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ARTICLES



D. Scott Rogo
1950-1990. One of the most widely respected writer-journalists covering the field of parapsychology. Attended the University of Cincinnati and then San Fernando Valley State College from which he graduated in 1972 with a B.A. in music. Served as a visiting researcher at both the Psychical Research Foundation (then in Durham, North Carolina) and the (former) Division of Parapsychology and Psychophysics of Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn, New York. He published three papers reporting experimental research on the ganzfeld and conducted a study on personality factors of successful ganzfeld subjects. Scott was also active in field investigations of hauntings and poltergeists. Not only did he produce many books and popular articles, but in addition he published full papers in all of the professional, English-language, refereed parapsychology journals. Scott was also consulting editor for *Fate* where he wrote a regular column on parapsychology. Tragically, on August 18, 1990, Scott was found stabbed to death in his home.

Psychical Research and the Survival Controversy (Part 4)

Mediumship and the Case for Survival

- D. Scott Rogo -

THE SPR's great debate over the nature of apparitions occupied the attention of the Cambridge group from the 1880s well into the 1890s. While an *a priori* case for survival could be built on their data, these case studies certainly did not constitute the type of hard evidence for immortality for which they were searching. So they began looking in different directions for this evidence. It was by way of this expanded approach to the survival issue that the SPR founders were led back to the spiritualist movement, despite their distaste for the fraud they knew was rife within its ranks. The founders of the SPR had all investigated spiritualist mediums during their early studies, and they were ambivalent about their findings. They were encouraged, however, when [William James](#), the brilliant and esteemed Harvard psychologist/philosopher contacted them in 1885 with stunning news: he claimed to have found a genuine trance medium through whom he had spoken with his own, purportedly deceased, relatives.

Testimony from such a critically minded source couldn't be ignored, and a new chapter in parapsychology's search for proof was about to open.

Mrs [Leonore Piper](#) wasn't exactly the picture of a spiritualist wonder-worker. She was a middle-class and married Bostonian who had lived an eminently normal life. Her introduction to the spiritualist movement came only after she suffered some medical problems as a result of an accident. Her father-in-law suggested that she see a prominent blind clairvoyant in Boston to hear what he would have to say about possible treatment. It was during her first consultation that something strange occurred. Mrs Piper later explained that as she sat listening to the psychic, 'his face seemed to become smaller and smaller, receding as it were into the distance, until gradually I lost consciousness of my surroundings'. She had apparently entered into a spontaneous trance, which surprised her since she had previously entertained no interest in spiritualism.[4] She started attending some of Dr Cocke's regular séances anyway, and soon discovered that she, too, had trance ability. It wasn't long before she was the talk of the spiritualist community, since during her trances her clients seemed capable of making contact with their deceased friends and relatives.

[4] Piper, Alta. *The Life and Work of Mrs Piper*. London: Kegan Paul, 1929.

Mrs Piper was only 25 years old at the time and her burgeoning mediumship probably wouldn't have come to scientific attention at all were it not for a fortunate development. William James's mother-in-law heard about her, visited the young psychic, and was so impressed by her performance that she guided James's attention to her. James and his wife sat with Mrs Piper shortly thereafter and were astounded by the accurate messages they received.

James attended several sittings with Mrs Piper from 1885 to 1886, and several of the incidents he witnessed especially impressed him. During one sitting for example, the psychologist and his brother were told that their aunt (who was living in New York) had just died that very morning at 12.30. James knew nothing of the matter but as he later wrote, 'On reaching home an hour later I found a telegram as follows - Aunt Kate passed away a few minutes after midnight'.

The SPR was naturally impressed by stories such as these, so in 1887 they decided to take action. They sent one of their most critical investigators to Boston to look into the case and report back to them.

[Richard Hodgson](#) was a keen and rigidly sceptical investigator but he was also passionately devoted to psychical research. He set sail for Boston and ended up spending the next eighteen years of his life studying Mrs Piper's mediumship.

