

Looking Back to Duke

Sometimes, a look back is a good thing, if for no other reason than that you can see how mistakes were made in the past. Today, I am going to write a few words about the past, the time when ASUP was first hatched and the nest from which it flew. Duke University is known for a lot of things, not the least of which is a good basketball team, but the name Duke when mentioned in the paranormal research community, should be akin to gazing down onto the Holy Grail. It is, for better or worse, ground zero in our field and we can learn a lot from it.

But the true story does not begin with the Psychical Research Foundation (PRF) at Duke, in truth it goes back a bit further, to a court battle over the will of a man called James Kidd. Kidd was a lone prospector who called the Superstition Mountains home. In December, 1949, Kidd was reported missing from a single room motel in Phoenix. According to legend, Kidd died in the mountains, sitting on a new claim and was buried by strangers on the site. His body was never recovered and for most folks, that was all they knew about James Kidd. Unbeknownst to everyone was the fact that this penniless prospector was not penniless at all. In 1960 his will showed up in Probate Court, brought to light by the E.F. Hutton Company, who had been handling Kidd's financial affairs. Kidd was worth a little more than half a million dollars!

In the ensuing legal battle, a judge first awarded the funds to a major hospital, based on his interpretation of Kidd's will, which stated that the money should go to anyone who would research and prove the existence of a "visible spirit." A higher court then heard appeals to the finding, and the money was divided between two organizations and earmarked in the court's words, "To study the possibility of the survival of human intelligence after death." What was to become the PRF at Duke found its funding from the Kidd estate. I mention all of this for a reason that will become important later.

J.B. Rhine was the founding director of the Duke study, a man who was well grounded in science but fascinated by the possibility of less concrete theories concerning the human consciousness. He set to work researching Extra Sensory Perception (ESP). In 1958 Dr. Rhine ventured outside the safety of the laboratory and travelled with others to Seaford, Long Island and the home of the Hermann family, where there was a good deal of excitement over a very industrious spirit or poltergeist, who began by popping the tops off soda bottles and progressed from there. This was the first move into the field and was William Roll's first investigation with Rhine.

The Long Island poltergeist in Seaford was a spectacular case for its day. The PRF team spent a week on the scene and witnessed the phenomenon first hand, eventually the Roman Catholic Church became involved and a cleansing of the property was approved, but Roll noted the only time the phenomenon occurred was when the Hermann's son, Jimmy was home, but that fraud was out of the

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question. Roll was present on the last day of the manifestation, when a bleach bottle popped open in the family basement and that was the last time anything unusual happened in Seaford. Rhine and Roll announced that little Jimmy was a HAP, Human Agent Poltergeist. This made big headlines, both in New York and around the globe when publications like TIME magazine published their stories and put the PRF on the map, so to speak. Now everyone would look to the PRF for answers about the unexplained and the Genie was out of the proverbial bottle.

Note well that the PRF was not founded to do field research, in fact Dr. Rhine intended to study ESP and later OOBE (Out of Body Experiences), not ghosts in haunted houses as some believed. The Seaford case and ones like it were not on the agenda when PRF was formed by Rhine, which caused some friction among factions at Duke.

While I was never on staff at Duke, I was associated with the group for many years as a journalist with interests in the unexplained. I visited Duke many times, and spent time with some of the key players over the years, and I was always aware that the camp was divided over the validity of field observations. Good lab researchers are not proven to be good field investigators, the key being in the two words, research vs. investigation. This was the bone of contention between myself and Scott Rogo; I believed good field work depended on well trained investigators, like police officers and even journalists, while Scott was in favor of lettered professionals in the field. That of course, came to a head for Duke when Amityville happened and three hapless researchers were fed to the media by some well known ghost hunters. If Seaford had made the reputation of PRF in the media, the same could be said of Amityville and the ASUP. In the end, Roll admitted that field investigations should be left to trained investigators, rather than PhD's accustomed to the empiric method of lab research.

