

## Psychics and Paranormal Investigation

by  
Richard A. Barker

The only real "science" that has been applied to paranormal study has been applied to psychical research. Application of technology is not in and of itself *science*, and ghost hunters who think of themselves as scientific because they use K2 meters and infrared cameras need a lot more education in science. The British Society of Psychical Research (SPR) and the American Society of Psychical Research (ASPR) boasted some of the most prominent scientists, scholars, and philosophers of the 19th Century--several of them Nobel Prize winners in physics, chemistry, and medicine. These men and women developed and systematically tested theories about psychic abilities because that is how it is done in science. Their work has been largely forgotten, and their methods (or existence) unknown to most modern ghost hunters.

The ASPR has not upheld the golden tradition its 19th Century founders worked so hard to create. As far as their research into psychical phenomena is concerned, it is even less valid than the worthless drivel propagated by its brethren in the social sciences. So far, the major contribution of applied psychology is in marketing--developing effective ways of getting you to give your money to sellers of product. Perhaps it is the result of dumbing down in modern education and the dearth of curiosity among young Americans, or perhaps it is the desire for quick fame and fortune and shortcuts to knowledge. Perhaps it is the predictable and inevitable outcome of the age of Twitter, iPod, Wikipedia, American Idol, and Xbox that has dulled the intellect of the modern young person. It was investing and obsession with money that ruined their parents. But someone had to pay for those Xboxes and iPods.

The first notable spiritualist and psychic of the modern era was probably Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772). Trained as a mining engineer, Swedenborg had a vision at age 56 that changed his life. At that point, he abandoned his career in science, and spent most of his time in a dream-like state writing books on the spirit world. Immanuel Kant, considered by many to be the most important philosopher in the Western World after Aristotle, investigated an incident of Swedenborg's clairvoyance and concluded it was genuine "beyond all possibility of doubt." Swedenborg proposed a connection between the material world and the spirit world he called the "theory of correspondence," and he convincingly demonstrated this connection with his psychic powers. After his death, Swedenborg's followers established a religion based upon his ideas.

During the latter half of the Nineteen Century, during the Golden Age of Spiritualism, a number of the world's best scientists involved themselves in psychical research. Among them were Alfred Russel Wallace, codeveloper of the Theory of Evolution, William Crookes, discoverer of the cathode ray and the element argon, William Barrett, physicist, William James, author of the first text in psychology, Oliver Lodge, physicist, and Charles Richet, Nobel Prize for Medicine, 1913. Of the thousands of mediums and psychics investigated by them and by other notable scholars, only a handful seemed to have genuine, sustainable abilities, such as D.D. Home, Leonora Piper, and Alice Fleming. Some seemed to have had hit and miss abilities, like Rosina Thompson and the vulgar, Italian Eusapia Palladino. But most were downright frauds, like Helena Blavatsky, Henry Slade, and the Davenport Brothers. To avoid serious scrutiny or

regulation, psychics of today tend to band together into self-validating, protected communities where the fraudulent can thrive alongside the legitimate.

The psychical researchers of this era applied the best methods of the time to their investigations--some methods so uncomfortable and humiliating that it is a wonder that the true psychics put up with it. No reasonable person can review their findings and not conclude that there are special people with special abilities. A peculiar phenomenon was discovered in some of the psychics--as they got older, their abilities diminished. Some gave up the "business" rather than resort to tricks. Others, well... I might also mention that the genuine mediums did not charge for their services. *Ghost Hunters* by Deborah Blum (Penguin, 2006, ISBN 1-59420-090-4) is a very well-written and well-researched book on the activities of the Society of Psychical Research in England and the American Society of Psychical Research during this period. It should be required reading for everyone claiming to be interested in the paranormal.

The lessons that should have been learned from SPR and ASPR activities and findings are the following:

1. There are people with special abilities who actually communicate with the spirit world (or what we can assume is the spirit world). While there was never enough evidence to convince the most stringent SPR and ASPR researchers, there is more than enough to convince the reasonable scholar, who has not adopted logical positivism as a religion, that there are unexplainable but verifiable psychic abilities.
2. There are only a handful of these people with special abilities, and you will not find them in store fronts, malls, or as on-call service providers. By far, the majority of those making claims of psychic abilities are frauds. SPR researchers did discover that genuine abilities in some individuals diminish over time, and they either get out of the "business" or resort to tricks and gimmicks.
3. Those with genuine special abilities are the least likely to advertise them (more often they try to hide them), and they do not see their gifts as commercial product to sell.

The distinction between psychics, mediums, and sensitives is an arbitrary academic exercise that creates a false impression of legitimacy where none actually exists (see Wittgenstein). There are many people with astute powers of observation and insight, some futurists for example, who should not necessarily be understood as having special psychic abilities. There are also many people with empathetic natures who are clearly more in touch with the cosmos than some of us insensitive louts, but they do not have the sort of ability that ASPR was studying.

While I have had my moments, they are not of sufficient quantity or quality to earn the title psychic ability. There is no one who is more eager than myself to meet a truly gifted psychic, but I have had nothing but disappointments. We have had "sensitives" on our team, who connect with spirits in every location they visit--Dan'l, the sad little boy, John, who used to work here, the woman who was raped and murdered. These spirits were apparently full of snide comments on team members, and equally full of fanciful anecdotes. Yet, they have never seemed to be able to furnish any information that could be used to tie them to the historic record. They do not

seem to know their last names, birthdates, birthplaces, parents' names, or family relations. When I asked for such information, I was usually informed, rather indignantly, that I was out of line. The early psychical researchers were able to document and verify intimate details channeled through the genuine mediums. Are modern mediums less in tune, or are modern spirits dumber?

I leave it to the psychics to respond to this question: How can a psychic convince me (or anyone else) that he or she is genuine? It has to be more than blind faith. I find that members of spiritualist organizations tend to be extraordinarily shy about meeting with me—maybe its just me, but I'm finding lots of testimonials, and not finding credible evidence. I once heard a psychic, paid to tell stories at a Halloween event, describe his visions on the streets of Galena, IL, and what he described sounded suspiciously like characters in the movie Beetlejuice. Shall we chalk spiritualism up to just plain marketing? Is it the equivalent of professional wrestling, with the same goals?

Discovering psychic ability in an individual requires considerable testing. On the other hand, if you think you have psychic abilities, celebrate them, develop them--bearing in mind that your mind has considerable power to deceive itself. Just do not burden the rest of us with false hope and commercial chicanery. I have been studying the paranormal for more than 50 years, and I have yet to meet anyone with true psychic abilities. I have met many who thought they were psychic, but thinking you are Napoleon does not make you the Emperor of France.

I have worked with psychics on investigations. Though some were benign, others concerned themselves more with power politics and manipulation of the group than with paranormal investigation. Not one psychic with whom I have worked ever provided a piece of verifiable information. The psychics all seemed to me to be working out of a constructed reality that had no connection to object reality.

I would give almost anything to meet a true psychic. I tried to set up a reading with a promising local psychic, but she never answered my emails. Perhaps she knew in advance, psychically, that I am a cynic, but then she would also have known that I would celebrate and support her gifts if she truly had some. I suspect that she spoke with her friends who knew me as a adversary of fraud.