

Leonora Piper Spiritualisms One White Crow

Professor William James of Harvard was one of America's greatest psychologist – philosophers and was one of the founders of the Pragmatic school of thought — that only those principles that can be demonstrated not only theoretically, by deduction, but practically, by use, deserve intelligent consideration.

And yet this unbending pragmatist was converted to a belief in psychic phenomena to such a degree that he became one of the founding members of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR).

The medium who accomplished this seemingly impossible conversion was a woman named Leonora Piper, who was the reason that Professor James coined the adage about “the one white crow that proves that not all crows are black.” She became to him the one honest Spiritualist medium whose mere existence refuted the charge that all mediums are fakes.



Born Leonora Symonds in Nashua, New Hampshire in 1859, Leonora showed mediumistic ability at an early age, her first recorded experience taking place when she was around eight and playing in the family's garden. As she played, she heard a familiar voice whisper in her ear, saying, “It's Aunt Sara, not dead, but with you, still.” Understandably frightened, Leonora ran into the house and told her mother what had just happened. It turned out that her Aunt Sara had just died, a fact which supposedly didn't come to the family's attention until sometime later.

Other, similar incidents continued to occur throughout Leonora's childhood and adolescence, but she did her best to ignore them. It wasn't until she married Boston shopkeeper William Piper and settled into their new home in the Beacon Hill area of the city that she began to take her gifts seriously. After the birth of her first daughter, Alta, Leonora began to suffer from recurring pain which seemed to be related to an old childhood injury. The pain worsened following the birth of her second daughter, Minerva, and in an effort to relieve it, she agreed to accompany her father-in-law to the home of J.R. Cook, a blind medium who specialized in “curing” illness through psychic means.

According to Alta Piper, who wrote an extensive biography about her mother in 1929, whilst visiting Cook, Leonora slipped into trance, during which she received a spirit message from the deceased son of a local judge. Leonora dutifully passed on the message to him. On hearing it, he told her that it was the most accurate spirit message that he had received in the 30 years that he had been a follower of spiritualism.



LEONORA PIPER, CIRCA 1870s.

The incident marked the start of Leonora's public career as a medium. She soon began giving readings in her home, the startling accuracy of which drew sitters from well beyond the city limits of Boston. Word of her reputation eventually reached the ears of William James, renowned psychologist and brother of expatriate writer Henry James (The Golden Bowl, Daisy Miller, The Bostonians) and spiritual seeker.



WILLIAM JAMES, PIONEERING PSYCHOLOGIST, PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHER, AND LIFELONG SPIRITUAL SEEKER

James' interest in spiritualism surfaced after his marriage to Alice Gibbens in 1878, with whom he had two sons. Following the death of their second son Herman around 1885, James, like so many bereaved parents before him, turned to spiritualism for comfort. The renowned philosopher had already begun an exploration of so-called spiritual matters some years before. A man known and even

revered by some for his pragmatic approach to philosophical questions, James had always harbored a sympathetic attitude toward the idea of spirit contact, and on visiting the deathbed of his friend, [Frederic Myers](#), who had served as the president of the American Society for Psychical Research, had asked Myers to attempt to make contact after his death. James never received the desired messages from beyond. Disappointed, he still continued to pursue his interest in spiritualism, stating that it “one needs only to find one white crow in order to prove that not all crows are black.” Soon after making that statement, he found his “white crow”...in Leonora Piper.



FREDERIC MYERS, WILLIAM JAMES' FRIEND IN LIFE, A DISAPPOINTMENT IN DEATH

James first heard of Leonora Piper through his mother-in-law, who visited the Boston medium under an assumed name not only to maintain secrecy as to her true identity, but to prevent Leonora from digging up personal facts about her life that she might later attribute to her supposed mediumistic abilities. But her secrecy had no effect on Leonora's abilities. On visiting Leonora, Mrs. Gibbens was astounded when the medium purportedly passed on several messages from spirit which referenced a number of her relatives, living and dead, and which contained astonishingly accurate details which Mrs. Gibbens was convinced Leonora could not have known by “any normal means.” Impressed and excited, Mrs. Gibbens returned home and gushed about Leonora to her son-in-law who, by his own account, derided her for her credulity. He called her a “victim of a medium's trickery” and even went so far as to demonstrate to her the many ways in which someone like Leonora Piper was able to fool gullible members of the public. But Mrs. Gibbens would not be swayed, and made a second visit to Leonora's home, this time accompanied by James' sister-in-law, who came away equally impressed. Frustrated by the women's insistence on Leonora's authenticity, and now somewhat curious to meet her himself, James made his own trek to the Piper parlor for a reading.



