

Leslie Kean

Why Would a Journalist Investigate the Paranormal?

As an investigative reporter, I like to focus on large mysteries that are well documented but remain unexplained. Sometimes labelled as “paranormal” or on the fringe (which I have come to see are misnomers), they can be controversial. The research that most fascinates me challenges, or even threatens, the established scientific world view. But oddly enough, this is one of the reasons I find it compelling. Can we get to the bottom of these issues? If not, can we at least sort out fact from fiction and offer the public clear, uncontaminated results that leave conspiracy theories, denials of real phenomena, and personal belief systems out of it? For me, the larger questions about reality offer more payoff than coverage of the day-to-day struggles of humanity, which are vitally important but are handled beautifully by hordes of other reporters.

It is generally not known that there are qualified scientists who have documented phenomena that are not supposed to be “real,” phenomena that some of their contemporary colleagues claim are literally impossible based on our understanding of space travel or physics. The problem is that the phenomena are actually very real, and there is no way around that. When you have witnessed such “impossible” events yourself, as I have, these denials from skeptics are especially difficult to ignore. It goes without saying that genuine, open-minded skepticism is certainly positive, and all research must be scrutinized and debated. But I’m talking about closed-minded, irrational dismissals that create a strange sort of cognitive dissonance.

Given the extraordinary and complex nature of these topics, I have been committed to maintaining a rigorous and one-pointed focus on my areas of study over a long period of time. For about twenty years, I have been a freelancer, not beholden to assignments from an editor or to the limiting attitudes of the establishment media. Due to supplemental sources of income, it was logistically possible for me to stop working for the public radio station that employed me in the 1990s. During this earlier time, I had reported on a range of “normal” topics both in mainstream print media and while producing and hosting a daily investigative news show. For example, I developed an expertise on Burma’s struggle for democracy, traveling there to return with exclusive stories, which were widely published, and in 1994 I co-authored *Burma’s Revolution of the Spirit*.¹



Unidentified Aerial Phenomena

But in 1999 everything changed. I received a copy of a 90-page study by retired Generals, space experts, and scientists in France about unidentified aerial phenomena—objects in the sky that displayed technology we don’t have and that behaved as if under intelligent control. These distinguished authors presented their “extraterrestrial hypothesis” as a rational and viable explanation for the officially documented phenomena. This was unprecedented coming from such a group. I thought it was a big news story and felt that I had a scoop, having received an advance copy before its public release. In 2000, I wrote a lengthy news analysis piece based on the French report for the Sunday *Boston Globe*,² where I had previously published articles on Burma and other issues, and it was well received. At this point, there was no turning back.

But soon I would learn about the systemic resistance among American policy makers, which profoundly affects the attitudes of scientists, to taking this subject seriously enough to pursue official investigations. Even the very best cases, involving aviation personnel or police officers concerned about potential safety issues, are ignored. When pressured, the FAA provides bogus explanations (note the case at O’Hare Airport in 2006 as an example³). This contrasted with the approach in France and other countries. And where does scientific curiosity enter the picture? Thus began my in-depth investigation into evidence for the existence of UFOs, with the goal of clarifying what we know and what we don’t know about them. I also hoped to gain an understanding of why the data is shunned by the establishment.

For the next decade, I reviewed hundreds of official case reports and government documents; interviewed pilots, military personnel, and government officials; and investigated cases. I published stories in mainstream media, organized large press conferences in Washington, contributed to documentaries, and was the plaintiff in a landmark Freedom of Information Act lawsuit against NASA concerning the 1965 crash of an unidentified object in Pennsylvania.⁴

Like the French experts who initially piqued my interest, as well as government agencies in other countries that investigate credible reports, I was able to conclude that there is solid evidence for the existence of remarkable unknown physical objects in our skies. We have not yet determined what they are, why they are here, or where they come from, but the reality of *something* manifesting for more than 70 years is indisputable. My work culminated in the 2010 publication of *UFOs*:

Generals, Pilots, and Government Officials Go on the Record,⁵ a *New York Times* bestseller. Understandably, scientists find UFOs difficult to study for a host of reasons, and more hard data is needed, as they point out. But the data we do have are worthy of serious consideration, and it is unfortunate that UFOs have been so marginalized, especially by those searching for signs of extraterrestrial life.

