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## Experience and Studying the Paranormal

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# Experience and Studying the Paranormal

## **Abstract**

There is a great deal of doubt in mainstream science about the appropriateness of scientific research on the 'paranormal,' ranging from healthy skepticism to ridicule. Even some (many? most?) scientists who dare to study the paranormal display at least a healthy degree of skepticism themselves. Some of this is no doubt a reaction to the attack from mainstream science. However, keep in mind that scientists in general, no matter how mainstream or anomalous their subject matter, have not only been trained in the methods of science, but have also been socialized mostly in a Western cultural context that privileges science as a way of knowing. Even the Western spirit mediums we studied (Emmons & Emmons 2003) tended to be skeptical of their own work, often looking for 'confirmations' that their readings were evidential instead of something they were just making up in their heads. [*excerpt*]

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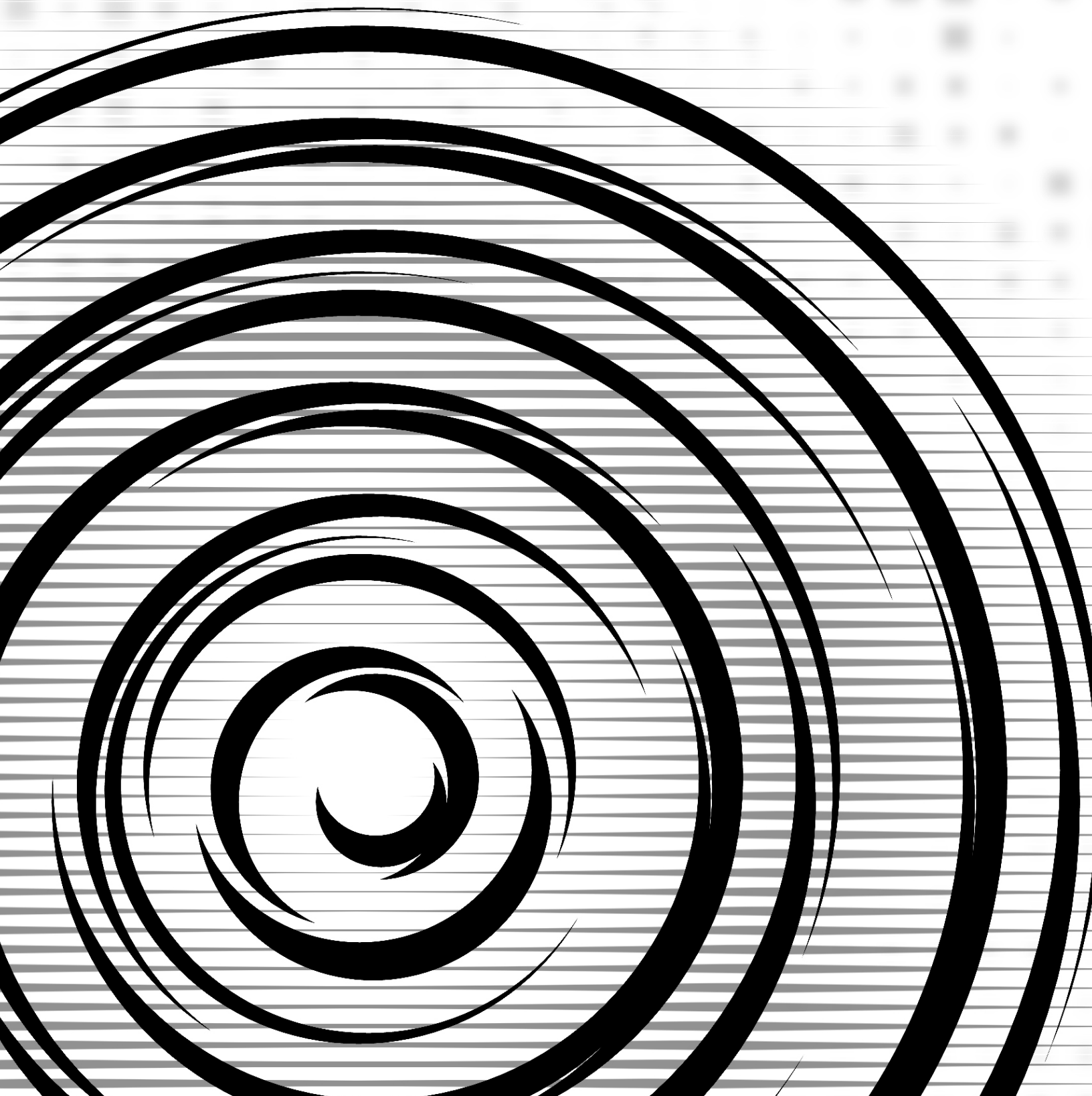
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# Paranthropology

