

Toward More Subtle Awareness:
Meanings, Implications, and Possible New Directions for Psi Research

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Years ago, a professional parapsychological conference included a panel discussion devoted to the future of parapsychology. Many of us in the audience were amused to hear one of our esteemed colleagues begin his presentation by saying, “Of course, we cannot predict the future.” This was a delightfully curious comment from someone who had dedicated much of his life to a field that has collected considerable anecdotal and laboratory evidence for the reality of precognition (future-knowing or future-telling)—that, under certain conditions, persons are indeed able to “predict the future.” However, predicting the future of parapsychology is not something I would wish to attempt in this essay. Rather, I will present some personal views on the functions, meanings, and implications of psi events and experiences—as we now know them—and suggest some possibly fruitful directions for future psi research.

Functions, Meanings, and Implications Suggested by Psi Research Findings

Psi researchers typically think of psi as an information or communication process (e.g., see Shapin & Coly, 1980). Certainly, information—especially imagery-related and emotion-related information—can be “communicated” in many psi interactions, and considerable research has been devoted to exploring this aspect. I have been intrigued, however, by other roles psi might play and by other functions it might serve

One of these functions is suggested by comments of artist Georgia O'Keeffe. In discussing her large paintings of flowers, for which she is well known, O'Keeffe has noted:

Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven't the time—and to see takes time like to have a friend takes time. If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small.

So I said to myself—I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see in flowers. (O'Keeffe [1939] in Lynes, 1999, p. 1099)

Could psi be playing a role similar to that of O'Keeffe's large flower paintings? The dramatic, exaggerated flower renditions attract our attention, cause us to see things—"ordinary" flowers and the rest of the world, if we are fortunate—in new ways. So too, psi episodes, because of their anomalous and sometimes dramatic nature, attract our attention. Could these psi interactions serve as wake-up calls—prompting us to shift our attention, to look at the ordinary in new ways? Could what transpires in psi phenomena be magnifications that bring into bold relief certain subtle qualities of ourselves and of nature that are ever-present but typically unnoticed?

Psi events may be exaggerated and dramatized manifestations, indicators, and reminders of processes inherent in nature's operation and in our very lives. A dull, unmindful familiarity and habituation, and a vast array of distractions, may keep these smaller, more subtle processes hidden from our everyday observation and awareness. Psi events may help us momentarily shift, clarify, and deepen our perceptions, so that we might see more fully what lies about us and within us, hidden in the ordinary.

To profit most from these opportunities, however, it is necessary to go beyond the psi phenomena themselves, to their matrix, and this requires time, patience, and a willingness to be with the phenomena and with what they might reveal—to consider them deeply and at length. It may be important, as well, to appreciate the aesthetic dimensions of what we contemplating.

Those within the Buddhist tradition urge us not to confuse the pointing finger with the moon, and others warn us not to mistake the map for the territory. So, too, it may be useful to look beyond psi events and experiences to what these might be pointing toward or indicating, rather than stopping with, and devoting attention solely to, the psi phenomena themselves.

What might be the lessons, the hidden aspects of ourselves and of the world, to which psi may point, if we ponder them patiently and appreciatively? For me, psi events and experiences serve as reminders or as intimations of the following:

Human beings possess many abilities and potentials that we may not yet have discovered or explored sufficiently. Presently, we apprehend these human potentials very incompletely. Nor need these latent abilities be confined to humans. Identical or related processes may be present in animals, plants, and even in the inanimate realm. It would be illuminating to explore the psychological, sociological, and political reasons for the abandonment of investigations of psi or psi-related processes in animals (anpsi) or in plants (planpsi), and for the half-hearted attempts to investigate psi-like processes even in inanimate nature. Are our poorly understood psi potentials related to other much more familiar, but also poorly understood, potentials such as memory, voluntary action and self-regulation, creativity, placebo effects, spontaneous remissions, unusual athletic feats, unusual calculating skills, and the accomplishments of prodigies? Are there corresponding or analogous processes in animals, plants, and inanimate nature?

There is a special interconnectedness that we share with others and with all of nature.

