



OBITUARY

## A Life Between Rockets; A Tribute to Charles T. Tart, 1936-2025

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**Charles T. Tart**

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When I was asked to write an obituary for Charles “Charley” Tart, I knew it would be an emotionally wrenching experience because we had been close friends and colleagues for more than half a century. Although we did most of our current work in California, neither of us were born there. I was born in Wisconsin, and Charley was born on April 29, 1937, in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, and grew up in New Jersey. I was active in amateur theatrical productions, and he was active in amateur radio, working as a radio engineer while a teenager, holding a First Class Radiotelephone License from the Federal Communications Commission.

As an undergraduate, Charley studied electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and transferred to Duke University to study psychology. He was intrigued by parapsychology and was mentored by J. B. Rhine, the founder of the field, as an undergraduate in speech education at the University of Wisconsin (Krippner, 1963). I was instrumental in arranging a lecture by Rhine to the student body and accepted his invitation to visit him at his Duke University laboratory, initiating a lifelong relationship (Krippner, 2024).

In 1961, I received my PhD from Northwestern University in counseling and guidance, while Charley received his PhD in psychology from the University of North Carolina in 1963, where his dissertation described his attempts to influence dream content through posthypnotic suggestions. He then found another mentor in Ernest Hilgard at Stanford University, where he completed a two-year postdoctoral training in hypnosis. I received my training from workshops sponsored by the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis and the Society of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis and published my first article on hypnosis in 1963.

Charley was a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis for 28 years, became Professor Emeritus on his retirement, going on to teach at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California), where he also became a Professor Emeritus. He was a guest or visiting professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, the University of Virginia, and the University of Nevada. I taught at Kent State University for three years, was a visiting professor at the University of Puerto Rico and New York University, taught at Saybrook University for 47 years until I was terminated in 1997, then became Distinguished Professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies and Research Professor at the California Institute for Human Science.

Charley was an emeritus member of the Monroe Institute Board of Advisors, which specializes in the study of out-of-body experiences, and was a consultant on government-funded parapsychological research at SRI International. As for my governmental connections, both the CIA and FBI have ongoing files on me, and I was able to obtain heavily redacted copies under the Freedom of Information Act. The files focused on my several



trips to the USSR to survey Soviet work on parapsychology and related topics (Krippner, 1980).

Two of Charley's edited books, *Altered States of Consciousness: A Book of Readings* (1969, 1972) and *Transpersonal Psychologies: Perspectives on the Mind from Seven Great Spiritual Traditions* (1975), were instrumental in providing these areas of inquiry with a solid foundation, both often serving as classroom texts. I was pleased that my chapter on hypnosis, psychedelics, and creativity appeared in the 1969 book as well as its revised 1972 edition.

In 1967, Charley and I were speakers at a conference on "altered states of consciousness, hypnosis, drugs, dreams, and psi" sponsored by the Parapsychology Foundation and held in a charming retreat center in St. Paul de Vence, famed for its French cuisine. It was there that Charley and I discovered our opposition to the draconian marijuana laws that had ruined the lives of numerous young people. We knew that marijuana, like all recreational drugs, was not "safe" but thought the punishment exceeded the crime. Charley went on to author the innovative book *On Being Stoned: A Psychological Study of Marijuana Intoxication* (1971) that reported the subjective reactions of 150 "experienced marijuana users." I did not fall into that category, and so I was not interviewed. However, in 1972, I authored a book chapter predicting the eventual legalization of marijuana, and this resulted in several invitations to speak on behalf of legalization by various advocacy groups (Krippner, 1972a).

It was also at that French conference that I became aware of Charley's delightful sense of humor, as well as his kindness and lack of rancor. Numerous students have told me how Charley fostered their careers, taking time to answer their inquiries and provide helpful suggestions. Charley and I also participated in a seminar on parapsychology at the Esalen Institute, where we enjoyed the famed baths, the home-cooked meals, and the lively presentations where, once again, his wit lightened discussions that were often quite technical.

Charley's engineering background enabled him to construct an automatic ESP testing device called the ESPAT-ESTER, built at the University of Virginia. In his 1976 book *Learning to Use Extrasensory Perception*, Charley applied experimental methods from learning theory in an attempt to enhance psi performance. In contrast, Montague Ullman and I conducted screening studies to select participants for our decade-long experiments at Maimonides Medical Center, reporting our results in several articles and the 1973 book *Dream Telepathy: Experiments in Nocturnal ESP*.

In 1968, Charley conducted an out-of-body experience (OBE) experiment with a subject known as Miss Z for four nights in his sleep laboratory.<sup>[5]</sup> Miss Z was attached to an EEG machine, and a five-digit code was placed on a shelf above her bed. She did not claim to see the number on the first three nights, but on the fourth, she gave the number correctly.

