

WHEN SPIRITS COME CALLING

The open-minded skeptic's guide to after death contacts

CHAPTER I (Abridged)

Has someone you know lost a beloved partner? If they confide that they've sometimes sensed their lost mate's presence, don't assume that grief has tipped them over the edge.

Studies by doctors, psychologists, social workers and public opinion researchers confirm that experiences of apparent contact with the dead are commonplace all over the world. For instance, over half the healthy, normal widows and almost as large a percentage of widowers in the United States sense the presence of their departed mates at least once afterwards. Such experiences are usually unexpected and spontaneous, not invited in any way. They are also direct—they do *not* involve mediums.

Apparent contacts are most common in the first year after a partner passes on, but they may recur for years, even for decades. Most such seeming visits from "beyond the veil" are perceived as pleasant; a significant few bring guidance or information that it would seem could only come from a spirit source.

This book documents over a hundred such contact experiences, as reported since 1998 by the normal, everyday folks who experienced them. The majority of them are not bereaved spouses; virtually anyone may perceive contact with the dead. It's common for sane, active women and men to sense contact with their deceased parents or children, with grandparents, siblings or friends. But because more research has been done on widows and widowers—in England and Wales, Japan, Norway and Sweden, as well as in the United States—it's easier to cite statistics about their experiences. In 1983 I myself was widowed. Soon I was confronted by mysteries unlike any I'd ever imagined.

I was well into my forties—a college professor and the published author of a scholarly book about contemporary architecture—when a startling event forced me to ponder whether spirits can survive and contact the living. Since then, further personal experiences plus lots of research have taught me that the death of the body is not the end of all

consciousness. Instead, it's a doorway to something else.

My own introduction to the paranormal

When I was widowed in 1983, I had been married for ten years to Paul Fletcher. Both of us had been married before. Paul was a warm and loving man, cheerfully committed to helping me raise my young son, Keith, from a previous marriage. He was also an outspoken atheist but that hardly bothered me since I had considered myself an agnostic for as long as I'd understood the meaning of the word.

When we married in New York, Paul was a vigorous 51 year-old with a wild and sometimes salty sense of humor, and a linguist's delight in wordplay. As Keith and I picked up his verbal addiction, the three of us often sat laughing around our dinner table, circling it with a sequence of ever more outrageous puns. With a barrel chest and lots of wavy brown hair lightly flecked with gray, Paul looked a decade younger. But diabetes was gnawing away at him from within. Two years after our wedding at the Unitarian-Universalist church where we had met—a humanistic church that had no creed which we could not sincerely affirm—a massive hemorrhage caused by diabetic retinopathy destroyed the vision of his right eye. For two more years he got by reasonably well until, in November of 1977, a smaller hemorrhage damaged his other eye.

Now he was legally blind. By profession a teacher of French and Spanish, he could no longer work. Since he could still read if he had lots of light, he bought himself a floor lamp whose four bulbs together gave off 330 watts. In time that lamp would have a momentous effect on my life.

My son and I never used more than its top, 150 watt bulb. We came to call it "Paul's lamp." He would sit under it by the hour when he wasn't playing his guitar or visiting with friends or volunteering at the church where we had met, answering the phone and fielding questions from visitors. Gradually the bleed into his "good eye" was absorbed by surrounding tissues. The doctors did their best. For a time his condition improved. But then came a second hemorrhage, then another and another. By 1981, Paul was totally blind.

Usually my husband made a fine show of keeping up his spirits but one day he came home seething with bitterness and resentment.

Some stranger, seeing him with his cane and wanting to comfort him had told him, "Don't worry, someday you'll see again," meaning, of course, in the afterlife. "What a crock," my atheist husband roared, "when it's over, it's over." Around New Year's Day, 1983, he came down with pneumonia. Three weeks later Paul passed on.