The psi phenomena that we observe appear to require and to reveal this interconnectedness. This connectedness seems more subtle, more extensive, and more profound than are the more familiar, conventional forms. Similes and metaphors often can communicate understandings that otherwise are not possible. With regard to connectedness, I have always found the following two statements useful and revealing.

We with our lives are like islands in the seas, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other's foghorns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean's bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother-sea or reservoir. Our "normal" consciousness is circumscribed for adaptation to our external earthly environment, but the fence is weak in spots, and fitful influences from beyond leak in, showing the otherwise unverifiable common connection. (William James, 1909/1977, pp. 798-799)

I've heard it said there's a window that opens
from one mind to another,
but if there's no wall, there's no need
for fitting the window, or the latch. (Jelaluddin Rumi, 13th century/1984, p. 10)

Our identities may extend beyond their customarily assumed limits. Although we tend to conceive of ourselves as separate individuals, isolated from one another, and from other aspects of nature, by our "skin-encapsulated egos," psi events suggest that these limited identities may be quirks of an unnecessarily limited and habituated attention, self-perception, and self-conception. Such an individual self concept may be, to a large extent, culturally conditioned, because—even without considering psi events—we can find, in other cultures, greater identifications with others (with one's extended family, one's community, one's ancestors; with aspects of the natural world). Even within a Western, Eurocentric culture, we experience expansions of self-identity, beyond their usual bounds, in certain nonordinary conditions of consciousness. Psi experiences suggest even further, and more profound, extensions of identity. These extensions are honored in the concept of the "long body" developed most recently by Chris Aanstoos (1986) and William Roll (1988), but broached as early as 1935 by Henri Bergson, who used this same image of "our large body"—co-extensive with our consciousness, comprising all we perceive, reaching to the stars. "The habit has grown of limiting consciousness to the small body and ignoring the vast one" (Bergson, 1935, pp. 246-247). The relatively young field of transpersonal psychology devotes itself largely to studies of ways in which one's identity is experienced as extending

beyond the conventional boundaries of personality and ego. Psi events indicate the reality of such extensions. Issues about the nature of human identity are, of course, at the heart of perennial debates about whether aspects of one's identity might survive physical death (see Doore, 1990).

There exist alternative ways of knowing, being, and doing, beyond those made possible by sensation, reason, and motor action. This is, perhaps, the most obvious lesson from the findings of psi research. Experiences of receptive psi (telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychometry) illustrate the direct knowing of events and circumstances beyond the reach of the conventional senses and rational inference. Active psi events (psychokinesis, especially in its macro or directly detectable mode) illustrate the direct influence of physical, biological, or psychological circumstances beyond the reach of our muscles, glands, or the tools we have created for extending these conventional actions. In many indigenous, spiritual, and wisdom traditions, there are claims of knowing through becoming or being what is to be known. Psi experiences are consistent with these claims. These alternative forms of knowing, being, and doing are rich in epistemological implications, and their consideration is crucial for those seeking a more complete understanding of the nature of consciousness and its role in the physical world.

The universe may function according to spontaneous or simultaneous co-arising principles and goal-directed (teleonomic) principles, in addition to more familiar causal principles. The apparent goal-directed effects of psychokinesis, the co-occurrence of meaningfully related, synchronistic events, and the space-, time-, and barrier-defying character of all forms of psi, pose great difficulties for explanations based on our conventional understanding of causality. In the light of the findings of psi research, it becomes increasingly satisfying to assert that cause and effect are one, and to maintain, with Alan Watts (1970), that "to say that certain events are causally connected is only a clumsy way of saying that they are features of the same event, like the head and tail of [a] cat" (p. 82). In a world that includes psi

events and experiences, there is a place, as well, for aims and purposes, and for intentions and volitions, that are more than epiphenomenal.