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## Experience and Studying the Paranormal

Charles F. Emmons & Penelope Emmons



There is a great deal of doubt in mainstream science about the appropriateness of scientific research on the 'paranormal,' ranging from healthy skepticism to ridicule. Even some (many? most?) scientists who dare to study the paranormal display at least a healthy degree of skepticism themselves. Some of this is no doubt a reaction to the attack from mainstream science. However, keep in mind that scientists in general, no matter how mainstream or anomalous their subject matter, have not only been trained in the methods of science, but have also been socialized mostly in a Western cultural context that privileges science as a way of knowing. Even the Western spirit mediums we studied (Emmons & Emmons 2003) tended to be skeptical of their own work, often looking for 'confirmations' that their readings were evidential instead of something they were just making up in their heads.

Therefore, it often takes some kind of dramatic personal experience for a scientist to get past a materialist mindset and to become open-minded enough and curious enough to look into the study of anomalies. My favorite account of such an experience is Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer's (2007:2-4) adventure with her daughter's harp. The expensive, handmade harp had been stolen at a theater in Oakland, California, where she played in a concert. Having failed to find it after extensive help from the police, and media, Mayer reluctantly agreed to a friend's suggestion that she contact a dowser (a practitioner who allegedly finds things, underground or elsewhere, by means of dowsing rods).

Her friend directed Mayer to the president of the American Society of Dowsers, whom she then called on the phone. From Arkansas, the dowser paused briefly, then told her that the harp was still in Oakland and asked her to send him a street map of the city. Two days after she sent the map, the dowser called her back and told her, 'It's in the second house on the right on D\_\_\_\_\_ Street, just off L\_\_\_\_\_ Avenue' (Mayer 2007:3). Mayer located the house, then gave the address to the police, who predictably told her that 'a tip' was not enough

grounds to get a search warrant. Besides, they said, surely the harp had been fenced out of the area by then.

At this point Mayer put up flyers in a two-block area around the house, offering a reward for the harp. 'It was a crazy idea...[and] I was embarrassed enough about what I was doing to tell just a couple of close friends about it' (Mayer 2007:3). Three days later a man called saying that the harp described on the flyer he'd seen outside his house matched exactly a harp his next-door neighbor had recently acquired. After two weeks of 'a series of circuitous phone calls' it was agreed that she would meet a teenage boy in a store parking lot. Sure enough, it was her daughter's harp. 'Twenty-five minutes later, as I turned into my driveway, I had the thought, This changes everything...I had to face the fact that my notions of space, time, reality, and the nature of the human mind were stunningly inadequate' (Mayer 2007:3-4).

After that she began to delve into the literature on anomalies and started to share experiences with her psychology colleagues and others at the University of California, Berkeley, and elsewhere. She died just after completing her book *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind* (Mayer 2007), the source for the above account.

Fortunately we have more than just 'anecdotal' evidence for scientists changing their values or interests based on personal experiences (and not just on their knowledge of research findings). In a survey of elite scientists, McClenon (1984:162) found that 'belief in ESP is more closely related to personal experience [with paranormal events] than to familiarity with the research literature on psi.' In other words, it may be that research is less convincing than personal experience when it comes to 'things that aren't supposed to happen' (deviant knowledge).

This does not surprise me. In my study of 91 UFO researchers (84 of whom had advanced degrees, including 76 doctorates), the most important single reason they gave for wanting to (daring to) study UFOs was thinking that they had had a UFO



experience themselves (Emmons 1997:48-54). Altogether 48% thought they had had an experience, and another 8% thought they might have. This contrasts with polls of the general population in which only between 5% and 14% thought they had seen a UFO.

Although some of these ufologists kept their work secret, most of them had undergone risks to their careers by conducting UFO research. It often takes some kind of powerful personal curiosity to be willing to buck the social control system in academe and government (not so much in business). As one of the UFO researchers told me ('Dr. X,' Emmons 1997:52-54), after he and his wife and at least one other witness had experienced a brightly-colored low-flying ferris-wheel-shaped object that drove them off the highway, he no longer doubted that UFOs existed; he just had to find out what they were.