I never expected to sense him near me again. My 16 year-old son and I kept busy preparing for his memorial service and the open house we would hold that same day. For almost two weeks those duties kept us focused. The day after the memorial service—it was a Sunday—I felt lonely, let down. Somehow I would have to start rebuilding my life. Keith had a paper due the next day; I offered to type it for him and pressed him to put his draft into final form. We were standing in the living room of the Manhattan highrise apartment where the two of us had lived since 1969. Paul's lamp, unlit, was a few feet away. Suddenly *it turned itself on* and started flashing strangely, short flashes of light that came infrequently and seemingly in response to things we said.

At first it was incomprehensible. "That's weird," Keith said. Nothing like this had ever happened since Paul bought that lamp several years before. And there was nothing wrong with the wiring in the building. And nothing else in the apartment seemed to be affected. The refrigerator still droned on; our hallway light glowed on, unchanging. Our eyes met—and suddenly Keith and I both sensed that Paul was contacting us. How better could he let us know that now he could tell the difference between on and off, light and dark? The blind man we'd lived with could see again.

We started talking to the lamp. Paul, who spoke French like a Frenchman, had lived in Paris for five happy years when he was young, had visited there often, had been the ultimate Francophile. "Now you can go see Paris again," Keith said and for a long moment the lamp blazed brighter.

Twice that evening, Paul's lamp came on by itself and flickered for a time mysteriously. Afterwards, returning to our accustomed skepticism, we checked its bulbs and switches and the outlet where it was plugged in. Nothing we found accounted for the way that it had behaved. My son—who in his senior year of high school would win two

regional awards for scientific achievement—noted that it seemed to have difficulty flashing unless we were within about eight feet of it, and could not flash frequently or immediately in response. Keith theorized that Paul's spirit had only limited energy and capacity to respond. (Years later I would run across confirmation of this theory in a book by a distinguished British physicist, Sir Oliver Lodge, who in the early part of the 20th century wrote books on the paranormal. More about this in Chapter 9.)

The next day, I visited our church to pick up some phonograph records that had been played at Paul's memorial service. There I ran into Prabat, a Hindu friend of Paul's. Prabat was a thickset, warmhearted man in his fifties, trained as an engineer. As soon as he caught sight of me, his broad dark face lit up.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said, "I have something to tell you. Paul came to me in a dream. He took my hand. You know how he used to shake hands, very strong, very firm. I could *feel* him with my hand. He said he was happy now so I asked him to tell me more, to tell me where he was, what it had been like, you know, to die — but then he disappeared and the next thing ... I woke up."

Prabat laughed. "That dream was so real. I got out of bed and looked all over the house for him." That was when I told him what had happened with Paul's lamp.

"You mustn't worry," he said, "it's perfectly natural. For thirty days after someone dies, he can wander the earth at will."

He was speaking out of his Hindu tradition, happy to share it with me. So *that's* what Hindus believe, I thought. There are hundreds of millions of Hindus in the world, I figured, not to mention all the Buddhists who believe in reincarnation and the Chinese who practice ancestor worship, so they must believe in spirit survival too. Maybe, I decided, I'm not so crazy to believe that Paul's spirit may have survived.

A couple of days after my conversation with Paul's Hindu friend, I scribbled down a log of strange things that had happened around the time of the memorial service. I headed it, "SUPERNATURAL (?) EVENTS, WEEKEND OF FEBRUARY 6, 1983." At the time, I wasn't

even familiar with the word "paranormal." Unlike "supernatural," which suggests that a phenomenon is magical or bizarre, "paranormal" suggests merely that science has not yet found a neat explanation for it. It never occurred to me then that anything more would happen to me, or to anyone else who had been close to Paul, that would suggest his spirit's presence on our plane. But lots more has. For many years I kept up that log till it was over 50 pages long.

A third of those pages cover events that happened that first year. (Typically after death contacts come most frequently soon after a person's passing.) Not all these phenomena were sensed by me. Many were perceived by Keith alone. With some irritation, my teenage son reported to me that Paul still seemed determined to parent him. Often when Keith should have been studying but instead was talking to a friend on the phone, a pin-up lamp in his room would flash. When it was time for him to go to bed, the lamp would turn off.

