

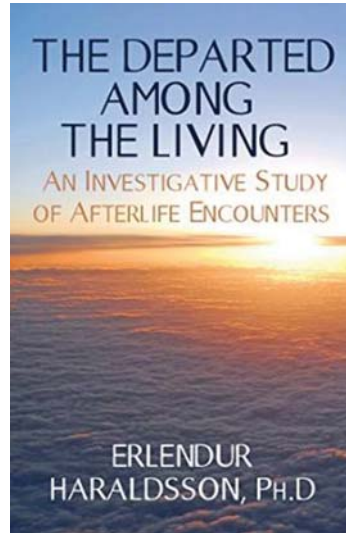
BOOK REVIEW

The Departed Among the Living: An Investigative Study of After-life Encounters by Erlendur Haraldsson. White Crow Books, 2012. 274 pp. \$17.95. ISBN 978-1-908733-29-0.

Reports of encounters with deceased people are as old as humanity and seem to be in the roots of many if not the majority of spiritual traditions. However, scientific studies on this exciting but controversial topic started in Nineteenth Century. The first large survey of apparitions was published by researchers from the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in 1886 (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886). Recent authors studying Spiritism, Spiritualism, and psychical research developed the first attempts at systematic and scientific investigations of these experiences (Alvarado 2012, Sharp 2006). The subject has become more relevant given that in the last decades there has been an increasing interest in psychiatry and psychology literature in the study of “psychotic experiences” in the general population, which often involve anomalous sensory experiences. Several large epidemiological data studies have shown that most “psychotic experiences” happen in the nonclinical population and are usually not related to psychotic disorders. In a study performed by the World Health Organization in 52 countries involving more than 250,000 participants, psychotic experiences (when participants were not half asleep, dreaming, or under the influence of alcohol or drugs) occurring the previous year were reported by 12.52% of world’s population, ranging from 1% (Vietnam) to 46% (Nepal). It is remarkable that only 10% of those reporting psychotic symptoms had a diagnosis of schizophrenia (Nuevo et al. 2012). There is a need to investigate and better understand these “psychotic” experiences in non-clinical populations. Since spiritual experiences often involve psychotic-like aspects, they are privileged venues in which to understand psychotic phenomena in the general population (Moreira-Almeida & Cardena 2011). One important sort of hallucinatory experience in the general population, both in terms of impact on the percipient and their potential theoretical implications, is the report of perceiving a deceased person.

This book presents a comprehensive phenomenological analysis of reports of perceptions of deceased people by individuals from the general population in Iceland, where, in 1974–1975, 31% of a national representative sample (n = 902) reported that they “have ever been aware

of the presence of a deceased person.” Data for the book was obtained from 449 Icelanders who reported, in a waking state, direct personal experience of contact with a deceased person (excluding contacts in dreams or through mediums). This sample was obtained from two sources. The first was composed of 128 people selected from the national sample above. Initially, they were recruited from the two largest population centers in Iceland and, later, from the rest of the country. The remaining 321 were obtained through advertisements published in 1980 in five popular magazines that reached a diverse readership.



These two subsamples reported similarities in the distribution of sensory modality involved in the experiences. Comparisons in sociodemographic factors are not provided, so it is hard to evaluate the degree of similarity between the subsamples as well as between the total sample and the general population. It would be useful if the author provided more details about the sampling process and a table with comparisons of sociodemographic characteristics between the two subsamples and the national representative sample of people reporting encounters with the departed.

The best aspect of this book is the detailed descriptions about these experiences, especially regarding phenomenological aspects. Most reports involved only one sensory modality. From the total sample, 67% of encounters involved visual experiences and 28% aural experiences. In addition to quantitative data, the book provides richness in the hundreds of first-hand descriptions of the wide range of experiences of encountering a deceased person.

Chapters are divided to cover different aspects of the experience. The first chapters are devoted to the different sensorial modalities involved in the reports (seeing, hearing, touch, smell, and sensing a presence). The following chapters cover several different aspects, such as: experiences at the moment of death, how long after death, how long they last, how physically real they were, who the deceased persons were, several sorts of violent deaths (accidents, suicide, drowning, murder, etc.), specific types of perceivers (child, widow), unusual behavior of animals, and encounters involving some sort of message or warning. Each chapter usually starts

with one or two brief paragraphs providing a general overview and some quantitative data regarding that specific aspect of the experience and then provides many (often 10 to 20) first-hand reports illustrating the experience.

Most chapters and reports described do not concentrate on whether these experiences are fabrications from perceivers' minds (ordinary hallucinations) or some form of veridical anomalous perception. However, some of the last chapters address this issue more directly: a perceiver obtaining information previously unknown by him/her, and more than one person having the same experience (shared perception). Finally, the last four chapters discuss aspects of an afterlife, from belief in it to empirical evidence of survival of bodily death. While 71% of Icelanders believe in an afterlife, 91% of the sample investigated in the book reported this belief. This difference might be related to the fact that 38% of the sample reported that their experience increased their belief in an afterlife. The author lists some features of afterlife encounters that suggest these reports are not just hallucinations:

- 28% of the appearing deceased died a violent death, the same percentage reported in the pioneer SPR study. This consistency of findings from different countries and different centuries, including that many percipients did not even know that the person had died, would suggest it is a "universal human experience" which may be explained as "due to a high motivation to communicate by the prematurely deceased person" (p. 231).
- Concentration of cases in the first 24 hours after the death of the perceived person, also in line with the SPR study, would also suggest a motivation of the deceased to communicate.
- Collective experiences would make hallucinatory hypothesis less plausible.
- Obtaining veridical information previously unknown by the percipient.
- The intention or purpose of the deceased in several reports, such as those that convey warnings that sometimes rescue the percipient from mortal danger.

In the conclusion, the author states that the data obtained are not compelling, but suggestive of a real human experience that cannot be dismissed as mere illusion. Also along this line, the major characteristics found were also obtained from studies in different countries (China, UK, USA, Germany, Italy, France) and in different centuries. He also briefly discusses the implications of studies of deathbed visions, near-death

experiences, memories of past life, mystical experiences, and terminal lucidity and concludes that “this substantial body of research is increasingly suggestive—if not convincing—evidence for life beyond the physical body” (p. 241).

The book has some limitations. First, it is hard to evaluate the representativeness of the sample and, therefore the generalizability of the findings. However, the results’ similarities with other studies suggest, at least partially, their representativeness. It would be useful to have more information about sampling procedures and a sample description. Second, the author could provide a deeper discussion of the findings and analyze them in the light of the comprehensive literature on the topic. On the other hand, the author seems to have wished to keep his analysis and interpretation at a minimum, focusing on providing direct empirical data for the reader’s own interpretation and conclusions. The major strength of the book is exactly the numerous and rich descriptions of these experiences, providing the reader with direct contact with these reports which allows us a good sense of these fascinating and challenging human experiences. The book may also be a primary source for future in-depth analyses to be performed by researchers who further organize, categorize, and explore this rich material.

ALEXANDER MOREIRA-ALMEIDA

Research Center in Spirituality and Health (NUPES)
School of Medicine, Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), Juiz de Fora, MG, Brazil
alex.ma@uff.edu.br

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