Why would I want to risk my reputation taking this on? The disregard for compelling evidence of something of this magnitude, and the distaste it has generated within the scientific world, actually fueled my reporting—it gave me more impetus to inform the official world about the facts. And because of my serious and rational approach as a journalist, my reputation has only grown. I believe the entrenched avoidance and denials from the establishment border on the absurd, although fear of the implications of unknown objects operating beyond our control is understandable. (Unfortunately, UFO enthusiasts are their own worst enemies due to their unprovable conspiracy theories and other claims about “ET” that push the topic to the fringe, making it easier for the very people they want to influence to reject it out of hand.)

This time I witnessed the impossible with my own eyes and didn't have to rely only on reports from other observers.

Survival of consciousness

The question of the survival of consciousness after bodily death has also been a longtime interest, percolating in the background while I worked on UFOs. In 2007 I became an associate producer for a documentary on this topic, which offered me exposure to some outstanding cases and a range of experts in the United States and abroad. I traveled to Glasgow, Scotland, to meet with the family of a boy named Cameron who, when he was two and a half, began talking about a past life on an island called “Barra” where he said planes landed on the beach. He described the house he lived in with his siblings, his black and white dog, and numerous details about the location. Cameron’s memories became an obsession, generating much longing for his “Barra Mum.” His mother Norma, who had never been to Barra and could not explain how her son knew anything about it, contacted psychiatrist Jim Tucker, an expert on child reincarnation cases at the University of Virginia. Eventually they took Cameron to Barra, a remote island off the coast of Scotland, and with the help of a local historian, were able to find what they determined was his “previous house.” Cameron’s strong emotional reaction at the home was captured on film.⁶ It seemed as if the small boy was actually remembering a life lived before this one, and this aroused my curiosity, especially after meeting the family and talking to them myself.

I also assisted with interviews of two physical mediums—those who facilitate the manifestation of extraordinary physical phenomena while in a trance state that they say is generated by forces coming from the “spirit world.” Their phenomena included the creation of moving lights, levitated objects, materialized “living” and moving hands, unusual images on factory-sealed photographic film, and detailed information ostensibly provided from deceased relatives. More than 500 sessions, known as the Scole Experiments, included hundreds of witnesses between 1993 and 1998 in the village of Scole, England, and in six other countries. With a stated purpose of demonstrating the reality of life after death, the sessions were scrutinized for three years by three qualified outside investigators from the Society for Psychical Research in the UK who were experienced in exposing fraud. They conducted and controlled many experiments at the Scole sittings themselves and documented the events as genuine in a lengthy, scholarly report.⁷ The mediums I met seemed absolutely credible. Yet this was so difficult to fathom that I became determined to experience these or similar astonishing phenomena myself someday.

And that time came. Beginning in 2012, I was finally able to focus exclusively on an investigation into evidence suggestive of survival past death. Approached with the same rigor as UFOs, my new book, *Surviving Death: A Journalist Investigates Evidence of an Afterlife*,⁸ examines evidence suggesting the possibility of survival through another puzzling and often disregarded body of research. Yet this investigation offered me something new: an ability to test some of the phenomena through personal engagement with them. This time, I witnessed the impossible with my own eyes and didn’t have to rely only on reports from other observers. And I knew I could trust myself as the best source possible! I therefore became even more motivated to meet the challenge of those who claim that what I and so many others have seen aren’t real. This is simply an assault on the truth and a denial of the existence of powerful forces within Nature that are not yet understood. And a journalist’s job is to tell the truth, no matter how difficult the investigation may be.

I do not have the space here to describe adequately what the remarkable phenomena are which I witnessed or experienced directly (they are covered in my book), and the various explanations for them which I explore. My purpose here is to address why I write about these topics at all. But, some brief examples follow. I was directly exposed to people capable of perception that seemed to transcend the limitations of the physical brain. I was present when unexplainable forces, acting with apparent intelligence, were able to move objects at a distance. I received obscure and accurate details from possible discarnate beings communicating through people unknown to them, under conditions eliminating any possibility of fraud or cold readings.

My research was illuminating as well. I learned about clinically dead patients with no brain function who could “hear and see” while experiencing themselves as outside their bodies during cardiac arrest or under anesthesia, and who reported journeys to a sublime afterlife dimension. Numerous studies have been published in which no single explanation has been found

to explain the many facets of these life-changing near-death experiences. In addition, skeptical scientists have documented genuine phenomena such as materializations, independent voices, and levitations while working in the light with physical mediums under tightly controlled conditions in which fraud or misinterpretation were ruled out.

