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## Deathbed Phantasms: Mere Terminal Hallucinations, or Harbingers of the Afterlife?

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(Source: Culver Pictures)

Encounters with apparitions (or “ghosts”) of the dead can occur under a variety of contexts. Of course, the most familiar – and the most stereotyped – is within the context of a haunting, where the apparition of a deceased person is continually seen in a place that the person once inhabited in life. Some spontaneous encounters with apparitions occur within the context of a crisis situation, where a person’s apparition is seen at the time that he or she is in the midst of a crisis or a traumatic experience.<sup>1</sup> Other encounters may occur in the moments after a person has died.<sup>2</sup> But probably less well-known are the instances in which an apparition has appeared to a person at or near the moment of death.<sup>3</sup> A typical example of this kind of appearance (in its most basic form) is the following account, given by a New York physician attending to a dying man at the turn of the last century:

It was about four o’clock, and the dawn for which he [the patient] had been watching was creeping in through the shutters, when, as I bent over the bed, I noticed that his face was quite calm and his eyes clear. The poor fellow looked up into my face, and, taking my hand in both of his, he said: ‘You’ve been a good friend to me, doctor. You’ve stood by me.’ Then something happened which I shall never forget to my dying day happened; something which is utterly indescribable. While he appeared perfectly rational and as sane as any man I have ever seen, the only way that I can express it is that he was transported into another world, and although I cannot satisfactorily explain the matter to myself, I am fully convinced that he had entered the Golden City – for he said in a stronger voice that he had used since I attended him: ‘There is mother! Why, mother, have you come to see me? No, no, I’m coming to see *you*. Just wait, mother, I am almost over. I can jump it. Wait, mother.’ On his face there was a look of inexpressible happiness, and the way in which he

said the words impressed me as I have never been before, and I am as firmly convinced that he saw and talked with his mother as I am that I am sitting here.

In order to preserve what I believed to be his conversation with his mother, and also to have a record of the strangest happening of my life, I immediately wrote down every word he had said...His was one of the most beautiful deaths I have ever seen.<sup>4</sup>, p. 73, italics in original

An important thing to note in this account is that, according to the attending physician, the dying man "...appeared perfectly rational and as sane as any man I have ever seen," which, on the surface, suggests that the man was not in a terminal delirium or a drug-induced state at the time, and was therefore not responding to a pathological hallucination.

Reports of these "deathbed visions" stretch all the way back to the early days of psychical research, but it was the pioneering efforts of psychical researchers such as Ernesto Bozzano<sup>4</sup> and James Hyslop<sup>5</sup> that helped draw broader attention to these experiences and encourage other researchers to begin compiling and systematically studying them. In his study, Hyslop noted that individuals who are dying have a tendency to see apparitions of deceased people rather than those of the living, which suggested to him that deathbed visions were supportive of the possibility of life after death. Physicist and psychical researcher Sir William Barrett also made an important posthumous contribution with his 1926 book *Death-Bed Visions*, in which he also recognized the tendency for dying individuals to see apparitions of the dead.<sup>6</sup>

Even toward the present time, it seems that encounters with deathbed apparitions have not faded away, and are still reported by a considerable number of people. In the late 1950s, researcher Karlis Osis had conducted a preliminary survey of physicians and nurses in the U.S. who had cared for 35,540 terminally ill patients. Of these patients, 1,318 of them had seen a deathbed apparition, and 884 had a related vision of the afterlife.<sup>7</sup> Collaborating with Icelandic researcher Erlendur Haraldsson, Osis expanded this survey a decade later to include interviews of physicians and nurses in India and the U.S. The results of this second study indicated that, in spite of obvious cultural differences, there was a reasonable degree of consistency with Osis' first survey, in that several fundamental characteristics of the apparitional experiences were the same – including the tendency for the dying patients to see apparitions of the dead, rather than those of the living.<sup>8</sup> (Additional characteristics will be discussed below.)