The universe appears to be friendly. Psi allows us to know things and to influence outcomes when these are not possible through conventional means. Psi-mediated foreknowledge can help us prepare ourselves for traumatic events and can help us cope better with losses and with bad news. Psi, in the form of psi-mediated instrumental responses (PMIR; see Stanford, 1974a, 1974b) may increase the likelihood of being at the right place at the right time, and thereby avoid accidents or encounter desirable outcomes. In the forms of synchronicities, serendipity, pleasant surprises, “library angels” (in which useful information presents itself through “random” page openings or through the sudden and curious appearances of books, themselves), required information, or healing interactions, psi appears to occur in the service of our spoken and unspoken needs. Psi sometimes entertains us in its playful, humorous appearances and puzzles us in the curious, and apparently meaningless and trivial, forms in which it sometimes presents itself. To me, all of these things—especially the adaptive, survival-aiding aspects—suggest friendliness, support, and caring. This is not to deny or minimize the needs, pain, suffering, and apparent hostility that arise as the, perhaps necessary, complements of friendliness and support.

The universe is intelligent. The receptive psi process is able to provide information about particular target events, distinguishing these from other, less relevant, events. The active psi process (psychokinesis) is able to influence particular target systems, discriminating these from other systems. These instances of discernment, discrimination, and remarkable acuity are hallmarks of intelligence. In addition, psychokinesis appears to operate in an intelligent fashion, helping to bring about particular, desired outcomes. So, too, do other forms of psi when operating in a psi-mediated instrumental response (PMIR) mode to help satisfy the needs of

persons or other disposed systems. Synchronistic occurrences may provide relevant, useful information, confirmations, or clues to those involved. The specificity, appropriateness, and adaptive value of various psi outcomes indicate, to me, the operation of a form or forms of intelligence in whatever underlies psi.

The universe includes Something More. Psi events and experiences point to the existence of Something More in our world. That Something More that can become evident in, or can be suggested by, psi incidents does not appear to be apprehended readily, if at all, through more conventional and familiar tools, methods, and paradigms. To paraphrase William James, the findings of psi research provide exceptions, “white crows”—an “ever not quite” aspect of our world (a term James borrowed from Benjamin Paul Blood, an early advocate of pluralistic philosophy and an early explorer of chemically-induced nonordinary conditions of consciousness)—that forbid prematurely closing of our accounts with reality by assuming that our current understanding of the universe is complete. Conventional science and conventional inquiries that do not include considerations of psi hint at things beyond their reach, and these hints, in turn, point to the limitations of these conventional approaches and conclusions. Psi findings suggest not only that Something More exists, but also that we can be in an intimate interrelationship with that More.

There is an aspect of mystery in the universe. Although we have been studying psi phenomena formally since at least 1882, the essential nature, workings, and limits (if any) of psi remain shrouded in mystery. What William James said in 1909 remains just as true, nearly a century later.

For twenty-five years I have been in touch with . . . psychical research . . . [y]et I am theoretically no “further” than I was at the beginning; and I confess that at times I have been tempted to believe that the Creator has eternally intended this department of nature to remain *baffling*, to prompt our curiosities and hopes and suspicions all in equal measure, so that, although ghosts and clairvoyances, and

raps and messages from spirits, are always seeming to exist and can never be fully explained away, they also can never be susceptible to full corroboration. (James, 1909/1977, p. 788)

It may be, as James also suggested, that psychical researchers have been unduly impatient, “and that we must expect to mark progress not by quarter-centuries, but by half-centuries or whole centuries” (p. 788). On the other hand, it has been proposed that at least part of the mystery surrounding psi may be an essential aspect of its very nature. I have discussed this elsewhere (Braud, 1985), and an entire volume devoted to this obscuring or evasiveness facet of psi has been published (Kasahara, 1993). Could the presence of the unknown and of mystery may be a necessary complement to what is known and understood? Psi findings point to mystery, and they also point to a realm rich in unconscious, unpredictable workings and in which our comfortable strategies of striving, control, and mastery must give way to complementary modes of acceptance, surrender, awe, and respect.

Experienced Meanings, Interpretations, Lessons, and Impacts

The previous section addressed some of the more theoretical or intellectual lessons and possible conclusions suggested by psi research and its findings. In this section, I treat the more direct, experiential content of reports of those who have actually had psi experiences, emphasizing their perceived meanings, interpretations, lessons, and life impacts.