Richard Hodgson came to the United States in part to take over the reins of the American branch of the SPR, which William James had helped to organize. His first major project was to take complete charge of the Piper case. His plan was to book her sittings himself, study her background, and make sure she wasn't secretly studying her sitters. He even had her trailed by detectives. He also insisted that many of the sitters he booked remain anonymous to her. Despite these formidable controls, the quality of the Piper mediumship remained impressive. She would merely sit down with the client, suffer some minor convulsions and enter a trance, and soon a curious personality who called himself 'Dr [Phinuit](#)' would speak through her and act as master-of-ceremonies for the session. Hodgson was never much impressed by Dr Phinuit since the persona's French was practically non-existent and he could never give a very credible account of his terrestrial life. Phinuit actually seemed to be a split-off portion of Mrs Piper's own mind, or so Hodgson argued. But despite his dubious credentials, Dr Phinuit was often brilliant at bringing through veridical messages from the dead.

Hodgson later reported that at his first sitting at Mrs Piper's home, Dr Phinuit successfully described and helped bring through some of his own departed friends. The control especially mentioned an old school friend and called him by his proper name. 'He says you went to school together,' he explained to Hodgson. 'He goes on jumping-frogs and laughs. He says he used to get the better of you. He had convulsions before his death struggles. He went off into a sort of spasm. You were not there.'



Mrs Leonore Piper was the 'one white crow' who proved spirit communication to William James satisfaction. (Mary Evans Picture Library)

All of this rather trivial information was correct, and it alerted Dr Hodgson to the fact that he was being confronted by a case of epoch-making potential.

The communications that followed the appearance of his old friend impressed him even more. Hodgson was from Australia and many years before his move to England he had fallen in love with a young woman. Marriage never entered his life, however, and the woman passed on long before the time of the present sittings. Hodgson was astounded when Phinuit began describing the young woman, and she was able to bring through several deeply personal messages which, more than anything else, convinced Hodgson of the authenticity of the Piper mediumship.

Despite the startling nature of the evidence, Dr Hodgson was not sure that he was actually making contact with the dead. It was true that the messages seemed to be coming from the world of the dead, and he spent months supervising the sittings of other clients whose personal experiences were leading them to the same view. Yet like so many of SPR founders, Hodgson found himself grappling with the same old telepathy versus spirit communication debate that was plaguing the study of apparitions. It was certainly reasonable to assume that Mrs Piper's messages came from the dead; but it was also possible that she was reading the minds of the sitters and gathering up all the pertinent information. He reasoned that this information could then be used to help build up perfect (but bogus) personations of the dead. This line of reasoning was tempting since Mrs Piper's chief control actually seemed to be bogus. It didn't take too much of a leap in faith and logic to assume that *all* the spirits that regularly came through her also had their psychological roots within her own mind. Hodgson at first actively favoured this view; which he put forth in his first major paper on the case.[5]

[5] Hodgson, Richard. A record of certain phenomena of trance. *Proceedings: Society for Psychical Research*, 1892, 8, 1-67.

He was not the only person to receive such evidential messages, since many of the sitters he booked in Boston reported similar success. So in order to test Mrs Piper under even more stringent conditions, Hodgson and his colleagues decided that she should go to England and sit for the SPR leaders in person. They would then be in a position to supervise her closely for themselves. The trip would also allow the researchers to be sure that Mrs Piper was not secretly learning about her sitters' backgrounds, since she had never visited England before, and could not have had access to information about them. The sitters in this case were, of course, the researchers themselves.

Mrs Piper sailed for England in 1889 and was met at the docks by F. W. H. Myers and [Oliver Lodge](#), an influential physicist at the University of Liverpool and one of the SPR's leading lights. They carefully controlled every move she made and even, with her consent, opened her mail to make sure no one as 'feeding' her information. Despite these incumbrances, she gave séances for the SPR both in Liverpool and Cambridge with outstanding success.