More recently, in her book *Afterlife Encounters*, researcher Dianne Arcangel stated that, in her previous and extensive experience as a hospice chaplain, "I have never sat with a dying patient who was not in the accompaniment of an apparition as their time [of death] grew near."<sup>9</sup>, p. 120 She further added that terminal patients seem to experience deathbed apparitions and other afterlife-related visions so commonly that "...hospice staff and volunteers consider [afterlife encounters] a signal that death is drawing nearer and increase the frequency of their visits."<sup>9</sup>, p. 110

At the very least, the consistency of these deathbed visions across the generations suggests that something of interest is going on here. While the exact content of the experiences has varied across cases, studies of case collections tend to indicate that they have some interesting characteristics, which may be best illustrated through anecdotal accounts.

As with apparitions seen in other contexts<sup>10</sup>, apparitional figures appearing at the deathbed can often look solid and life-like. In some rare cases, however, only certain parts of the figure have been seen, as in a deathbed case examined by the late researcher Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, in which a young woman witnessed an apparition of her grandmother

standing before her dying grandfather's bed. As the young woman generally recounted of the experience:

Granddaddy called me to give him a drink of water. I failed in my attempts to lift him enough to wet his lips. The disease had reduced his once tall, strong stature to [that of] a frail, weak invalid. I called mom at work to ask for help, but she told me it would have to wait until dad [the young woman's stepfather] returned from work at noon.

Shortly thereafter I heard granddaddy calling out to his wife, Hazel. Grandmom had died nine years prior [on October 13, 1956], so I thought he must be losing his mind. I ran down the hall to make another attempt to help him. The room was filled with a warm, bright light. He spoke to grandmom, who was standing at the foot of his bed. Neither of them acknowledged my presence. She was there but a brief moment, and when granddaddy laid back down, his soul escaped with her. He died with a smile on his face.<sup>11, p. 360</sup>

When Stevenson asked her for more details about the experience, the young woman recalled that the vision of her grandmother was in "...a very bright white light and that her face is there and I see her hands. I can see an image of arms but I don't see clothing. She is either in all white or the white light is so bright I can't see the clothing."<sup>11, p. 360</sup>

In many deathbed visions, any sounds or utterances that seem to emanate from the apparition are usually only heard by the dying patient. But in some cases, other witnesses have heard them, as well. One example of this comes from a case in the collection of spontaneous psychic experiences sent over the years to the Rhine Research Center in North Carolina. As the woman who sent in the experience stated in her letter:

My aunt, who helped raise me, was dying of a cerebral hemorrhage. We had all been up for five days and nights with her. The candles were flickering, and she was in a coma. I went to get a cup of tea and my husband remained in the room with her, saying the rosary at her bedside.

All of a sudden, he ran down the stairs past us, appearing pale and visibly shaken. When we could finally get him to talk, he said that while he was praying, my aunt seemed to come out of the coma and started flailing her arms around in the air, holding them wide open as if she were trying to reach someone, and crying, "Mom! Oh, Mom."

My husband felt a breeze, and suddenly a little woman stood next to him, less than five feet tall with a plaid shawl over her head, wringing her hands, and my husband saw tears running down her face. Although he heard nothing from the woman, *he did hear the rustle of her dress*. She was in black. He said that he prayed hard that he could muster the strength to get out of the room. When able, he rushed out and down the stairs.

He described the experience to relatives at our house, and another aunt said, "Well, that was her mother. She has been dead since 1910." When we went back upstairs, Mom was dead with a peaceful smile on her face.<sup>12, pp. 266-267, emphasis added</sup>

In some cases, the dying patients apparently saw the apparitions against background visions depicting the "other-worldly" realms of the afterlife. In their 1977 book *At the Hour of Death*, Osis and Haraldsson cite an account given by a nurse treating a 76-year-old woman who had suffered a heart attack:

[The woman's] consciousness was very, very clear – no sedation, no hallucinogenic history. She was cheerful and confident that she would recover and return to her daughter who badly needed her at home. Suddenly she stretched out her arms and, smiling, called to me. "Can't you see Charlie [her dead husband] there with outstretched arms? I'm wondering why I haven't 'gone home' before."