In considering the meanings of my own psi experiences, as well as those of others who have discussed their own experiences with me, I find that the meanings of these experiences tend to cluster in three areas.

- The experiences indicate, or remind me, that there is something more—other than or beyond the usual way in which we picture or conceive of the world. Specifically, there seem to be other realms, other ways of knowing, being, and doing. This, in turn, suggests that our conventional worldviews are incomplete and in need of modification and

expansion. It also helps me to reframe and reprioritize my life experiences, and things in general, by considering the larger contexts in which all experiences occur.

- The experiences often have functional, adaptive aspects. They can result in needed information or opportunities, help in the avoidance of undesired events, and serve to confirm decisions and affirm certain courses of action. The latter confirmations and affirmations seem to be especially characteristic of meaningful coincidences or synchronicities.
- The experiences suggest, and remind me of, how profoundly, extensively, and subtly things are interconnected. This, in turn, prompts me to consider actions and experiences in larger contexts, and also plays a role in the framework or world view according to which I make sense of things in general. This feeling of the connectedness of things brings with it feelings of trust that things are as they should be and that things are proceeding in ways that might be of greatest benefit for the greatest number.

These general experiential lessons are mirrored in the experiences of others. For example, Genie Palmer (1999), in exploring psi and other exceptional human experiences, found that these experiences were much more common than expected, had great meaning and powerful life impacts, had strong need-related and spiritual aspects, and were associated with well-being, positive life changes, transformation, and a fuller realization of our human potentials. These experiences brought a recognition and openness to Something More, were affirmations of life choices and directions, and indicated the profound interconnectedness of all of us. She found, further, that disclosing and working with these experiences, either individually or in group contexts, had beneficial consequences. Similar findings have been reported by Milton (1992), Kennedy and Kanthamani (1995), Dowdall (1998), White (1998), and others.

Possible New Directions for Psi Research

Just as psi events may call us to look beyond their surface characteristics toward the more subtle aspects of nature that these events may reflect, so too, this pointing to subtlety may encourage us to be more discerning and more incisive in the conclusions we draw about our subject matter and in the approaches we use to explore it. In the service of a more subtle, more discerning approach, the following shifts in our research strategies could be useful.

We could revisit the conclusions we have drawn about psi, its nature, and the factors that appear to modulate psi performance and examine these more incisively. We could scrutinize more carefully many of our working assumptions. For example, we take it for granted that the Ganzfeld and remote viewing protocols facilitate psi, that concrete objects or pictorial materials are more psi-accessible than are abstract or alphanumerical materials, that psi is “independent of distance,” and so on. Many of these generalizations are not backed by appropriate or appropriately extensive data, however. Often, ostensible psi-conducive conditions have not been contrasted with meaningful control conditions, nor have psychological confounds been addressed and dealt with adequately.

We could explore a wider range of inquiry methods in our studies of psi. In a recently published book (Braud & Anderson, 1998), we present no fewer than 28 research methods. Only a few of these have been used consistently in psi research.

We could range more widely in our sources of evidence and inspiration. Both adjacent and far-removed fields are rich in evidence and ideas that we could find useful to our increased understanding of psi. We could explore more carefully not only the literature and lore of parapsychology and psychical research, but also the areas of psychology, sociology, anthropology, the spiritual and wisdom traditions, the humanities, and the arts. We could delve more deeply into older works. In the grocery business, it is a common practice to “rotate one’s

stock”—making older materials more accessible so that they have a chance of being purchased and used, rather than languishing out of reach. We tend to reverse this practice in our scholarly and empirical work—emphasizing the very latest reports, methods, and data, and ignoring older thoughts and findings as though there were an expiration date for truth and we dare not delve into materials that are more than 5 – 10 years old. How wise is this practice?

We could extend the range of our subject matter. It would seem useful to learn about psi not only by studying its four, familiar, main forms and the major forms of evidence suggestive of survival of biological death, but to include, as well, a study of related experiences. Rhea White (1998) has identified many of these exceptional human experiences, and related forms have been suggested and treated by others.