During the experiment, Tart monitored the equipment in the next room, behind an observation window. However, he admitted he had occasionally dozed during the session, resulting in criticism. Some years later, I repeated the experiment, taking extreme precautions to rule out alternative explanations. The research participant, James Ungar, claimed to have learned OBEs from Rosicrucian adepts. Before he entered our soundproof room, an envelope containing a "target picture" was randomly selected but not viewed. A research assistant entered the soundproof room, opened the envelope, and dropped the target picture onto a shelf without viewing it, then left the premises. A different target picture was used each night of the study. Two experimenters then affixed electrodes to Ungar's head, and he went to sleep on a bed directly under the shelf. The experimenters took turns monitoring Ungar's sleep, awakening him following a burst of rapid eye movements. He recalled dreams on each of the three nights but did not report an OBE.

On the fourth night, Ungar reported an OBE following a burst of alpha wave activity (uncommon during sleep) and stated that he had dreamed about a sunset. In the morning, the experimenters retrieved the target picture, "Memories of a Perfect Sunset." Dreams about sunsets are extremely rare, occurring once in some seventy times, and so we claimed to have repeated Charley's experiment, publishing our results in a 1996 issue of a parapsychological journal. Nobody has ever criticized this study, and so I felt that Charley's work had been vindicated.

Charley was a student of George Gurdjieff's work, especially his concept of "semi-hypnotic waking sleep," which is reflected in Charley's 1986 book *Waking Up: Overcoming the Obstacles to Human Potential*. In that book, he introduced the phrase "consensus trance," likening ordinary waking consciousness to "hypnotic trance," discussing how everyone from birth is inducted into the "trance" of the surrounding society. Charley emphasized the pervasive power of parents, teachers, religious leaders, political figures, and others to conform. Following Gurdjieff's directions to overcome "absent-mindedness," Charley outlined a path to "awakening," based upon self-observation, that his readers could follow.

In 1988, David Feinstein and I did something similar, publishing our 12-week workbook, *Personal Mythology: The Psychology of Your Evolving Self*, using the anthropological concept of “myth,” receiving an endorsement from Joseph Campbell, the famed cultural mythologist. We drew from the Jungian concept of “personal myth,” Albert Ellis’s “rational and irrational belief systems,” and conducted numerous workshops on the topic both at home and abroad. Like Charley, we advocated self-observation as a means to construct personal myths that liberate rather than enslave, even though they might clash with family myths and the myths of one’s culture.

Charley held a black belt in the Japanese martial art, Aikido, and was a regular meditator. I was an irregular meditator but jogged daily when I was mobile and worked with my remembered dreams each morning, as well as participating in a dream appreciation group. As is the case with many members of the International Association for the Study of Dreams, we consider regular dreamwork a psychological discipline. My co-authored 2002 book, *Extraordinary Dreams and How to Work with them*, has been translated into more than a dozen languages.

One of Charley’s seminal contributions appeared in a 1972 issue of *Science*, the flagship journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In it, Charley pointed out that altered states, such as those attained by advanced meditators and deeply hypnotized research participants, produce data that are not easily explained by conventional frameworks, which might dismiss them as hallucinations and delusions. I never thought Charley’s article on “state specific sciences” received the attention it deserved, but now it might attain new salience, given the recent appearance of “psychonauts” who are exploring exotic realms by means of “extended state” psychedelics, communicating with the “beings” they meet there, and requesting their help in creative problem-solving.

In 1970, I also published in *Science* a brief report on how “street drugs” purporting to be LSD rarely contained significant amounts of that powerful chemical.

In my own experiments with psychedelics, I took no chances, avoiding “street drugs.” Before harmine was declared illegal, I ordered a small supply from a chemical company and brought it along when I spent a weekend at Charley’s home. He abstained, probably wisely, but he and his lovely wife, Judy, sat patiently while I described the cornucopia of colorful images that came my way. Charley and Judy were wonderful hosts, and their children delighted in jumping into the tub with me during my morning bath.

I felt that Charley’s great productivity was grounded in a happy and supportive family life.

In contrast, my marriage of over three decades ended when my wife sued for divorce, probably deservedly so, and her children and grandchildren cut off all communications with me.

In 1981, Charley received the James Randi Educational Foundation Media Pigasus Award “for discovering that the further in the future events are, the more difficult it is to predict them.” Earlier, In 1978, my co-edited book *Future Science* won the Bent Spoon Award from the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. The book was also criticized by a former president of the Parapsychological Association, with the suggestion that I be expelled from the organization. Admittedly, the chapters of the book were highly speculative, but such topics as “biological plasma,” “orgone energy,” mediumship, and quantum physics are hardly outrageous in the 21st century.

One of Charley’s most provocative books was *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal Brings Science and Spirituality Together* (Tart, 2009). (A revised edition, *The Secret Science of the Soul* was published in 2017). As usual, the book is beautifully written; it makes the case that human capacities ranging from extrasensory perception and empathy to psychokinesis and prayer provide evidence for spirituality. I recalled that Charley was raised in a strict Lutheran faith, which he rejected in college, but saw parapsychology as a means to mend the rift. I never had the same problem, as my Presbyterian Sunday School classes emphasized delightful biblical stories that fueled my interest in mythology. Hence, I never saw the need to combine science and spirituality, rather taking the position that science can study spirituality just as it can study any other human activity. I am a Fellow of the Society for the Psychological Study of Religion and Spirituality, which is devoted to this enterprise.