Describing the vision she said, “What a beautiful place with all the flowers and music. Don’t you hear it? Oh, girls, don’t you see Charlie?” She said he was waiting for her. I feel she definitely saw her husband.<sup>8, pp. 80-81</sup>

In a summary of his earlier preliminary survey, Osis cited another case involving a 60-year-old woman suffering from intestinal cancer:

All of a sudden (the doctor reports) she opened her eyes. She called her (deceased) husband by name and said she was coming to him. She had the most peaceful, nicest smile, just as if she were going to the arms of someone she thought a great deal of. She said, “Guy, I am coming.” She didn’t seem to realize I was there. It was almost as if she were in another world. It was as if something beautiful had opened up to her; she was experiencing something so wonderful and beautiful.<sup>13, p. 1</sup>

As intriguing as they are, it’s important to note that cases of deathbed visions cannot be expected to carry a lot of value on their own as evidence for life after death from a scientific perspective because of their purely anecdotal nature as personal accounts. But this does not mean that we can’t learn anything from them, however.

For instance, one thing that may be noticeable from the personal accounts presented so far is that in each one, the dying patient has witnessed an apparition of someone he or she was related to. It turns out that this pattern holds for the majority of the deathbed visions examined in the studies conducted by Osis and Haraldsson.<sup>7,8</sup> In his preliminary survey, Osis found that of the deathbed apparitions seen, 90% were relatives of the dying patient, with most of them being close relatives (i.e., parents, siblings, spouses, or children). Similarly, over half (around 60%) of the deathbed visions in Osis and Haraldsson’s subsequent interview study involved close relatives of the dying patient. Moreover, as Table 1 shows, this pattern is consistent with other kinds of apparitional experiences.

**Table 1. Relations Between Apparitions and the People Witnessing Them (% Cases)<sup>14</sup>**

<i>Study</i>	<i># Cases</i>	<i>Relatives</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Strangers</i>
Osis & Haraldsson (1977): Deathbed Visions	418	60	9	21
Arcangel (2005): Crisis, Post-mortem, & Haunting Apparitions	590	58	-	13
Haraldsson (2012): Crisis, Post-mortem, & Haunting Apparitions	449	51	9	24
<b>Average Percentage</b>		<b>56</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>19</b>

Comparing the apparitions seen in deathbed visions (Osis & Haraldsson’s study; first row in Table 1) with those seen in three other situational contexts (Rows 2 & 3), it can be seen that the apparitions are relatives of the person seeing them in approximately half of the cases.

In addition, several of the apparitions were reported by the dying patients to be a “take-away” figure, meaning that the apparition’s apparent purpose for appearing was to greet and help lead the dying patient away to the afterlife (but not always with the patient’s consent). Some of the personal accounts presented in this article certainly seem suggestive of this.

Some of the most important findings to emerge from these studies of deathbed visions concerns not the apparitions, but the patients themselves. In some of the personal accounts presented here, it has been noted that the dying patients appeared to be rational and clear-headed when they encountered the deathbed apparitions. The studies conducted by Osis and

Haraldsson seem to further confirm that, according to the attending physicians and nurses, the dying patients' experiences were not likely to have been influenced by medical factors such as medication, high fever, and symptoms of illness. Nor were there any indications that the patients' experiences were significantly affected by demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, & education) or by psychological factors (e.g., stress, desires, & expectations). In other words, these findings suggest that the dying patients in these cases came from all walks of life, and that they were not medicated, delirious, or seriously ill at the time they saw the apparition, nor were they under stress or expecting to see one when it occurred. In the eyes of Osis and Haraldsson, this seemed to lend considerable credence toward the possibility of life after death.