Lest you think that an experience always carries the day ('seeing is believing'), I should point out that I had some amusing interviews with astronomers for my UFO study in which they told me that they did not believe in ESP or other anomalies, then proceeded to relate to me their own strange experiences. On another occasion I watched a tape of a man describing his disturbing nighttime visitation involving what he interpreted as a ghost, at the end of which he stated, 'And I don't even believe in ghosts.'

Mayer (2007:108, 113) relates that Hal Puthoff, on the last day of the CIA-sponsored program in remote viewing that he and Russell Targ worked on at SRI, thought to himself, 'I can't be doing this. These data can't be real; it's simply not possible.' But the evidence was too strong. He said, 'The problem lay with my beliefs.' I don't want to make too much of this psychological issue, because I still think that the main issue is social organizational (the interests of the scientific establishment and of those who benefit from it), but Puthoff's case is still interesting. It shows how being socialized to the dominant paradigm makes it difficult even for scientists who dare to do the research not to be super-skeptical.

Even studying how personal experience impacts scientists' willingness to study anomalies is easier for the sociologist in me to accept when I think about my own 'experience with experience.' Here are a couple of examples (see also Emmons and Emmons 2003:93-109).

Before the age of 19 I never thought that I had experienced anything paranormal, until I took a psychology course run by Professor John Fleming at Gannon College. Although I was an atheist at the time, and felt sure that the universe could be ex-

plained entirely by the normal laws of physics, I was astonished to hear fascinating accounts of research on ESP and PK. Instead of taking an 'it can't be; therefore it isn't' attitude, however, I thought, 'It shouldn't be, but it seems to be, so I'd better check it out.'

I decided to try a study of my own, one in PK (mind over matter). In the following summer I rolled 3 dice at a time for a total of over 200,000 up-faces, 'trying for' a 5 on each one. The results were hits 11/2 to 2 percent in excess of the expected value, with odds billions to one against this outcome for the size of the sample. Professor Fleming consulted with J.B. Rhine on my data sheets, who said they contained typical 'decline effects' (very cold streaks after very hot streaks). Fleming also had my dice tested (rolled in a machine) in a lab setting without me present, and the dice appeared slightly biased against fives, meaning that the odds against my results were even greater than expected.

That hooked me for life, I think, but my first actual sociological/anthropological study of the paranormal didn't come until about 18 years later, in my book *Chinese Ghosts and ESP: A Study of Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences* (1982), in which I used social scientific techniques to compare ghost experiences, among other things, in Western and Eastern cultures. I found that apparition experiences were very much the same phenomenologically, in spite of significant cultural differences in beliefs (Emmons 1982). For example, firsthand reports of apparition experiences in both cultures almost never occurred simultaneously with physical effects, in spite of strong beliefs in Chinese culture that ghosts often attack people physically.

Although I have had many other personal experiences that have boosted my curiosity, probably the most significant set of experiences got me interested in the research on spirit mediums in the United States (Emmons & Emmons 2003). Most of these experiences connect to the death of my mother in 1993 (Emmons & Emmons 2003:101-107). I got the impression that I was communicating with my mother after her death, at first hearing her voice in my left ear. I could have chalked it up to my imagination, except that there were many evidential aspects to the communication. For example, on several occasions it appeared that she would help me find lost objects, or warn me about little accidents that were about to happen if I didn't avoid them (like a bike u-turning right back toward me, which oddly happened twice within about two minutes, with different riders on different streets). The warning was 'watch out,' which

I heard internally a few seconds before each bicycle event. It got to the point that it seemed to me to be unscientific not to see some significance in such unusual occurrences.

Fortunately I still retain the skepticism to consider other interpretations (like clairvoyance rather than spirit communication). Such experiences may or may not convince anybody else, but they have been enough to stimulate me to study paranormal issues (probably at a cost to my career). I also never want to lose my skeptical side. After all, my curiosity addiction is not satisfied by 'believing' (I don't believe in belief; I believe in evidence, which includes personal experience), and accepting things without adequate evidence would be like cheating myself, or cheating at solitaire.

Another interesting experience took place while at college in 1964, although I thought strongly at the time that it was probably a hoax: a table-tipping demonstration (Emmons & Emmons 2003:137-138). At a cast party after our final performance, four of us sat around a card table with our hands on top (no thumbs underneath, it appeared). The table rose a good foot and a half before I dropped under the table to investigate. I could discover no tricks, although I suspected two people who had whispered something to each other over the table before we started.

Stephen Braude, philosophy professor at University of Maryland (Baltimore Campus), and a prominent writer in the field of paranormal research, also had a 'table-up séance' experience in graduate school. He told me that several factors made it seem genuine: it was his table, the participants were not 'jokers,' and it was in daylight. The memory of this experience, which he thought needed confronting, stayed with him, but he waited until he was safely tenured as a professor before becoming involved in research on such matters.