It would be impossible to go into great detail about these important sittings. Lodge was perhaps the most impressed with Mrs Piper, partly due to his own experiences with her.[6] The following is a report Lodge filed about a single incident that occurred during one of his first sittings. Remember that this is actually just one episode which occurred during a more lengthy session:

[6] Myers, F. W. H.; Lodge, Oliver; Leaf, W.; James, William. A record of observations of certain phenomena of trance. *Proceedings: Society for Psychical Research*, 1890, 6, 436-659.

It happens that an uncle of mine in London, now quite an old man, and one of a surviving three out of a very large family, had a twin brother who died some twenty or more years ago. I interested him generally in the subject, and wrote to ask if he would lend me some relic of his brother. By morning post on a certain day I received a curious old gold watch, which this brother had worn and been fond of, and that same morning, no one in the house having seen it or knowing anything about it, I handed it to Mrs Piper when in a state of trance.

I was told almost immediately that it had belonged to one of my uncles - one that had been very fond of Uncle Robert, the name of the survivor - that the watch was now in possession of this same Uncle Robert, with whom he was anxious to communicate. After some difficulty and many wrong attempts Dr Phinuit caught the name, Jerry, short for Jeremiah, and said emphatically, as if a third person was speaking, 'This is my watch, and Robert is my brother, and I am here. Uncle Jerry, my watch'...

Having thus ostensibly got into communication through some means or other with what purported to be a deceased relative, whom I had indeed known slightly in his later years of blindness, but of whose early life I knew nothing, I pointed out to him that to make Uncle Robert aware of his presence it would be well to recall trivial details of their boyhood, all of which I would faithfully report.

He quite caught the idea, and proceeded during several successive sittings ostensibly to instruct Dr Phinuit to mention a number of little things such as would enable his brother to recognise him ...

'Uncle Jerry' recalled episodes such as swimming the creek when they were boys together; and running some risk of getting drowned; killing a cat in Smiths field; the possession of a small rifle, and of a long peculiar skin, like a snake-skin, which he thought was not in the possession of Uncle Robert.

All these facts have been more or less completely verified.

The only problem with evidence such as this is that Mrs Piper liked to hold the hands of her sitters. It was suggested by some sceptics that somehow the sitter might be communicating information to the psychic by making unconscious and subtle muscular movements. This idea was especially championed by [Andrew Lang](#), an early SPR member and a pioneering anthropologist and folklorist. He engaged Lodge in a prolonged debate over this issue in the SPR's publications. Lang was sceptical of Mrs Piper, but even he finally admitted that the 'snake-skin' reference cited above was just too good to be dismissed.

Several of the Society's leaders were able to work with Mrs Piper during her trip. They filed a joint report on their work with her in which they came to four main conclusions: (1) that there was no reason to suspect Mrs Piper's good faith or honesty (2) that Dr Phinuit was probably a secondary personality of the psychic's own mind, (3) that he often 'faked' his way through some of the sittings, but that (4) on a good day he could bring through voluminous amounts of highly evidential material. The SPR researchers would not, however, commit themselves as to whether these messages emanated from the dead. This was an issue on which they were hopelessly divided. Sir Oliver Lodge preferred this theory to any other about the source of Mrs Piper's communications, but the telepathic hypothesis loomed far and wide and some researchers favoured it.

Even though the SPR could not agree about the source of Mrs Piper's communications, its leaders did not cease studying her formidable abilities. She returned to Boston in 1890 where she once again worked under Hodgson's auspices. Although the reasons were not clear, it now seemed that the quality of her mediumship was improving. Some of her sittings were so impressive that the telepathic hypothesis had to be stretched widely to account for them. This was certainly the opinion of the Revd and Mrs S. W. Sutton, who first attended sittings with Mrs Piper in 1893.[7] Their hope was to establish communication with their little daughter Katherine, who had died only six weeks before. The Suttons were intelligent people and they brought along a note-taker supplied by Dr Hodgson, so today we still have a complete stenographic record of what transpired during their critical sitting of 8 December. This was an occasion on which several departed members of the Sutton family spoke through Mrs Piper, including their daughter. The sitting is so crucial to understanding the psychology of the Piper mediumship that an edited version of the sitting is transcribed below.