Twice, apparently paranormal incidents were noticed by me and another person who was in my company at the time—first a woman I worked with, later a male acquaintance. Jonathan, the office manager at our church and a friend of Paul's, reported other odd events to me. For years, as Paul coped with his growing blindness, he had helped out in the church office and brought along a portable radio to keep his mind occupied. After his death, a tiny earphone which Paul had used to listen to that radio kept turning up on Jon's desk there. "And sometimes," Jon told me, "I get this oddball sense I'm being *overheard*."

None of us ever saw an apparition or heard Paul's voice. Instead, over half these apparently paranormal events involved electrical gadgets like lights, a fan, an air conditioner, a record player, two hairdryers and a hot pot. (Paul's lamp was most likely to flash when I was down in the dumps but was *not* thinking of him.) Other events involved the movements of small objects in symbolic or useful ways. For instance, one Friday afternoon when I'd forgotten to make an important phone call before the weekend, legal papers which had been thumbtacked for months onto a bulletin board in my bedroom fell down; they reminded me just in time to get in touch with my lawyer. No draft dislodged them and I didn't brush against them; I was several feet

away when they rustled down onto my dresser.

After Paul had been gone a year, things started happening that recalled his taste for puns. Keith went away to college. To liven up my empty nest, I invited two old friends over to dinner. Paul had known and liked both of them. The evening went well. After my guests left, I tidied up, then went to sleep. The next morning I found lying on the floor a small metal box of the herb, sage. I hadn't used this herb the previous night, nor could it easily have fallen from the spice rack above. A wooden rod across the front of each shelf held its contents in place; nothing had ever fallen from this rack before. But sage had been Paul's favorite seasoning and in both French and English, "sage" has a complimentary meaning. This is especially true in French, Paul's second language, in which it can mean sensible and well-behaved as well as wise. Three years later, the can of sage again fell mysteriously. I had just generously tipped two of my building's maintenance men whom Paul had always liked and tipped similarly. Both times I could almost hear ghostly applause.

By now I was sensing paranormal contact far less often. Months, even years elapsed between shows of Paul's presence. In 1991 I took early retirement from my job and moved from New York which had been my home for the past 24 years to Oregon where at first I knew almost no one. I would have welcomed a sense of Paul's presence but my log has no entries at all for that period. True, a light fixture in my kitchen occasionally flickered but, because its flickering never seemed to correspond meaningfully with any thought or mood of mine, I never sensed anything paranormal to it. I wasn't surprised when in 1994, someone repainting my ceiling discovered that the fixture needed to be rewired.

By the fall of 1993 I was convinced that Paul would never communicate with me again. I was dating Charles, the man who four years later would become my husband. When I invited three of Charles' relatives over for dinner, Paul's spirit popped by to give his blessing to my latest beau. Not long before my guests were due to arrive, I set to work to fix eggplant parmigiana while Charles started making a salad. Out of a kitchen drawer I pulled a grater and laid it down on a counter. It was a flat 11x 5 inch stainless steel number

with sharp-edged slots for shredding vegetables and such. I planned to use it to shred mozzarella; Charles planned to use it to grate a carrot for his salad. But for the moment neither of us was ready to use this common kitchen tool.

A few minutes later I was ready to shred my cheese—but that stainless steel grater was nowhere to be found. My new partner and I both looked high and low: on counters, in drawers, behind and under bags of produce. At last, we gave up in desperation. I sliced my cheese with a knife, Charles took a potato peeler to his carrot. Our guests arrived, we sat down to eat, then I got up to fetch dessert. And there on the counter where I'd left it in the first place was that runaway grater, like the prodigal son.

As I came back to the dinner table, Charles responded to the stunned expression on my face. "Is something wrong?" he asked me. I waved the grater at him and told him where I'd found it. As soon as we got over our astonishment, it was obvious to us both what Paul had meant to tell us: Charles was *greater*, far better for me, than any other man I'd dated in the ten years since his death.