My explorations of these and other remarkable phenomena gave rise to many questions. For example, how can it be that an apparition returns a wave from a human observer? And, I witnessed the materialization of a “living” hand during sessions with British physical medium Stewart Alexander. I also touched this hand and held it in mine, on multiple occasions. (No, it could not have been hoaxed, as I address in my book.) How could this be possible, and by what mechanism does it occur? And what about a two-year-old American boy, born in 1998, remembering numerous specific names and facts about a previous life as a World War II pilot, along with specialized knowledge of airplanes from that period, which were later verified as accurate to the life of the person he claimed to have been? Without a doubt, whether one wants to accept survival after death or not, human beings have demonstrated the use of extraordinary psychic functioning, which I have witnessed myself on many occasions under a variety of circumstances. And I am not the only one to have done so.

Yet, there are vocal skeptics who still claim that none of this can happen and therefore doesn't. As a journalist who knows differently as a matter of *fact*, what is the best response to such ignorance?

It can't happen and therefore it doesn't happen

Take, for example, Sean M. Carroll, a theoretical physicist with a PhD from Harvard who is a professor at the California Institute of Technology. I became curious about his rather extreme perspective after watching a 2014 video of him debating the question of whether death is final, with Steven Novella, the president and co-founder of the New England Skeptical Society, as his partner.⁹ (These two materialists were up against NDE experts Eben Alexander and Raymond Moody.) I explored Carroll's blog¹⁰ and discovered repeated statements that what I have actually witnessed myself can't happen and therefore doesn't happen. We already know what the four forces are in nature (gravitation, electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces), he says, and none of them can explain ESP or the independent movement of physical objects. “If parapsychologists followed the methodology of scientific inquiry, they would look at what we know about the laws of physics, realize that their purported subject of study had already been ruled out, and within thirty seconds would declare themselves finished,” he states. Is this really the methodology of scientific inquiry? Don't investigate anything that appears to contradict what we already know?

Like other skeptics, Carroll believes that any and all studies of psychokinesis or telepathy are “pseudoscience” because we already know everything about all long-range forces able to influence macroscopic objects. “There is no room there for telekinesis etc. So, in the real world, it's not science,” he writes.

Electromagnetism doesn't bend spoons, he observes, because it would be detected. Well, it may not be electromagnetism, but there is indeed some force that can bend these implements. Is Carroll curious to find out what it is? He posits that there is no way for a human brain to send out a signal that could read a mind or bend a spoon... Really? I too doubted such things were possible, as any reasonable person would trained to think this way. But, I have witnessed the “paranormal” bending of forks—or perhaps “mangling” would be a better description—and I assume he hasn't.

At a conference in 2015, I gathered with a small group of friends early one evening, including an outstanding medium whom I had known previously. I watched her rub her fingers back and forth against four forks while she seemed to both focus and relax at the same time, chatting happily as if nothing unusual were going on. Tricky? No. I retrieved the dinner forks myself from our hotel dining room, which were the



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Fork bending witnessed by the author.

only ones used, and they were significantly thicker and stronger than average. I watched the process carefully and made videos of multiple bendings. The forks appeared to become like putty, allowing for easy manipulation. Two severely bent forks remain in my possession; I wonder if a laboratory would be interested in examining them for any molecular affects. The medium does not really understand how she does this, so maybe science could attempt to find out and explain what forces are in operation here.

But wait! “There are no new particles or forces relevant to your everyday life that science hasn’t found yet,” Carroll proclaims. He also states, as if it were fact, that the human mind cannot move objects without touching them. Yet I have seen the levitation of a small table in the light with no one touching it at all, which then turned upside down in the air and returned to the ground on its back, to cite only one example of the macro PK I’ve been fortunate to witness. Well, maybe it’s not the human mind that’s involved, as he says. But then what is it? Ironically, by denying the possibility that human consciousness or psi is at play here, Carroll may be opening the door to unknown forces *coming from some other dimension* in which the laws of physics don’t apply. The mediums who facilitate these extraordinary phenomena—and yes, genuine mental and physical mediums with real abilities *do* exist—are convinced that the forces involved in their phenomena are created by discarnate beings working with and through them. (This explanation does not apply to fork-bending or many other human-generated psychic phenomena.) If we accept that the more spectacular psychokinetic manifestations cannot possibly be caused by humans, as Carroll rules out, then maybe the mediums are right. It sounds as if the force *could* be coming from some kind of “other side” because it can’t be of this physical earth.