Also, I prefer the term “physicalism” to “materialism.” Both terms hold that consciousness is an epiphenomenon, a byproduct of neurological dynamics rather than the very basis of the brain and everything else. My beloved mentor Alan Watts liked the term “materialism” because it kept people focused on the pleasures of the material world rather than escaping into a vague metaphysical mist. And, of course, Madonna sings about being a “material girl.”

In Charley’s 1989 book *Open Mind, Discriminating Mind, Reflections on Human Possibilities*, he asks his readers to keep an open mind on such topics as lucid dreaming, meditation, post-mortem survival, and similar experiences because cultural limitations prevent them from appreciating these

paths to reduce suffering. But Charley also cautions readers to be discriminating, and check the scientific evidence regarding unusual experiences, so that their open mind does not harbor beliefs that could become detrimental. In 2001, Charley published *Mind Science*, in which he gave practical instructions on how to meditate.

His 1977 book, *Psi: Explorations of the Psychic Realm*, is a summary of the entire field of parapsychology and the several contributions he has made to it. His 2016 book *Out-of-body Experiences* (originally part of an anthology) focuses on "OBES," a topic he researched and a term he popularized. *Body, mind, spirit: Exploring the parapsychology of spirituality.*, his collection of papers given at a conference on near-death studies, was published sometime later (Tart and others. 2018).

Charley's 1991 book *States of Consciousness* spells out that term in greater detail, identifying several "subsystems of consciousness" and describing what would be required for a state to be called a "discrete state of consciousness." This book is vital because some writers toss around the "altered state" term without recognizing its complexity.

Both Charley and I received awards from the Parapsychological Association, the Society for Psychological Hypnosis, and the Society for Humanistic Psychology. I received many more awards, but that is due to the fact that I am much more of an organizational junkie, being an active member in a dozen or more professional organizations, often traveling overseas to participate in conferences and conventions. Charley remained close to home, writing a series of profound and influential books. Every once in a while, one of my books makes an impact; *Varieties of Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (2000, 2014), which I co-edited with my old friends Etzel Cardena and Steven Lynn, became an American Psychological Association "best-seller."

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The *American Psychological Association Dictionary* describes *transpersonal psychology* as an approach concerned with the exploration of "higher" states of consciousness, states that transcend personal identity and immediate desires, their varieties, their causes, and their effects. I would add that transpersonal psychology is concerned with the study of humanity's highest potential and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness and the transformative effects of these states.

William James, the founder of U.S. psychology, was the first to use the term, and "psychology" was added by Abraham Maslow, Anthony Sutich, and Stanislav Grof, generally regarded as the originators of the discipline. I was fortunate to have had personal interactions with all of them. And recall Grof telling me that he used the word "transpersonal" because the Czechoslovakian communists would not know what it meant. I was drawn to transpersonal psychology because of its inclusion of Eastern wisdom, a topic of great interest to me resulting from my contact with Alan Watts, his books, and his lectures. I published my first article in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* in 1972 (Krippner, 1072b) and began speaking at various transpersonal psychology conferences, both at home and abroad. At one of those conferences, Charley told me that the original title of his seminal 1979 book was *Spiritual Psychologies*, but the publisher thought that title would scare potential readers, and so he changed the term to *Transpersonal Psychologies*.

It does not diminish the importance of this book to point out that few of the traditions described, such as Sufism and Western magic, qualify as “psychologies.” Conventionally, the essential components of psychology are biological/neurological, cognitive/affective, developmental, learning, social/cultural interactions, and mental health, its maintenance, and dysfunctions. Transpersonal psychologists want to add a spiritual component, but they must not neglect the other components. Such books as the *Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Transpersonal Psychology* (2015) have attempted to fill in those gaps.

In 2024, the fourth edition of *Consciousness: An Introduction* was published, and I was flattered to see one of my articles cited, an essay on the psychology of shamanism, a field that I pioneered. Charley had half a dozen of his articles and books cited, often at great length (Blackmore & Troscianko. 2024). This is one of many acknowledgments of the contributions that he has made to that field.

In the 1981 book *Men and Women of Parapsychology*, Charley reflected, “I think of myself primarily as a scientist, interested in many aspects of science. . . . My most common, mid-level professional identity is Transpersonal Psychologist, and I usually regard parapsychology as a specialty interest within that. . . . I’m a human being trying to understand reality, my place in it, other people, and the meaning of it all. Perhaps, as some of the wisdom traditions say, I’m a spiritual being having a human experience.”

Charley’s last words, according to his son, were “I came here on a rocket, and I will leave this contact between those rockets.”

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