[7] Hodgson, Richard. A further record of observations of certain phenomena of trance. *Proceedings: Society for Psychological Research*, 1898, 284-582.

This séance began as Mrs Piper took hold of the note-taker's hands. Her trance followed in short order and then Mrs Sutton took the psychic's hands in her own. It didn't take the enigmatic Dr Phinuit very long before he was able to bring through her daughter. He almost began the sitting with the words, 'A little child is coming through'. The Suttons could then hear the control coaxing the child to come to him, and he spoke as if he were their daughter. This was typical of the control, who often proxied in this manner. He reached for a medal and a band of buttons that the Suttons had placed on the séance table, and then spoke:

I want this - I want to bite it.
Quick, I want to put them in my
mouth ...

I will get her talk to you in a
minute. Who is Frank in the
body?...

A lady is here who passed out of
the body with tumour in the bowels
...

She has the child ... She is
bringing it to me. Who is Dodo?
Speak to me quickly. I want you to
call Dodo. Tell Dodo I am happy.
Cry for me no more [Phinuit puts
his hands to his throat.] No more
sore throat any more Papa, speak
to me. Can not you see me? I am
not dead, I am living. I am happy
with Grandma. [Phinuit now
speaks for himself:] Here are two
more. One, two, three here ... one
older and one younger than Kakie.
That is a boy. The one that came
first. The little one calls the lady,
Auntie I wish you could see these
children. [Addressing Mr Sutton, to
whom he turns:] You do a great
deal of good in the body [To Mrs
Sutton:] He is a dear man. Was
this little ones tongue very dry?
She keeps showing me her
tongue. Her name is Katherine.
She calls herself Kakie. She
passed out last. Tell Dodo Kakie is
in spiritual body. Where is horsey?
Big horsey, not this little one. Dear
Papa, take me wide [to ride].
[Speaking for Katherine:] Do you
see Kakie? The pretty white
flowers you put on me I have here.
I took their little souls out and keep
them with me. Papa, want to wide
horsey. Every day I go to see
horsey. I like that horsey. I go to
wide I am with you every day ...

I was so hot, my head was so hot.

She used to bite it.
The buttons also. To bite the
buttons was forbidden. He exactly
imitated her arch manner.

We do not know. My uncle Frank
died a few years before. We were
much attached. Possibly Phinuit
was confused and my uncle was
trying to communicate.

My friend, Mrs C. died of ovarian
tumour.

The name for her brother George.

She had pain and distress of the
throat and tongue.

My mother had been dead many
years.

Correct.
Both were boys.

Not her aunt.

Her tongue was paralysed, and
she suffered much with it to the
end.
Correct

I gave her a little horse. Probably
refers to a toy cart and horse she
used to like.

Phinuit describes lilies of the
valley, which were the flowers we
placed on her casket. She pleaded
this all through her illness.

I asked if she remembered
anything after she was brought
downstairs.

Correct.

Some further messages were received and Kakie referred to her sister Eleanor by name. Then, to the Sutton's great surprise, the communicator begin singing a song that was sung to her before she died. The little communicator urged her parents to sing along with her, and the couple complied. While they were singing they could hear a soft, childlike voice coming out of the psychic's mouth and intoning the precise

words with them. Two stanzas were sung before the sitting could progress. Then the child sang yet another song she had known in life through the entranced medium. It actually seemed as if the child was talking directly through Mrs Piper and was no longer using the control as a proxy. What so impressed the Suttons was that these two songs were the only two the child knew completely. Phinuit seemed to re-insert himself at this point, and the sitting continued:

Dr Phinuit

Where is Dinah? I want Dinah.