Thinking about survival of the spirit

I had quit my job and moved to Oregon to start a new life. I started reading widely about the paranormal, particularly about sensing "the departed" after death. Articles in scholarly journals were among the first things I checked. Soon I ran across data on the multitude of people from different countries who had had experiences that resembled my own. For instance, when in their European Human Values Study, Gallup pollsters asked, "Have you ever felt that you were really in touch with someone who had died?" 33% of Italians said yes, as did 26% in Great Britain and West Germany. Icelanders topped the list with 41%. For Asians who, like my friend Prabat, took survival of the spirit for granted, the rate of contact experiences was *over twice as high*.

A study of mourning in Japan reported that 27 out of 30 Tokyo widows whose husbands had recently died in car accidents sensed their presence afterwards. Its author, a Japanese-American

psychiatrist, pointed out that Japan's two religions, Buddhism and Shinto, both assume the presence of the deceased, at least at times. "According to traditional rites," he noted, "the spirits of the deceased can be called back to this world—usually by shamanistic rites similar to those widespread throughout Asia.... [If you were Japanese you would feel] in direct daily communication with your ancestors. The family altar would be your 'hot line'.... You could ... ring the bell, light incense, and talk over the current crisis with one whom you have loved and cherished."

But even in Western cultures, responsible research by skilled professionals documented that healthy, normal individuals often sensed apparent contact with the dead.

- Interviews with 66 widowers and 227 widows in an area of Wales—almost all of those healthy enough to be interviewed—revealed that half the widowers and 46% of the widows had sensed some kind of after-death communication [ADC] with their departed mate. (Vivid dreams that seemed like visits from a loved one were not counted.) According to W. D. Rees, the general practitioner who reported this research in 1971, ADCs were usually perceived as helpful and pleasant. Those who had them were *not* particularly depressed or socially isolated. Instead, they were more likely to have had longer marriages, happier marriages, and marriages with children. Though ADCs were most likely to occur within the first year after a loved one's passing, sometimes they recurred for years, even decades. Often they continued after the widowed spouse remarried.
- A 1970's survey of residents of Los Angeles which drew samples from white, black, Japanese- and Mexican-American neighborhoods found that 44% of the 434 people interviewed thought they had had encounters with someone who was dead. Over a quarter of those who reported such an encounter said that the dead person actually visited or was seen at a seance.
- The ambitious Harvard Bereavement Study of widows and widowers from the Boston area followed scores of subjects for four years after

they lost their mates. Three weeks after their loss, 44% of those who expressed a high degree of yearning for their dead spouse felt that "My husband/wife knows and sees everything I do." More surprising, almost a third of those in the "Low Yearning" category *also* agreed with this statement. Most of the widows sensed that their husband was with them some or all of the time. "One reported hearing her husband come to the door after work and put his key in the lock. Four others reported catching sight of their husband out of the corner of their eyes. In one case he was sitting in the living room ... in another he was standing by the door." The widows found this sense of presence comforting.

Interviewed thirteen months after bereavement, almost half agreed with the statement that "I have a feeling that my husband watches over me." The researchers stressed that their subjects were *not* psychotic and, observed that since "bereaved people are often reluctant to reveal information ... that might be taken to indicate mental illness," these figures were probably an undercount.

- In 1982, an Arizona psychologist, David Balk, interviewed a sample of normal American teenagers who had lost a sister or brother. About half of them at times had thought they saw or heard their dead sibling. Several reported occurrences that they felt "involved actual contact with the sibling."
- In 1985, a team of Americans headed by P. Richard Olson, MD, studied 52 widowed people in a North Carolina nursing home, none of whom appeared to be mentally ill or confused. Over 60% of the 46 widows had sensed their husbands with them after death in some way. For almost all of them, the experience was a pleasant one. Two of the six widowers in the nursing home reported similar experiences.