Behind that admission was the fact that, as mentioned earlier the Kidd endowment was to anyone who would prove the existence of ghostly apparitions, not as the courts later interpreted it as, "The survival of human personality after death." The latter was simply what the court perceived, based on Kidd's written will. In an attempt to make it sound more feasible, the court had changed in essence what Kidd required. Dr. Rhine had undertaken Seaford to fulfill in fact, the Kidd directive, even though the group was ill prepared to do fieldwork and was really created to study ESP in a lab environment.

Giving the Devil his due, the PRF had originally drawn from the field experience of others, not associated with the Duke team, including Hans Holtzer and later Peter Hurkos. Holtzer was a Ph.D. in comparative religions and saw himself as the classic parapsychologist. He fit the essence of what Rhine saw as the epitome of the paranormal investigator when Holtzer first published his account of the haunting of the Morris-Jumel Mansion in New York City. While Holtzer was probably the most prolific

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writer in the field, he often lacked conclusions to his research, finding it acceptable to retell the story of a haunting but not always seeking the true cause and effect that led to it. The PRF paid lip service to Holtzer in the beginning, but split with him even before the Amityville hoax took place. Holtzer of course, later wrote extensively on Amityville and the demonic aspects that he saw in the case, while the PRF found it easier to side with the ASUP, who maintained it was largely a work of fiction, which was later upheld in a court case between Paul Hoffman, an early ASUP member and the Lutz family in New York State Supreme Court. The PRF lauded the ASUP investigation and freely admitted that field work would be ceded to trained investigators in the future.

Unfortunately, that did not cover the likes of Peter Hurkos, who some today still refer to as, “the world’s greatest psychic.” Once again, there were those at Duke who were mesmerized by Hurkos’ reported abilities and once again, the ASUP stepped in to suggest that Hurkos was more smoke and mirrors than true psychic. The ASUP claim was based on reports that Hurkos was arrested and later convicted for impersonating a police officer in Boston during the period that he was “consulting” on the Strangler Cases. He had attempted to gain access to case files, posing as a detective and was caught. Other Hurkos cases were also brought into question and many claimed he never gave any information that was not already public knowledge or printed in local papers. Hurkos’ trick of posing as a police officer was well known and he had been detained by NYPD officers when they found him fingering through closed case records at the old police headquarters before they were copied to microfiche. Ironically, Hurkos had planned to “solve” closed case files in New York for the media, but unwittingly chose one that Paul Hoffman and Rick Moran had already researched for the New York Daily News, which led to the undoing of that scheme. Nevertheless, Hurkos was considered to be something very special to some at PRF.

The PRF files are not all filled with bad news, and there was much to be learned from Dr. Rhine and Bill Roll; it isn’t easy to create a mapping system to identify human psychic ability, but they did try. One lesson I did learn from Rhine was that the absence of positive feedback can be as important as a high score when testing subjects. Rhine of course was the master of the Zener Cards, the ones with +, -, wavy lines, etc. that were used extensively at Duke to test for ESP. At one point, Dr. Rhine created a test based on a discussion with Scott Rogo. A set of push buttons were laid out on a board, the same number of buttons that would be used in a Zener deck, but without any markings. On the receiver console the associated lights had the corresponding Zener code. In the test, the “sender” would look at a card, the “receiver” would press a button (unmarked) associated by what he or she believed they saw, while the monitor recorded the hits and misses. I was the subject of one of those tests and scored

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remarkably low, way below what was expected if someone hit the buttons without even thinking. While I found that amusing, Rhine noted later that my extremely low hit count was indicative of a psychic personality, simply because it was so far from the expected norm. I learned that either an extremely high or low hit rate indicates the abnormal, which was an interesting insight to me.

