

Is There Anybody There?

Words Jaime Christian Desplaces

A 2008 study of 6000 New Zealanders by Victoria University associate professor of psychology, Marc Wilson, revealed that a third of the population believes that we can communicate with the dead, 18% believe in telekinesis, 40% that part of us survives physical death and that almost half believe mind-reading is possible. "The more you adhere to traditional religion," Wilson tells me, "the more likely you are to believe in other paranormal activity. I want the world to be mysterious. I'd love to be confident that there's something going on that we can't explain. Sadly, if I wear my scientist hat, there's nothing to suggest this is the case."

There is a danger that sceptics – who are often atheists – allow their disbelief in a god to close their minds to the possibility of there being 'another world', scenarios that could reasonably be mutually exclusive. Scepticism – and atheism – is arguably not the antithesis of faith, but simply a differing form of it.

"I think scepticism is healthy and I welcome it," says Kerry-Marie Callander, who runs her own Auckland-based psychic service, Spiritual Decisions. "But I have had sceptics in tears because I've provided them with evidence that is so profound that they've apologised for doubting me."

Kerry has been trained by renowned US medium Doreen Virtue and makes annual visits to England's Arthur Findlay spiritual college. The UK, she says, has far stricter regulation policies, something that she would like to see adopted here to avoid vulnerable clients being taken advantage of. Kerry claims that anyone can hone their psychic skills, it's simply a case of learning to interpret your senses ("You can feel when you walk into a room if people have had an argument in it"), but as with musical or sporting abilities, some are more naturally gifted than others. She feels that there is too much ignorance and laments the easy-to-mock crystal-ball-gazing psychic stereotypes.

"I can't read people's minds and I can't tell fortunes," she says. "I don't go around 'being psychic', I'm not God. It's like choosing to turn on a radio and tuning into a station. One man showed himself to me through music and his tattoos, it couldn't have been anyone else. He'd taken his own life and his wife blamed herself because they'd had a fight but he told me to tell her that he planned to do it anyway. She couldn't forgive herself before that. Who else could have helped her but a medium?"

It's not just members of the general public who seek spiritual guidance. Rumours are rife that police forces throughout the world regularly, though unofficially, request the help of clairvoyants.

"I've worked in the forensic field for over 40 years," says Professor Glynn Owens of Auckland University School of Psychology, "and I'm pleased to say that no-one I've ever met in forensics would ever take this kind of thing seriously."

In 2009, London's Metropolitan Police Force issued a statement to the BBC refuting claims that psychic Joe Power had assisted them with a high profile murder case. However, following a report by investigative journalist Donal MacIntyre, which proved that the Met had, in fact, contacted Power for help, the UK's premier police force issued a second statement refusing to "identify people we may or may not speak to in connection with enquiries. We are not prepared to discuss this further."

Two years earlier Britain's Ministry of Defence was forced to admit spending £18,000 researching whether psychics could find hidden objects and from 1972-1995 the American government invested US\$20million in the Stargate Project to investigate whether

paranormal powers could be of military benefit during the Cold War.

"On occasions where a psychic practitioner gets something right it's because we underestimate the odds of them doing so," Wilson tells me. "Got a scar on your left knee? Turns out that a lot of people have but we think that it's less common than it is."

Be that as it may, it's rather trivialising the issue. Any psychic worth their salt will produce far more intriguing observations which is what makes the whole issue so fascinating. Of course, many predictions miss the spot, but if a soccer player shoots wide ten times during a match, it doesn't invalidate the one goal that he does score.

And it must be comforting to live with the steadfast belief that we pass over not to blackness, but a better place?

"I'm still scared of death, but I know there's life after it," says Kerry. "I don't believe in hell. We create our own hell on earth and after we go over we review our lives and become better souls. A psychic gift is not evil – it's for the good of mankind. It heals and should be conducted with love to direct people to reach their full potential."

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