Some of the most interesting data on American experiences of contact with the dead have been pulled together by Andrew Greeley, the distinguished sociologist, novelist and Catholic priest. Writing in 1989 he reported that in a poll conducted by the National Opinion

Research Center (NORC), 42% of Americans said that at least once they'd felt that they "were really in touch with someone who had died." Impressed by the Olson study cited above, Greeley sorted through the data from that NORC poll to see how its *widowed* respondents had answered this question. "Of the 149 widowed," he reported, "129 were women and 20 were men. The proportion of widows reporting contact with the dead 'at least once or twice' was 64 percent."

Recently, a few researchers doing surveys of this kind have reassured their interview subjects that normal people often have "illusions or hallucinations" of loved ones who have passed on. Their rates of positive responses have gone through the roof.

- A 1993 study measured the feelings of 20 American university students, 18-27 years old, who had lost a parent at least two years before. The great majority of them agreed strongly with the statement, "I feel he/she is still with me at times."
- A 1993 Swedish study of 14 widowers and 36 widows in their seventies found that one month after bereavement, 89% of the women and 57% of the men reported some kind of after-death communication—this even though ADCs "are hardly recognized in Sweden. They are spoken about neither publicly nor among close friends." Only after these widows and widowers were told that such sensations were common did they "speak freely, expressing relief from thoughts that they 'might become or be considered insane.'" A year after bereavement, over half of them reported that they were still sensing contact with their lost mates.
- A 1995 study of Norwegian women, 44-79 years old, who had lost their husbands or live-in partners showed similar results. Soon after bereavement, almost three-quarters of them (29 out of 39) sometimes sensed their lost mate's presence. And a year later, *two-thirds* of them were still sensing ADCs.

Even more striking was an in-depth study by a Massachusetts psychologist, Dr. Roberta Dew Conant, of ten white middle-class,

middle-aged homeowners who had recently lost their husbands. In Conant's opinion, all of them were adjusting well to their bereavement. Yet *every one of them* reported that, at least once, she had experienced "unbidden, consoling 'sense of presence' of the deceased." Their ADCs took many forms but most interesting to me for obvious reasons was the widow who reported that many important family events "were accompanied by flickering lights. The family 'came to believe' that dimming lights meant the deceased husband was communicating his presence."

Over the past few years, evidence for ADCs has mounted. In two scholarly yet eminently readable books, Louis E. LaGrand, Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus at the State University of New York, discusses after death contacts from the point of view of a certified grief counselor. In *Talking to Heaven*, a bestselling book by a well known medium, James Van Praagh lists "ways spirits let their loved ones know that they are around them *without* the use of a medium." Topping that list is lights, followed by other electrically operated devices. In *Hello from Heaven!*, Bill and Judy Guggenheim supply 353 thumbnail accounts of contact experiences culled from over 2,000 interviews. They document that spirits may come to us via many routes including dreams, the five senses and, yes, the meaningful misbehavior of electrical devices.

As my research on ADCs progressed, I decided to take a leap and do a series of interviews of my own. The prospect was tempting since I have a master's degree in sociology and have always found survey work fascinating. Besides, though I have the highest regard for the achievements of the Guggenheims and Prof. LaGrand, it is always useful in a field as new as this for independent researchers to replicate still controversial studies. My goal was not just to collect stories of spontaneous after-death contacts but to get a handle on who was most likely to experience them. Perhaps, I hoped, frequent perceivers of contact would open up to me, knowing that I myself had often sensed contact with a departed loved one.

Later I would discover that Father Greeley had called for interviews of just this sort. In 1975, drawing on a study of over 1,400

Americans done by NORC, he sketched out a profile of psychics, noting that people who grew up in a home where there was considerable tension were particularly likely to experience clairvoyance, telepathy and *deja vu*. He also explored the phenomenon of contact with the dead. But lamenting the limitations of standard polling, he pointed out that, "We are badly handicapped by the fact that we were unable to ask our respondents any more than whether they had had such experiences. It would be important to know whether the experiences were dreaming or awake, whether there was conversation with the dead person [and] what the circumstances were at the time of contact...."