Robert Waggoner (2009:4-7), a researcher in the field of lucid dreaming, had his own experiences with lucid dreams, precognitive dreams, and visions of his 'inner advisor' by ages 11 and 12. Then he read books by Carlos Castaneda as a teenager and continued to have lucid dreams, learning to practice staying aware within such dreams, which is still a practical focus of his research today.

Russell Targ, laser physicist and remote viewing researcher, told me about his childhood interest in trick magic, which led to his experiencing apparently real ESP while engaging in his performance tricks. His curiosity over his personal experience led him to build an ESP teaching machine involving a 4-choice

option, with the target selected by a random-number generator. People could learn from feedback, knowing what it felt like when they were successful.

By contrast some researchers have become interested in anomalies without first having personal experiences to motivate them. Other strong motivators come from reading and from social influences from friends and family (some of whom may have had their own experiences). Reasons given by UFO researchers are similar (Emmons 1997:51). This also parallels the reasons for spirit mediums becoming socialized into their role (Emmons & Emmons 2003:210-217). In other words, in spite of the socialization process and social control system in mainstream science (and religion), there are other ways for people to become socialized to 'deviant' knowledge.

For example, Dean Radin (1997:300), psi lab researcher at IONS (Institute of Noetic Sciences), writes about his curiosity stemming from reading science fiction stories, something Russell Targ did as well. Radin says that people in his family, including himself, did not have paranormal experiences when he was young. He never had a conversion experience and has been hooked on the data only (Mayer 2007:226).

Radin did tell us at a meeting of the Society for Scientific Exploration, however, that he tends to have precognitive dreams as an adult. Once he had a dream that he would be in a car accident the following day. 'Not wanting to be in a car accident,' he said, he decided to take a very circuitous route to work the next day, one that he did not take ordinarily, but then he was rear-ended. I couldn't help speculating on how a New Ager or Spiritualist might interpret such an experience. For example, maybe the Universe was having fun with him, Dean Radin the big psi researcher, who conducts lab tests for precognition. It raises paradoxical questions about such things as whether the future is predetermined and whether one could change it based on prior knowledge.

Darlene Miller, Director of Programs at The Monroe Institute (TMI), told me about a blend of social influence, reading, and personal experiences in her background. Having been raised a fundamentalist Christian, and switching to atheism in college, she was later introduced to ideas from TMI by business associates who had attended the institute. This, plus contact with The Course in Miracles material, changed her perspective on things. The same associates led her to try reiki healing, with which she had a dramatic experience involving intense heat that took her pain away in ten minutes. After that she took the

Gateway experience from TMI and moved to TMI the following summer.

Robin Wooffitt, head of the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit, a sociological research department at the University of York, England, had early reading influences, somewhat like Dean Radin. As a child he was interested in comics, pop novels, horror films and things generally related to the occult. These led him to the paranormal and the supernatural. Although he recalled no anomalous experiences of his own as a youth, and only a couple of things in the past few years that ‘could be data,’ he told me that nowadays he is primarily very skeptical, having been more open to such things as a child.

Al Rauber and Garrett Husveth, two paranormal investigators in the United States, both said in a joint interview that their earliest influences came from reading. Al read a book on ghosts as a sophomore in high school, then read everything he could find on the paranormal, hauntings and ESP. Garrett said that he became interested in ghosts at age five or six, then read all that he could about parapsychology, EVP (electronic voice phenomenon), ghosts and hauntings. The two of them started working together in the late 1980s. Both of them seem more focused on investigative methodology than on any personal experiences they might have had.

Mark Nesbitt, historian and writer of the Ghosts of Gettysburg series (1991), told me that he had been interested in ghosts as a kid, and later as a park ranger in Gettysburg he would ask people if they had heard about ghosts on the battlefield or in the historic houses there. Of course the official position of the Park Service (and of the Visitor’s Center in Gettysburg, I might add, where I spotted nary a book about ghost experiences or ghost folklore), has been to deny or ignore ghost experiences, probably out of needing to appear ‘respectable’ I should think. However, Mark, wanting to be a writer, began to record the many experiences people reported to him, and in recent years he has had some experiences of his own.