Another intriguing aspect of some deathbed visions that some people have considered to be supportive of the possibility of life after death is when a dying patient sees the apparition of a deceased person at a time when the patient is unaware that the person has already died.<sup>15</sup> One detailed example of this comes from Eleanor Sidgwick in the annals of psychical research, following an account given in the late 19th century by an Irish colonel concerning his wife and a family acquaintance. His account is as follows:

Some sixteen years since Mrs. ---- [the colonel's wife] said to me: "We have some people staying here all week. Do you know anyone I could get to sing with the girls?" I suggested that my gunmaker, Mr. X., had a daughter with a fine voice, who was training as a public singer, and that if she, Mrs. ----, liked, I would write to X., and ask if he would allow her to come down and spend a week with us. On my wife's approval I wrote, and Miss X. came down for a week, and then left. As far as I know, Mrs. ---- never saw her again....Miss X. did not come out as a singer, but shortly after married Mr. Henry Webley, and none of us ever saw her again.

Six or seven years passed away, and Mrs. ----, who had been long ill, was dying, in fact she did die the following day. I was sitting at the foot of her bed talking over some business matters that she was anxious to arrange, being perfectly composed and in thorough possession of her senses; in fact, she was right, and my solicitor, who advised that the step she wanted to be taken was not necessary, was wrong. She changed the subject and said, "Do you hear those voices singing?" I replied that I did not; and she said: "I have heard them several times to-day, and I am sure that they are angels welcoming me to Heaven; but" – she added – "it is strange, there is one voice amongst them I am sure I know, and cannot remember whose voice it is." Suddenly she stopped, and said, pointing straight over my head: "Why there she is, in the corner of the room; it is Julia X.; she is coming on; she is leaning over you; she has her hands up; she is praying; do look; she is going." I turned but could see nothing. Mrs. ---- then said: "She is gone." All these things I imagined to be the phantasies of a dying person.

Two days afterwards, taking up the *Times* newspaper, I saw recorded the death of Julia, the wife of Mr. Webley. I was so astounded that a day or so after the funeral I went up to ---- and asked Mr. X. if Mrs. Webley, his daughter, was dead. He said: "Yes, poor thing, she died of puerperal fever. On the day she died she began singing in the morning, and sang and sang until she died." In a subsequent communication Colonel ---- adds: "Mrs. Julia Webley died on February 2nd, at six or thereabout in the morning, 1874. Mrs. ---- died February 13th, 1874, at about four in the evening. I saw the notice of Mrs. Webley's death on February 14th. Mrs. ---- never was subject to hallucinations of any sort."<sup>16, p. 92</sup>

In the section of her book describing deathbed visions like this one<sup>17</sup>, 19th century author and social commentator Frances Power Cobbe had called them "Peak in Darien" visions because to her, they seemed to offer wondrous hints about the afterlife.<sup>18</sup> Bozzano<sup>4</sup>, Hyslop<sup>5</sup>, and Barrett<sup>6</sup> also took special note of "Peak in Darien" cases in their early studies of deathbed visions. But apart

from the possibility of survival after death, it's also possible that the dying patient may have become aware of the death of the person through ESP, which manifested in the form of a visual apparition. Regardless of the modality involved, "Peak in Darien" cases seem to add an element to deathbed visions that becomes difficult to account for through conventional explanations such as mere pathological hallucination – something more complex seems to be involved here.

It may be of interest to note that deathbed visions seem to share some characteristics with another kind of experience in which people close to death sometimes see others who are known to be dead: near-death experiences (NDEs). Researcher Emily Kelly at the University of Virginia's Division of Perceptual Studies once performed a study specifically of NDE cases in which the person who was near death reported meeting deceased individuals as part of the NDE.<sup>19</sup> Similar to deathbed visions, Kelly found that in NDE cases of this type:

- 1.) most of the deceased individuals who were seen during the NDE tended to be relatives of the person seeing them;
- 2.) the NDE is more likely to contain one or more background aspects that are suggestive of an "other-worldly" realm (such as bright light or seeing a tunnel);
- 3.) psychological factors, such as expectation and desire, do not always influence who is seen during the NDE (e.g., during an NDE, a person doesn't always see who he or she had hoped to see)

The central differences between deathbed visions and NDEs involving encounters with deceased people include the following:

- 1.) NDEs are often instigated by trauma and sudden health problems, whereas many terminal patients are not faced with these life-threatening situations when they have their deathbed vision.
- 2.) NDEs can include more encompassing experiential elements such as out-of-body experiences and life reviews; these are lacking in deathbed visions.
- 3.) NDEs often take place while a person is unconscious, whereas people who experience deathbed visions are awake and alert.