Since the early 1990s when I started talking openly about my own paranormal experiences, I've discussed ADCs with hundreds who had experienced them firsthand. Since 1998, I've done 78 in-depth interviews with women and men who had had ADCs. All interviews were taped, transcribed, then analyzed. Twelve of my informants were personally known to my husband and/or me; several had been our friends for many years. The experiences they reported provided a standard of comparison for the stories of the others. As it turned out, there was no significant difference between the two groups of stories.

All but one of my informants gave every evidence of coping with their lives with at least average sanity and skill. They've told me not just about the ADCs they've had but far, far more. They've described their religious and spiritual backgrounds: what they were taught to believe and what they've come to believe as a result of spirit contacts. They've told me the context out of which their experiences flowed. They've entrusted me with secrets, some of which they had never shared before with another living soul. It has been humbling for me—yet enriching beyond measure

Contact experiences and those who have them

What constitutes a contact experience? The stereotypical contact, only too familiar to us from stage, screen and TV, is a visual one. Our trembling heroine sees a threatening ghost, our flabbergasted hero tries to deal with his late wife, glowing greenly and trailing filmy chiffon. Is this the way it really is? Well, not exactly.

Only one-eighth of the contact-with-the-dead experiences I collected involved sight at all. Some of these did indeed involve seeing a departed loved one, wholly or in part, clearly or hazily. But many other sight experiences involved seeing lights turn on or off or flicker at a particularly meaningful time, for no perceptible physical reason. (See Chapter 9 for more about these.) Still others involved the movement of an object, usually very small, associated with the lost person—a ribbon or a photo or a cherished tiny figurine. (Chapter 11 tells more about these.)

Three other senses — hearing, touch and smell — were mentioned about as frequently as sight but the most common vehicle for a contact experience was a vivid dream. Those who had ADCs in dreams reported that these dreams felt substantially different from the garden variety; many years later, they might remember them in loving detail. Sometimes their vivid dreams conveyed information they hadn't known before. More often the loved ones they perceived in dreams seemed to be visiting to reassure the dreamer that they were all right or to urge the dreamer to stop mourning and get on with his or her life. (Chapter 15 tells more about vivid, paranormal dreams.)

Almost as frequently, people perceived contact with the dead via telepathic communication, symbolic events, or that subtle awareness called "sense of presence." Telepathic communication, also called extra-sensory perception or ESP, is probably the best known of these three. (Though it generally involves communication between living persons it also occurs frequently between the dead and the living.) Many of the symbolic events reported to me involved extraordinary behavior by an animal or bird. Chapter 12 tells stories of a hummingbird and a fox, an owl, several beloved dogs and a wildly running horse, all of which conveyed information or comfort through their actions.

Clearly some people have many more ADCs than others. I myself was never aware of having any until I was in my forties; then I started having lots of them. Being widowed makes it a lot more likely that you'll have contact experiences. But a number of the people I interviewed, over two-thirds of whom had never been widowed, had had five or more ADCs; often they started having them early in life. It's fair

to call these people "sensitives." In many another culture, given their ability to receive messages from the spirit world, they might be groomed as shamans or mediums. What gave them their special powers? In Chapter 16, I offer evidence from a number of scholarly studies that certain kinds of childhood experiences tend to create sensitives.

Only too many people in our society believe that all talk of contact with spirits is just so much wish fulfillment and woowoo fantasy. I, too, was brought up to think this way. In the university settings where I earned three degrees, denial of anything that implied that there might be spiritual forces afoot in the world seemed to be an article of faith. Yes, an article of *faith*. Like Madonna, we were all supposed to be material—and materialistic—girls and boys focused on making our mark in the one short life we had.

Now skepticism may well be a healthy stance from which to view many intellectual issues—but only if the skeptic is open-minded enough to take in all the evidence and move on accordingly. Unfortunately, only too often we run into close-minded, compulsive disbelievers determined not to acknowledge the conclusions argued by the facts. For them, denial of anything resembling an afterlife seems to be a kneejerk reaction. Such readers probably abandoned this book several pages ago. But for those whose minds are open, I offer the next two chapters. Both of them, I think, offer irrefutable evidence for the survival of the human spirit after death.