I want Bagie.
I want Bagie to bring me my
Dinah. I want to go to Bagie. I want
Bagie. I see Bagie an the time. Tell
Dodo when you see him that I love
him. Dear Dodo. He used to march
with me. He put me way up.

Dodo did sing to me. That was a
horrid body. I have a pretty body
now. Tell Grandma I love her. I
want her to know I live. Grandma
does know it, Marmie - Great
grandma, Marmie.

Mrs Sutton's Annotations

Dinah was an old black rag-doll,
not with us.

Her name for her sister Margaret.

Correct.

We called her Great Grandmother
Marmie, but *she* always called her
Grammie. Both Grandmother and
Great Grandmother were then
living.

With evidence such as this pouring in, Dr Hodgson found himself doubting the idea that telepathy could explain Mrs Piper's utterances. Even the somewhat questionable but crudely lovable Dr Phinuit began proving himself a bit. But it wasn't until one of Hodgson's own friends died and began communicating through Mrs Piper that he finally changed his entire verdict about the Piper mediumship. This new development came in 1892 during a crucial stage in the mediumship.

Before 1892 the Piper mediumship was characterized by two features. She always delivered her messages by trance speech and her transition to the trance state was accompanied by fits and spasms. This was the stage of the mediumship dominated by Dr Phinuit's ever-present personality, much to the chagrin of those researchers who considered him nothing but a sub-personality of the medium's. But in 1892 Mrs Piper began developing (under Hodgson's guidance) automatic writing which soon superseded the trance speech. The transition to the trance state also became gentler and more facile during this period. The real change in the trance state came, however; with the appearance of a new trance-personality who replaced Dr Phinuit as the psychic's primary control. George Pellew (whom Hodgson called 'George Pelham' throughout his writings on the case) was a young and philosophically minded friend of the researcher's. He had sat with Mrs Piper himself once before his death and long remained intrigued with the problems of trance mediumship. His death came in 1892 as a result of an accident, and it wasn't long before he started communicating through Mrs Piper. He soon took control of the Piper trance state altogether.

The appearance of the Pelham control also heralded a new dimension in the quality of the mediumship. It became more focused and consistently evidential. Hodgson also used the Pelham persona to test the possible spiritistic basis of the entire mediumship. During the next several months, he introduced 150 sitters to the séances, of whom 30 had known Pelham during his life. The Pelham control was able to accurately recognize 29 of them. His only lapse came when he failed to recognize a young woman he had only known as a child. Most of the sitters were able to talk and reminisce with the Pelham personality as though he were right there in the flesh, and the quality of his many trance conversations was certainly equal to that of the Sutton sittings. Hodgson was so impressed by this new personality that he issued another report on Mrs Piper in 1898 in which he outlined his reasons for converting to the spiritistic theory.[8]

[8] Ibid.

The subsequent history of the Piper mediumship is no less imposing or dramatic. She underwent several more changes in control, and when Dr Hodgson died suddenly in 1905, he subsequently communicated through her. Mrs Piper's mediumship began to deteriorate in 1911 and she lost her trance state altogether, though the automatic writing continued for several more years. She held sittings well into the 1920s and died in 1950.

Perhaps it seems by now that the entire case for survival could be based on the Piper mediumship. Even with such high evidential quality, though, some of the SPR old guard were still sceptical of the spiritistic hypothesis. For example, several of her 'communicators' still turned out to be fictional characters and even the most credible communicators - who should have known better - supported the legitimacy of the blatantly fictitious ones. Even the highly regarded Pelham personality could not discuss philosophical issues very well through Mrs Piper; despite the fact that the subject was very close to his heart when he was alive. It was in hopes of clarifying some of these problems that the SPR was always on the lookout for new and gifted trance mediums. This development was certainly fortuitous in one respect, since many of the original SPR founders were beginning to pass on. It was now up to a second generation of researchers to continue with their work.