Of course, many of the Duke experiments have been lost to time, either because we have forgotten them or buried them on purpose. One such experiment introduced Timothy Leary's Kool-Aid Acid Trip to the otherwise straight laced academics. Psilocybin Mushrooms coated in chocolate were introduced to the lab and the effects studied in all sorts of ways, including the use of a sensory deprivation chamber and strobe flashing experiments. All of this was done under the control of Dr. Rhine.

But the most notorious experiments were in the OOBE studies. It was the OOBE reports that caused most of PRF's problems, including the firing or resignation of several top researchers who were believed to have fudged statistics to gain future funding for the program. It is ironic that those same programs received the most money and eventually were adopted by the U.S. Government, which led to the Remote Viewing program that some say still exist. In its day, the OOBE work centered on several test subjects, but the recognized top subject was "Blue" Harary. "Blue" was a student at Duke, and lived at the PRF building, eating with the staff and working on the OOBE experiments; he freely admitted that without the "income" from those studies, he would never have been able to go to Duke or get his degree, which has led to speculation that some of his reported experiences were not fully honest, and possibly were led by researchers who were just as worried about future funding as the subject.

Having known Blue, I have to believe that what he once reported was accurate, at least in the unofficial experiments done with myself and Scott Rogo. Scott had reported his own OOBE in one of his books, *Mind Beyond the Body*, while I was totally lost when I tried it. Nevertheless, I did watch Blue one evening doing an unofficial OOBE, where he went Out of Body to visit a female research aide on the other side of the campus. He reported that he entered her room by floating through an open window and gave us a description of what she was wearing (or not wearing) as she slept. The next day I asked her about her sleep experience and she confirmed that she was sleeping with the window open and was on her bed, wearing only panties with no top sheet on the bed. The information matched Blue's account perfectly and the design and color of her underwear was unusual. His nocturnal visitation was not a big hit with the young woman, but proved a point.

Today, Blue is a successful businessman and stays away from the media spotlight. He acknowledges that some researchers did play with figures to guarantee future funding and will not draw

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a line as to what was and what was not genuine. But the fact is that the U.S. Government continued to fund such studies and later “hired” key test subjects, who have since dropped from sight. While it is only speculation that they still work for the government, it is reasonable to suspect that the 1970’s OOBE program at Duke did in fact flourish into the Remote Viewing program much later.

It think it is safe to say that if Duke’s PRF had never existed, neither would the ASUP in its present form, in fact, I would say that organizations like TAPS would have never flourished if the public had not been primed by decades of reporting of PRF studies. The fact that today, some of those studies are being questioned is not the point, the real issue is that Dr. Rhine and Dr. Roll both were dedicated to the study of something that was purely conjecture in the 1950’s and nurtured those studies to support other research, including our own.

Gone are the days when ASUP was funded to do field research, some of which came directly from Duke, as well as other universities, but while no one is willing to support things like a study of Ouija Boards today, at least the concept no longer shocks the public. If the PRF had never come to pass, the very idea of studying unexplained phenomenon would be impossible and we would still be telling tales of unsubstantiated haunting, rather than collecting and archiving case histories for future research.

The concept of archiving fully investigated cases can find its way back to PRF at Duke, when the importance of such ongoing studies were emphasized by folks like Bill Roll and Dr. Rhine. The PRF noted that while we may not be able to draw meaningful conclusions about the root of such phenomenon, the collection of data will surely lead top future findings and without it, the researcher in the lab setting has nothing to study. It is the partnership of both that will eventually lead to meaningful solution and answer the original core question raised by James Kidd more than a half century ago. We already acknowledge that “ghosts” exist, it is now the task at hand to find the more illusive answers; how are they created, how long they exist and are they somehow tied to the greatest question, is there really “life” after death.

I would suggest for future reading a new book by Stacy Horn, entitled, ***Unbelievable; investigations into ghosts, poltergeists, telepathy and other Unseen Phenomena from the Duke Parapsychology Laboratory.*** While it is not an all encompassing text on the history of the Duke experiments, it does cover a good deal of ground on the topic and will open the eyes of current researchers into what was once the forefront of our field.

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