We could direct more study to how psi occurs in everyday life, with an emphasis upon its impacts and accompaniments. It is important to understand how psi is experienced from the experiencer’s “inside” point of view, and to learn how people interpret their own psi experiences. What meanings do they attribute to these experiences? Do the experiences have impacts upon their actions, decisions, well-being, and worldviews? How useful are such experiences? Although such “lived world” (emic) views of psi are expected to be accompanied by possible misinterpretations and uncertainties, this approach can yield understandings that laboratory-based or external (etic) observations may not provide. A fuzzy snapshot of what happens in life may be more informative and useful than a clear snapshot of what happens under the more controlled, yet more artificial and incomplete, conditions of the laboratory.

We could welcome contributions from persons other than “professionals.” While continuing to value the important contributions of professional psi researchers, we can be more open to what can be learned by “nonprofessionals”—i.e., from persons in other areas and disciplines, from amateurs, from lay persons, from experiencers themselves. Not only are such

“outsiders” often privy to information and wisdom unavailable to psi researchers, but also, because they are not bathed in the assumptions and expectations of the field, they can provide fresh insights and interpretations that are otherwise difficult to generate or recognize.

We could pay increased attention to the adaequatio or preparedness of experiencers, participants, and investigators. The wonderful term *adaequatio* refers to the adequateness, preparedness, or predisposition of the knower (see Schumacher, 1978). This is an important determinant of what can be known. Just as a scientist must become skilled in the use of physical instruments, and aware of their possibilities and limitations, and just as an artist must become skilled in observational and rendering techniques, so, too, must one’s inner eye be trained and prepared to permit it to see clearly and well in the realm of psi experiences and events. It is possible that, although some facets of psi may be visible to almost anyone, other features may be discernable only to those whose own psi experiences have granted them the necessary *adaequatio*. This would apply to research participants, investigators, and theorists, alike. Experiences of preparing for, and actually having, psi experiences may be prerequisites for certain forms of knowing. A history of, and a predisposition toward, imaginal, meditative, and spiritual practices may contribute to requisite *adaequatio* of those who would study psi more fully and more deeply. *Adaequatio* considerations are of utmost relevance to our understanding of experimenter, observer, and checker effects in psi research, and may be important factors in determining whether or how our findings may replicate.

We could study what psi can reveal, about others or about the world, that is not redundant with sensory knowledge. Elsewhere (Braud, 1982), I have called this *nonevident psi*. We know that psi may simulate vision and audition. Indeed, in our studies of clairvoyance and remote viewing, and in our almost exclusive use of visual target materials, we have come to think of psi as another form of visual processing. We even verify its existence insofar as it can

duplicate the visual sense. Surely, this is but a narrow band of the full spectrum of what it might be possible to discern psychically. It seems important to learn what psi might be able to reveal about the world, other than its formal, sensible characteristics. What is not readily evident to the senses would describe one such possibility. Psi may allow us to learn about the histories, futures, relationships, associations, meanings, emotional states, consciousness characteristics, spiritual qualities, developmental stages, and a host of other qualities of objects, persons, or situations that are not immediately (or ever) evident to the conventional senses.

Carl Jung once defined *intuition* as the “perception of the possibilities inherent in a situation” (1960, p. 141). This expression parallels the notion of nonevident psi as an accessing of latent or implicit tendencies or potentials that are not yet explicit or available to the senses. We could develop research programs devoted to exploring some of these “inherent possibilities.” Goldberg (1983, 1989) already has suggested a variety of forms and functions of intuition. Some of these illustrate forms of nonevident psi, as well, and these could serve as useful starting points in planning new research programs.

Is there such a thing as *psychic space*, and can it, its dimensions, or its contents be discerned directly? Can our conscious awareness itself be a measuring instrument or a *psychoassay* for events and influences for which no other detectors presently exist? In exploring such areas, challenges involving the validity and trustworthiness of these observations and knowings would be great, but not insurmountable. A promising tool for such investigations is the *projective differential* developed by Peter Raynolds (1997). The technique uses rapidly presented pairs of abstract images as a way of measuring holistic and intuitive responses to a wide range of objects, persons, situations, or concepts. The technique provides quantitative and qualitative assessments of subtle, nonevident qualities and meanings. It should be possible to use the projective differential in novel studies of nonevident psi.