Back to academe, let me relate the background of four graduate students in the UK who were involved in studying the paranormal when I visited in 2008. Madeleine Castro, a PhD candidate at the University of York, England, said that she was curious about the unexplained from about age twelve, and she ‘questioned the God thing.’ Activities with other youths at renewal camps and around the campfire, including shared extraordinary experiences, contributed to her curiosity about anomalous experiences, which she now studies in a sociological frame.

Sarah Metcalfe, also at the University of York, whose research involves a sociological and medical approach to spirit mediumship, was originally introduced to the subject by her best friend who was a spirit medium. Sarah also attended a Spiritualist Church ‘for entertainment’ rather than as a regular member. She started out believing in mediumship but is now agnostic about it, nevertheless retaining a research interest.

Hannah Gilbert, another sociology graduate student at the University of York, told me that she had had no anomalous experiences as a child, but that she did have an interest in such things that was supported by her father, an academic psychologist. They even did some work together studying spiritual healing. Eventually she ended up doing sociological research on the subjective experiences of spirit mediums.

Another graduate student, name omitted for confidentiality, was interested from an early age due to her grandmother who practiced mediumship, astrology, and tarot-card reading. As an adult she helped run a community group that held workshops in these same subjects. Although her perspective has changed from her younger years, when she ‘used to believe everything,’ she ended up studying Internet communities involved in neopaganism and Wicca.

Before concluding this chapter on how experience spurs scientists into daring to research anomalous events, I should also point out that some people take the position that experience is actually more important than science, at least in terms of convincing people to accept the paranormal as real. Tami Simon, in the editorial introduction to *Measuring the Immeasurable: The Scientific Case for Spirituality* (2008:ix-x), states, ‘I am not a person who needs science or research to convince me of the benefits of spiritual practice.’ However, Simon continues to explain that science is useful for legitimating the use of spiritual practices in the work of medical professionals, and for refining such practices.

Paul Rademacher, director of The Monroe Institute, although supportive of the use of science at TMI, said to me that we tend to think that something is real if we can prove it by science, but experience comes first. In his case, when he had a construction accident as a young man, he had the experience of breaking through the pain and into a state of peace, in which he was surrounded by a being of light. Later, while in the ministry, he heard a clear, precise voice go off in his head, telling him of a book he must read. Through such spiritual guidance he ended up at TMI. Skip Atwater, also at TMI, had numerous

out-of-body experiences as a child. It was these experiences, plus his involvement with remote viewing in the military, that left him with little doubt about the reality of such phenomena.

Finally I am reminded of a Spiritualist who said to me, after hearing about this research of mine, 'Let's leave the scientists out of it.' As you might guess, I have no intention of doing that. However, as a (social) scientist, I am still very much interested in learning from people's subjective anomalous experiences.

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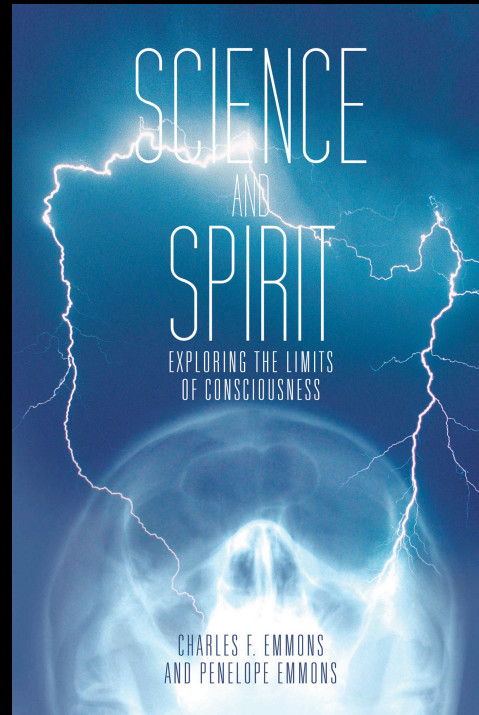
### Biographies

**Charles Emmons** is a sociologist at Gettysburg College and author of books on spiritual and paranormal topics. His latest book, coauthored by his wife, Penelope Emmons, is *Science and Spirit: Exploring the Limits of Consciousness* (2012). They also collaborated on *Guided by Spirit: A Journey into the Mind of the Medium* (2003). Other publications by Charlie include



*Chinese Ghosts and ESP: A Study of Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences* (1982), and *At the Threshold: UFOs, Science and the New Age* (1997). **Penelope Emmons** is an ordained minister and medium. She has given spiritual counseling (readings) for more than twenty years. Penelope has a BS degree in Education and a Masters in Social Work from Temple University. She has a private counseling and coaching practice in Gettysburg, PA.

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