SPIRIT TRUMPET, ONE OF MANY MEDIUMISTIC “PROPS” USED IN 19TH CENTURY SEANCES AND EVEN IN THOSE OF TODAY. BUT A PROP NOT FOUND IN LEONORA PIPER'S PARLOR.

Later, writing about that first meeting with Leonora Piper, James remarked on his surprised at finding her parlor devoid of the usual array of mediumistic props. There were no spirit trumpets or bells for spirits to talk through or to ring, no spirit cabinet, no red-tinted lamps to cast an eerie glow on the proceedings and trick sitters' eyes into seeing things that weren't there. There was only Leonora Piper, a demure, diminutive woman, who told James and the several other sitters present to sit wherever they wished before warning them not to expect to witness anything of a sensational nature during the reading. She was not the sort of medium who made things fly about the room, she explained, and there would be no manifestations of spirit images appearing before them. She would simply do what she always did, which was to go into trance and allow her spirit guides (or “controls”) to take over and give messages, following which she would awaken with no memory of what had taken place.



THE MEDIUM AT THE HEIGHT OF HER FAME

James was impressed with what occurred. Writing about it later on, he said, “My impression after this first visit was that Mrs. Piper was either possessed of supernatural powers or knew the members of my wife's family by sight and had by some lucky coincidence become acquainted with such a multitude of their domestic circumstances as to produce the startling impression which she did. My later knowledge of her sittings and personal acquaintance with her has led me to absolutely reject the latter explanation, and to believe that she has supernatural powers.” Following that initial visit, James made appointments for 25 of his friends to visit Leonora, thus hoping to test her veracity regarding other sitters. He was not disappointed in his quest. For the next two years, the “pragmatic philosopher” continued to test the Boston medium, even hiring a private detective (without telling Leonora) to follow her around and make certain that she wasn't gleaning information about her sitters through surreptitious means.

The one caveat for James throughout his testing of Leonora was her use of an alleged spirit control who identified himself as a deceased French physician called “Dr. Phinuit”, but since “Phinuit” was never able to give a satisfactory account of his earthly life, seemed to know next to nothing about medicine, and couldn’t even speak French, James concluded that the “spirit” was most likely a sub-conscious aspect of Leonora’s personality, the fact of which did not detract from his belief in the lady’s “tremendous” abilities as a medium.



WILLIAM JAMES, THE PRAGMATIC PHILOSOPHER WHO INTRODUCED LEONORA PIPER TO THE PUBLIC

In the mid-1880s, James took Leonora to England, where he introduced her to some of the great psychical researchers of the day, including Sir Oliver William Holmes, Henry Sedgwick, and FWH Meyers of the British SPR. According to all accounts, Leonora’s mediumistic performance in England was every bit as impressive as it had been back in the States, despite being kept under close, constant watch and even allowing her mail to be open and read as proof against fraudulence. Surprisingly, her success in England was met with some instances of scorn once she returned to Boston. After giving an interview in which she stated that she could not be sure whether she was actually being controlled by spirits during trance or whether her abilities were a result of ESP, The New York Herald ran a piece titled “Mrs. Leonora Piper’s Plain Statement” in which they pointed to the statement as a confession of fraudulence on Leonora’s part. At one point, in an effort to test the depth of her trance, Leonora was subjected to harsh treatment from several psychical investigators not associated with James which resulted in “a badly blistered tongue”, according to her daughter Alta’s subsequent biographical account of the incident.

Leonora returned to England in 1908 where she was one of several mediums who took part in the famous [cross correspondence](#) sessions, during which each medium (all of whom were from different areas, and some from other countries) allegedly received bits and pieces of spirit messages which made no sense on their own, but which, when connected, comprised a coherent message which was supposed to prove the validity of the respective spirit communications. The pressure of her involvement with the sessions had a debilitating effect on Leonora who returned to her home in Boston to find that she had lost her mediumistic abilities, a state which lasted until 1911. When her abilities finally did resurface, she found that she was only able to access them through automatic writing. She was never again able to go into trance.



LEONORA PIPER, POST-INVESTIGATIONS, CIRCA 1940s

Leonora Piper died in 1950, her name still associated with that of William James and the investigations she had undergone under his scrutiny. By that time, James was long dead, having passed away in 1910, but not before writing extensively about Leonora, his “white crow”, and declaring, as his final verdict on the case, that she “unquestionably displayed supernormal knowledge” of facts which could not be otherwise known to her, but that he remained unconvinced that it was the result of spirit agency.