Nonevident psi may allow us to access what Henry Corbin (1972) called the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal world. This is the subtle, visionary, intermediary, archetypal, spiritual realm—a realm encountered by the active, creative imagination. In exploring this world through nonevident psi, or as a means of further understanding nonevident psi, we should be careful not to project upon this realm too many of our conventional notions of physicality, spaciality, temporality, and causality. In this way, we could experience and learn from the unique qualities of this realm, while avoiding what philosophers call *category errors*.

We could explore the personifying, dramatizing, and mythopoetic aspects and functions of psi incidents. In addition to studying the *content* of psi experiences and events, we could pay increased attention to the possible ways in which psi may be used to personify or dramatize information or other states of affairs for our own benefit and for the benefit of others. In many cases, perhaps the manifest content of psi experiences is not as useful or important as another message that might be provided—in personified or dramatic form—by the experience. The content may be less relevant, and may simply consist of what is readily at hand. Frederic Myers, Theodore Flournoy, and others have touched upon this as the mythopoetic function of psi (see Ellenberger, 1981), as has William James (1909/1977). James Hillman (1976) has discussed personification in other contexts. The informational content of psi interactions (both extrasensory and psychokinetic) may, sometimes, be merely a secondary aspect of a drama or psychological representation or manifestation that is constructed (*poeisis*), “unconsciously,” to serve a purpose other than the conveyance of that particular (manifest) content. Personification, personalization, dramatization, and mythopoesis may play extremely important roles, especially, in so-called poltergeist episodes, in various psi-related automatisms (e.g., automatic writing, aura appearances, channeling) and, to an even greater extent, in the various phenomena that have been marshaled in favor of survival of bodily death (particularly, mediumistic and discarnate

communications). As examples, telepathic exchanges may simply be dramatic, personified indications of intimate connections between persons (especially meaningful when those involved may be feeling isolated, alienated, or abandoned); psychokinetic events may dramatize the interconnection of mind and matter and the active power of consciousness in the physical world; “trivial” coincidences or quaint and curious psi occurrences may indicate the reality of extremely low probability events that are, nonetheless, “allowed” by the Gaussian probability distributions of physical possibilities; and so on. This may be a crucial focus for future psi studies, and one that might provide particularly rich understandings of the meanings of psi events and experiences.

In addition to considering what a psi experience or event might “mean”—either by seeking an external, informational correlate or referent or by exploring another kind of dramatized or personified meaning—it also is important to appreciate the experience or event for itself. The latter contains its own meaning—one that may be as valid as anything, outside itself, that the experience may be “about.” This issue has already been explored in the context of images and symbols within the Jungian and related traditions (e.g., see Avens, 1980), and the thoughts that have arisen in this context can provide clues for us to use in our own studies of psi.

We could use psi studies as an arena in which to learn more about, and to appreciate, paradox and apparent contradictions. Experiencing and studying psi may provide opportunities for us to become more familiar with what might be called *chimeric truths*. A chimera is a mythical beast possessing an “impossible” blend of features—e.g., a lion’s head, goat’s body, and serpent’s tail. We tend to think of such things as fanciful and purely imaginary, since, surely, such strange beasts cannot really exist. Yet, are such chimeric blendings any stranger or “impossible” than the paradoxical blendings of wave and particle qualities that photons and subatomic entities have been shown to possess? Attributed to physicist Niels Bohr is the

statement: "The opposite of a truth is a lie. The opposite of a great truth is another great truth."

What seem to be contradictions or lies, to our conventional, rational mind, may be simply different aspects of a larger reality. Experiencing some of the implausibilities, impossibilities, contradictions, and paradoxes that psi events seem to embody may expand our comprehension of how nature may allow opposites (William Blake would call them *contraries*) to co-exist in a dynamic and necessary tension. Psi processes may be chimeras of blended possibilities that we might not entertain were they not realized in psi events. Lessons—in holding paradox and ambiguity—learned in this arena may generalize to other areas and help transform our ways of knowing, being, and doing.

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