Dr. Julie Beischel and her colleagues at the Windbridge Institute, a research facility in Arizona, have established a methodology for testing mental mediumship, which, through quintuple-blind protocols, eliminates any possibility of fraud, cold reading, or rater bias. Some mediums have passed these rigorous tests and delivered accurate information for unknown sitters not even present, as shown in detailed peer-reviewed, published papers. But Carroll dismisses this too. “You don’t need to set up elaborate double-blind protocols to pass judgment on the abilities of purported psychics,” he declares. “Our knowledge of the laws of physics rules them out. Speculations to the contrary are not the provenance of bold visionaries, they are the dreams of crackpots.” Well, I guess William James, Sir William Crookes, Charles Richet, Sir Oliver Lodge, Gustave Geley, among our earliest investigators—and the many other highly qualified thinkers and skeptical scientists who have conducted rigorous studies documenting genuine mediumship under controlled conditions eliminating any possibility of fraud—are also part of the dreaming crackpot club. Speculations? Not in the published papers and detailed reports that have I read.

While researching mediumship for my book, I received a reading from an Irish medium over Skype who didn’t know my name, location, or anything whatsoever about me, as I describe in my book. I used a fake name, new email address, and provided absolutely no information she could use to identify me. We never spoke before the reading. Yet she delivered stunningly accurate, personal information that seemed to come from two deceased people I was close to who died in recent years. (I list the statements in my book.) These communicators demonstrated character traits that fit their very different personalities. How does one explain this? The approach of denying the very existence of psychic ability simply doesn’t work.

We can’t ignore data, no matter how bizarre or even threatening it may be.

I wonder how many scientists have deduced that anomalous phenomena are incompatible with the laws of physics. It seems almost silly, because the phenomena *do* exist and the world of atoms and molecules has not self-imploded as a result. Our scientific laws remain intact as they apply to the physical world, while these mysterious forces do their own thing, as if they stand outside physicality and operate under separate laws. Perhaps the confusion lies with the rigid belief that consciousness is simply a result of physiological processes, a product of neurons and biology, and therefore must be subject to the same laws as the physical brain. “There are no particles or forces that contain the information in your brain after you die,” Carroll states, so therefore survival is not possible. How can he be so certain about this?

The disconnect between these unexplained phenomena and physical reality reinforces the hypothesis proposed by other scientists that consciousness stands apart from the physical body and therefore apart from the physical world. There is much data from a range of fields suggesting that mind is not a derivative of matter, and some investigators propose that consciousness may in fact be more fundamental than matter. Another possibility is that there are still undiscovered aspects of matter that are not yet incorporated into our current understanding of the physical world and the laws that govern it. How is the mind able to affect the force of gravity? If it’s not the mind, then something else is causing the levitations that I and so many others have witnessed.

I’m not a scientist, but I would think that if consciousness is nonlocal, as so many expert researchers have postulated, this would be a viable way to explain these occurrences. Non-physical realms, or other dimensions, would naturally exist outside the confines of the physical world, and perhaps consciousness provides a bridge between the material and the non-material. In any case, it is these sorts of questions that compel me to investigate research relating to the nature of consciousness, and to keep an open mind.

I believe that it would be of great benefit if more scientists would seriously consider data that is on the cutting edge of science, rather than dismissing out of hand anything that conflicts with the currently accepted world view. This is how science makes progress. We can’t ignore data, no matter how bizarre or even threatening it may be. In the meantime, maybe journalists can help make these facts known to the larger world so that we can all enjoy the awe and transcendence that such mysteries generate, and we can all be reminded that we don’t understand reality as well as we might think.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Alan Clements and Leslie Kean, *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit: The Struggle for Democratic Freedom and Dignity*, Aperture Foundation, 1994
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The Helene Reeder Memorial Fund for Research into Life after Death

ANNOUNCEMENT FOR GRANTS 2017

The Helene Reeder Fund is pleased to announce the availability of grants for small- and medium-sized scientific research projects concerning the question of Life after Death. Grants will be awarded in the range of EUR 500 – 5000 maximum. The topic **Research into Life after Death** should constitute the main objective of the project.

Applications in English to be submitted by email to the HRF, at edg.muller@comhem.se and should include:

- detailed description of the project, including the objectives of the project,
- methodology,
- cost budget,
- timetable,
- plans to publish the results in some scientific journals,
- CV of the applicant,
- how the applicant plans to report back to the HRF about progress and result,
- any other financing than from HRF.

Applications should be received not later than 1st of October 2017. It is the intention of the HRF to evaluate the applications and to make decision regarding the grants before the end of December. Applicants will be notified by email after the decision and the grants will be payable during December. *For further information, please apply to the above email address.*
 Edgar E. Müller, Secretary of the Board, the Swedish Society for Parapsychological Research