



BOOK REVIEW

# WTF Just Happened?!: A Sciencey-Skeptic Explores Grief, Healing, and Evidence of an Afterlife

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Before being asked to review this book, I had already met the author twice. First at the annual (2023) SSE meeting in Bloomington, then a month later at the annual IANDS conference in Washington. I was deeply impressed by her integrity, the depth of the questions she asked and the comments she made, and also her irreverent but warm sense of humor. Later, when the book editor asked me if I would review a few books, I said no. I told him that at my current age (82), I still have some things I want to say and cannot involve myself in other peoples' work. But when he told me that one of the books was by Elizabeth, I jumped at the opportunity and am glad I did.

This is a book by a grief-stricken, brash, and irreverent New Yorker. *Liz*, as she prefers to be called, was raised as an atheist/materialist, believed that spirituality was a lot of nonsense, and in particular, that mediums and psychics were all frauds. This is the view of all atheists. Liz's father dies when she is twenty-seven years old, and she is overwhelmed by intense grief. Devasted by her loss, and strongly motivated to discover whether, despite her atheist beliefs, there is any chance her father might have survived the death of his body, she begins to research and explore the world of mediums.

Now, on a personal note, I can recall that when I was her age and just beginning to explore these things (I was motivated by curiosity, not grief), I knew that I wanted to believe, so I was vigilant that this desire to believe would not be the reason I came to believe. Similarly, although Liz wants to find her dad, she doesn't want her beliefs to be based on wishful thinking, but on hard, scientific evidence. As she encounters various mediums, she is very vigilant against coming to believe just because a part of her wants to believe. But unlike the great majority of so-called "skeptics", she is intellectually honest and does her homework. The "homework" here has two components: (i) scientific research: she reads the books and papers by scientists who have formally studied mediums and have concluded it is real. She has studied the writings of Jim Tucker, Ian Stevenson, Gary Schwartz, Julie Beischel, and others, whose work would be familiar to readers of this journal. The second component to the "homework" is to experience mediums personally. She connects personally with several mediums certified by the *Windbridge Institute* and also by the *Forever Family Foundation*.

Now, the title of her book, "What the Fuck Just Happened?" refers to the many times that she, as an atheist/materialist, is confronted with experience that she cannot explain in materialist terms. But the book could have been titled "An Honest Atheist Meets the Empirical Data that Has Falsified Atheism". Most self-proclaimed atheist-materialists are *not* intellectually honest, as they studiously avoid both the science and personal experience necessary to evaluate mediumship. But Liz doesn't just get a few readings from a few mediums. She goes to their classes and workshops and gets to know several mediums personally. And there are some very funny moments where she struggles to



maintain her objective skepticism while socializing with the mediums. For example, when she meets a medium socially that she has not yet had a reading from, she tries to conceal her identity to prevent any chance that the medium could obtain information about her. When the social awkwardness of her trying to conceal her identity becomes too much, she tells the mediums what she is doing, and to her surprise, they encourage her. Another “WTF” moment that was humorous to me (but maybe not to Liz at the time) involved her being in a mediumship development class. The class is paired off, and each gives a reading to the other. Liz insists that she is just making stuff up, but it turns out that her accuracy rate is way, way beyond chance. The mediums tell her that she could become a medium, too, if she chose to develop her skills.

If I were still teaching (I was a philosophy professor for forty years), I would definitely use this book as a text. I believe that philosophical issues are best discussed, not in some abstract conceptual way as is done by academic philosophers, but as they emerge in the context of real-life situations. A major philosophical issue that pervades the book is the relationship between evidence and belief. We may agree that belief should be based on evidence, but the question is, how much evidence is sufficient to support or compel belief? There are two kinds of error that one can make: (i) One can believe in something without sufficient evidence, and (ii) one can fail to believe in something for which sufficient evidence exists. Liz is so concerned about not making the first error that, in my opinion, she makes the second error. And her dad agrees with me! (I had a few “WTF” moments myself while reading her book) As I’m reading her account of mediums’ readings, with hit after hit of detailed accurate information ---information that I judged to be more than sufficient to compel belief ----- she is still skeptical, trying to figure out how the medium could have obtained the information in ways other than by direct communication with the deceased. The thought comes to me, “My goodness, how much evidence does she need?” I turn the page, and read:

.....words came to me along with an incredible energy. I didn’t actually HEAR the words in my ears; it was as if they poured into me out of nowhere, not through my normal physical senses. They were in my dad’s voice.

‘JESUS CHRIST! HOW MUCH FUCKING EVIDENCE DO YOU NEED?’

That was exactly the kind of thing he would say. (p. 226)

So, from an epistemological perspective, her dad is accusing her of committing the <sup>second</sup> error mentioned above, of failing to believe something (personal survival) for which sufficient evidence has been provided. Generalizing, I believe that many of us would agree with her dad. The empirical evidence that shows that consciousness survives the death of the body, much of it published in this journal over the years, is more than sufficient to compel belief. But, the majority of academically trained scientists and philosophers do not examine the evidence. And, if Liz were not so desperately motivated by extreme grief, she would not have examined the evidence either.

And speaking of grief, every grief counselor should read this book. Many grief counselors have been conditioned by the atheist/materialist mindset to encourage their patients to disconnect emotionally from the deceased for whom they are grieving. They are encouraged to accept the finality of their loss and get on with their lives. But if I may use Liz’s colorful language here, this is just bullshit. The materialist therapists presume to know that survival is not the case and guide their patients accordingly. But if survival is the case, as an abundance of evidence shows, then this kind of therapy is very harmful to the grieving person. Liz’s grief is alleviated by two things: (i) in the workshops and classes she takes, she is surrounded by others who are also grieving a loss .....she connects with others at a deeper level than the merely social, and this level of connection is deeply healing. And (ii) she receives and witnesses many others also receive detailed, accurate, and meaningful information from deceased individuals. It is probably difficult to grieve for someone you’ve just talked with.

But Liz is still not done questioning the whole thing, and almost in passing, raises an important philosophical question that I want to comment on. Towards the end of the book, she accepts that materialism is false, and that consciousness is real, but is not yet convinced that *individual* or personal consciousness survives. Perhaps the specific mode of consciousness that she knew as her dad has merged with or has been absorbed into some larger consciousness and, hence, no longer exists as the specific being she knew and loved. I like the simple clarity of how she framed it. She asks one medium:

How do you know you are actually communicating with deceased individuals? What if there is some universal consciousness of love, and it presents itself in the form of our deceased individuals because that is how we understand love. But it isn’t truly them and we don’t actually continue as individuals. (p. 376)

And a little later, she asks another medium:

How do you know that all this comes from individual consciousness. How do you know that it doesn't just blend or fade, or that it is not just some universal love that we interpret as those individuals we love? (p. 392)

The mediums were not able to address this question. I myself did not believe that individual consciousness survives until I immersed myself deeply in the study of the Near-Death Experience. There are many accounts of deep NDEs in which the person simultaneously experiences herself as being indivisibly united with a Higher Consciousness and, at the same time, as the individual

consciousness that they are. The reports clearly state that individuality does not fade after death, but on the contrary, is greatly enhanced. But if I may be permitted to use her brash, irreverent language, I would say to her something like:

Liz, who the fuck do you think you *are*? You are not just some 'skin-encapsulated ego'. You *are* that very 'universal consciousness' manifesting as the form that bears your name. And so is your dad, and so are all of us". This view has been called the "One Mind" hypothesis, or more simply, Idealism. Or as the Hindus put it, "That (the universal consciousness) Thou (the individual consciousness) Art".