Although it is not clear by any means, perhaps further comparison of deathbed visions with NDEs may find that deathbed visions are a much lesser form of NDE, only lacking the richer subjective factors that NDEs tend to have, and without the traumatic onset. More in-depth study needs to be done to shed more light on deathbed visions and any relation they may (or may not) have to NDEs, and perhaps reveal more about the relevance both kinds of experiences may have on the question of life after death.

## References & Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the numerous apparitional case reports described by psychical researchers Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers, and Frank Podmore in their classic two-volume work *Phantasms of the Living* (London: Trübner & Company, 1886).

- <sup>2</sup>See, for example, the accounts of apparitional encounters compiled in the book *The Departed Among the Living: An Investigative Study of Afterlife Encounters* by Icelandic researcher Erlendur Haraldsson (Guildford, UK: White Crow Books, 2012).
- <sup>3</sup>For examples of other contexts, as well as further discussion of encounters with apparitions, see Williams, B., Ventola, A., & Wilson, M. (2009). *Apparitional Experiences: A Primer on Parapsychological Research and Perspectives*, which is available for download in Adobe PDF format on the Psychical Research Foundation website.
- <sup>4</sup>Bozzano, E. (1906). Apparitions of deceased persons at death-beds. *Annals of Psychical Science*, 3, 67 – 100.
- <sup>5</sup>Hyslop, J. H. (1907). Visions of the dying. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1, 45 – 55.
- <sup>6</sup>Barrett, W. F. (1926). *Death-Bed Visions*. London: Methuen.
- <sup>7</sup>Osis, K. (1961). *Deathbed Observations by Physicians and Nurses*. Parapsychological Monograph No. 3. New York: Parapsychology Foundation, Inc.
- <sup>8</sup>Osis, K., & Haraldsson, E. (1977). *At the Hour of Death*. New York: Avon Books.
- <sup>9</sup>Arcangel, D. (2005). *Afterlife Encounters: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Experiences*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, Inc.
- <sup>10</sup>See the discussion of apparitional experiences in Section 8 of Irwin, H. J. (1994). The phenomenology of parapsychological experiences. In S. Krippner (Ed.) *Advances in Parapsychological Research 7* (pp. 10 – 76). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- <sup>11</sup>Stevenson, I. (1995). Six modern apparitional experiences. *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, 9, 351 – 366.
- <sup>12</sup>Feather, S. R., & Schmicker, M. (2005). *The Gift: ESP, the Extraordinary Experiences of Ordinary People*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- <sup>13</sup>Osis, K. (1975, Summer). What did the dying see? *Theta* No. 45, 1 – 3.
- <sup>14</sup>Percentages in this table are rounded values derived from data presented in the books by Osis & Haraldsson (Note 8), Arcangel (Note 9) and Haraldsson (Note 2). Cases involving extended family members and religious or unidentified figures are excluded.
- <sup>15</sup>Greyson, B. (2010). Seeing dead people not known to have died: "Peak in Darien" experiences. *Anthropology and Humanism*, 35, 159 – 171.
- <sup>16</sup>Sidgwick, E. M. [Mrs. H.] (1885). Notes on the evidence, collected by the Society, for phantasms of the dead. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 3, 69 – 150.
- <sup>17</sup>Cobbe, F. P. (1882). *The Peak in Darien*. London: Williams & Norgate.
- <sup>18</sup>The name "Peak in Darien" comes from a poem by John Keats, which describes the wondrous moment when Spanish explorers on a mountaintop in Darien (in modern-day Panama) witness the sight of the Pacific Ocean for the very first time.
- <sup>19</sup>Kelly, E. W. (2001). Near-death experiences with reports of meeting deceased people. *Death Studies*, 25, 229 – 249.