

ESSAY

Lab Coat and Turban, a Tribute to Robert G. Jahn

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We have lost a friend, a valued colleague, and an inspirational mentor in the passing of Professor Robert G. Jahn, the founder and director of Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research (PEAR). He was one of the prominent academics who came together to create the Society for Scientific Exploration in the early 1980s, and he served as SSE's Vice-President for more than three decades. His was a voice on the SSE Council that we listened to with special attention, because he was himself such a talented listener, able to summarize what was important for decisions that would affect the course of SSE's growth and its value to the research community.

Bob's career touched and influenced the farthest reaches of science, from the physics of electric propulsion for spacecraft to the extended capacities of human consciousness. A partial listing of his accomplishments and honors gives a hint of his breadth of interests. Bob was Dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Princeton University from 1971 to 1986. He was a Fellow of the American Physical Society and of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, and an influential member of numerous other technical organizations. He was Chairman of the Board of the International Consciousness Research Laboratories consortium. He was a member of the Board of Directors of Hercules, Inc., and Chairman of its Technology Committee, and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Associated Universities, Inc. This is a small sample of the long list of Bob's achievements, but it is safe to say that with all his extraordinary contributions in science and technology, his deepest feelings of accomplishment were for the study of consciousness at the frontiers of our understanding.

The circumstances that led Bob to create the PEAR laboratory in 1979 provide a perfect example of his unusual character and his deep commitment to science in the service of understanding. As Dean of the Engineering School, he had welcomed new students with an encouragement to work hard to prepare themselves for their future work, mentioning that an important step would be an independent project on the topic of their choice. Two years later a student in electrical engineering and computer science came to him

for help when she found none of her professors would monitor her work attempting to replicate Helmut Schmidt's psychokinesis experiments. That was a bridge too far for her faculty, but not for Bob Jahn. He encouraged her to study the relevant professional literature and organizations, and helped her to design a fully rigorous experiment.

Her results and the background of literature and conference reports she had assembled were sufficiently persuasive that Bob decided to build a technically sophisticated lab focused on the possibility that consciousness might interact directly with physical systems. Careful experiments might reveal some fundamental error in what looked like good though sparsely supported research, or it could turn out that results from mind-machine experiments were pointing to aspects of the world that needed to be, but were not yet, accommodated in scientific models. Bob attended professional conferences himself to learn more and to meet people engaged in the work. He found a kindred spirit in Brenda Dunne and persuaded her to help build a laboratory. He turned to friends in the engineering and technology community and in the ranks of Princeton alumni to find support for a technically sophisticated laboratory. Among the major sources of support in the early years of the PEAR lab were James S. McDonnell, the founder of McDonnell Douglas Aircraft, and philanthropist Laurance Rockefeller, both fellow Princeton alumni.

Over its nearly three decades of operation, PEAR was acknowledged as one of the most productive psi research centers in the field. Together with Brenda, who managed the lab, and a team of scientists from several fields, Bob broke new ground while also confirming and replicating research from other scientists around the world. The lab became a beacon for people with a professional interest in psi research but equally for those with a personal interest in subtle aspects of consciousness. Our guests at the lab ranged from Nobel prize winners to celebrities, mathematicians to musicians. People looking for a solid source of information and an opportunity to directly experience psychic research could stop in to see and perhaps even participate in a controlled scientific experiment.

The PEAR lab focused on two empirical domains, one assessing mind-machine interaction (MMI) and one looking at remote viewing, most notably precognitive remote perception (PRP). A third aspect was theory and modeling, which was especially important to Bob. The mission of the lab was to first identify and confirm a phenomenon that needed attention, then to explore its dimensions and define its parameters. With such a foundation, an explanatory structure could be built.

Over its tenure, the lab built a number of highly refined physical experiments, and while others contributed, the seminal ideas were most

often from Bob's active, creative mind. By far the best known of these is the classic random event generator (REG) whose behavior participants attempted to influence by intention alone, replicating and extending the research stimulated by Helmut Schmidt. The REG instruments developed through three generations, eventually allowing expansion into the field for "natural" experiments looking at group consciousness.

Bob's aesthetic sense ensured that the physical experiments were not only precise, but beautiful. The "pinball machine" was worthy of a place in a technology museum, and the "linear pendulum" would be at home in a great modern art gallery. He and Brenda agreed that the place where people would be asked to attempt "impossible" tasks should be a comfortable, warm environment. PEAR was designed to ensure that the white lab coat and the white turban were equally influential, manifesting our operating assumption that successful mind-machine experiments would have to be a mutually respectful combination of the aesthetic and the scientific.

As Dean of Princeton's School of Engineering, Bob was a top-tier officer at a major Ivy League university. He was also a world class physicist running a NASA-funded plasma propulsion laboratory; some of the drives he envisioned are now onboard spacecraft exploring the solar system. He was nationally and internationally influential in science and engineering. Yet he commands our attention because he was a creative and broad-spectrum thinker who somehow escaped the dogmas of "scientific" education far enough to consider with equanimity the mysteries of mind as a part of the physical world. It was this expansive view that produced the PEAR lab and helped establish the SSE.

Bob Jahn was a thought leader, a careful scientist who understood the challenge of overcoming biases about research on subtle interactions of consciousness with its environment. He knew that any positive conclusions would have to be defended and that there was likely to be serious skepticism which only impeccable protocols could assuage. But it was equally clear that the implications of these experiments were important for both science and society. They were important to Bob personally as well. As he colorfully put it when I asked what motivated him to create a psi research lab: "I have accumulated a substantial pile of blue chips as a high technologist, and I am planning to spend them in research that matters deeply on the human scale."

That he did, and the result is a body of work that definitely matters.