer and author Carl Sagan, who was also a member of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), a group whose stated goals are laudable. A closer look, however, reveals little objective scientific investigation of paranormal claims. Rather, CSICOP revels in debunking *all* psychic claims, a truly remarkable feat in view of the huge number of credible people who report paranormal experiences.

INSTANCES OF PSEUDO SCIENCE

Sagan had stated that UFOs, communication with the deceased, dreams that foretell the future, precognition, psychokinesis, poltergeists, near-death experiences, faith healing, astrology, ghosts and clairvoyance are all "instances of pseudo science." Their practitioners, Sagan concluded, are "charlatans."

Richard Broughton, in his critically acclaimed book, *Parapsychology, the Controversial Science*, pointedly dismissed Sagan by accurately reminding readers that Sagan, who is an astronomer, by delving into the paranormal is "speculating somewhat far afield of his area of expertise."

CSICOP boasts of "several Nobel laureates." But in fact, if the paranormal represents pseudo science, why are there an increasing number of scientists, including Nobel prize winners, open to investigating psychic events? For example, Nobel laureate and dis-