

They Know the Unknown: Celebrity Accounts of Exceptional Experiences

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In some of my early writing on telephone anomalies, I stumbled across the book *They Knew The Unknown* by Martin Ebon, [1] who produced many popular books on psychic phenomena. This particular work, however, focused on popular figures – typically scientists – and their links to psychical research. My own interest in this book was for Thomas Edison and his interests in spiritualism and contact with the dead. But I enjoy the book for the insight of many other figures and their links to the field, including Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Abraham Lincoln, Charles Dickens, to name a few.

When the Covid-19 lockdown began, my personal reading went in the direction of autobiographies and biographies of figures who have been of personal interest to me throughout my life. Yes, this included parapsychologists, working my way through the life of J.B. Rhine in *The Enchanted Voyager* by Denis Brian,[2] and personal memoirs of Walter Franklin Prince [3]. But actors and singers of my time growing up in the 1990s of whom, have in some way, struck a chord with me, the people you'd want as those top 5 or 10 dinner guests when asked. Those are the life stories I sought out and began reading. What jumped out at me every time, up to the most recent autobiography I have just finished, is that they all gave at least some mention of significant exceptional experiences within their lives of clear interest to parapsychology. And here, I'll share just a few of those accounts.

Admittedly, before I read the life stories, a few television interviews produced examples of exceptional experiences that also stood out to me. The first was by the singer Sting (Gordon Sumner) of *The Police*. In the *DailyMail*, and many other news outlets of 2009, reports came of Sting's 'ghost confession'. This later included numerous interviews, such as on the *Late Show with Jimmy Fallon* in which he talked about his encounters in his purportedly haunted home in north London, where many of his songs were written. He stated, to Fallon "I never believed in ghosts, I was very sceptical, until I lived with them" [nervous laughter from the audience]. Fallon asked, "was it numerous ghosts?" Sting replied "Yeh, you would wake up in

the morning and everything had been reorganised in the kitchen, furniture was in a different place, bottles were smashed, plates were smashed on the floor. And one night I woke up and I saw Trudie [his wife] standing in the corner with our child. And I was wondering why she was staring at me, and then I reached over and there was Trudie [indicating in the bed next to him]. She went ‘Who’s that?’ [signalling to the woman in the corner]. And we both saw this woman and a child in the corner of the room. Then we found out that it used to be a pub called The Three Ducks, in the 17th century, and I don’t know what happened there but it was a very weird atmosphere. Then when I sold the house, it kept being resold every few months [laughs]. I liked the ghosts. I enjoyed their company. But I was very sceptical about it.” Fallon, and the audience, although facing the accounts with nervous laughter, appeared very respectful of Sting’s revelation, with Fallon somewhat relating to having been in buildings with such atmospheres and reputation and trying to ground himself with a mindset of calm on entry by saying out loud [to the ghosts] “Hey I’m cool, I’m good with you guys, you can do whatever. Haunt me. Have fun, it’s your place. Right?”.

The singer, Ed Sheeran, produced a similar account on the *Jonathan Ross Show* in 2017, while sat with guests Rita Ora and Gordon Ramsey. Although Ross is known for being a comic interviewer, he has some sympathy for accounts of exceptional experiences, especially due to his wife Jane Goldman’s involvement with works such as *The Woman in Black* (and the adaption of the screenplay, 2012), and also her documentary works on parapsychological phenomena, on *Jane Goldman Investigates* (2003) which saw Jane interview known faces such as the late Maurice Grosse and the very present Dr Ciaran O’Keeffe. The conversation started with Ross mentioning that Ora helped Sheeran purchase her old home, then Ross turned to Sheeran and said “but you think it’s haunted, don’t you?” Sheeran then goes on to explain “ah, I do have a haunted house, I have cottage, and there is a little girl that lives in the attic”. The reactions of both Ora and Ramsey are somewhat of nervous smiles, and some titters from the audience, but Sheeran remains straight faced and adamant in his account, which seems to dispel the attitude of humour or shocked facial reactions from the other guests. He goes continues, “Three people have stayed there that don’t believe in ghosts and they’ve all seen it”. Ross asks, “so what do they see, do they see her walking around?” Sheeran responds with “yeh, they sleep in the top room and they wake up with her at the end of the bed, and there’s...” Ramsey interjects with what seems like a whispered expletive and stunned looked, by which time Ora is fixated on Sheeran’s account. He gestures to Ramsey, saying “I’m not even [kidding], but basically, the top room has a trapdoor in it, where in the 16th century people went there when

they were ill and then they would die and get lowered down. And yeh, the girl that used to clean the room refuses to clean it, because she's seen the girl so many times." Both guests now silent, Ross asks "so she's seen the ghost, have you seen the ghost?" Sheeran's final comment "ah no, I'm not sleeping up there, f*** that man". To which, naturally, brings laughter on the final comment, to what was an experience seemingly told with truth and sincerity by Sheeran, no giving rise to the humour that people attempted to deploy to the telling of his account.

Finally on the television front, from my own personal research into after-death communication (ADC) experiences, I could not help but notice the mention of such an experience by the Bee Gees singer, and eldest brother, Sir Barry Gibb. In 2021, in several newspapers and radio platforms worldwide, Sir Barry and his wife Linda, reported that they had seen Andy Gibb (died 1988, seen by Linda) and Robin Gibb (died 2012, seen by Sir Barry) following their deaths. Reported in *The Sun* newspaper, Sir Barry is quoted as saying "Maybe it's a memory producing itself outside your conscious mind or maybe it's real? The biggest question of all is, 'is there life after death?' I'd like to know." In an interview with Piers Morgan on the show *Life Stories* on ITV (2017) Sir Barry revealed "I saw Robin in my house in Miami walk across from the front door to the bar and I went to look and there was nobody there... Maybe it's in your own head but it was Robin. [It was a] nice experience, it wasn't scary it was just 'Ooh there's Rob'." Although brief, this is a great example of how the ADC is predominantly a positive and therapeutic experience, no matter who encounters them, their beliefs, or background.

The first autobiography I read since 2019 where I noticed overlaps to exceptional experiences was certainly not expected – comedian Julian Clary, in his own life story humorously named *A Young Man's Passage* (2005). Following the loss of his partner Christopher, ADC type experiences were reported by Julian. "I had a 'real' communication with Christopher some years after he died. I was depressed, stoned and listening to Dionne Warwick's recording of 'Heartbreaker'. I was missing him and felt that he was missing me. I thought I heard him calling me, forlorn and desperate for my physical presence. It wasn't as if he was just in another room or another town, he was in another world, behind glass, through the mirror. I only mention it because it was one of several such experiences I had for a few years. They have always been quite distressing because try as I might I couldn't comfort or reassure him." It seems, despite the frustration Clary felt, there was some comfort to be had from the feeling and belief of Christopher continuing beyond death. Owing to this, he later attended a psychic demonstration.

However, he recounts ‘a regrettable’ experience, in which he felt the whole thing was most certainly a con for several reasons. Hands brushing his face in the dark, singing to distract from things happening around the room, the medium producing a poor impression of Christopher, and the likelihood that the medium and assistants had been listening into the sitters and their conversations of personal loss before they began – to mention but a few concerns.

In his recent autobiography, *Windswept & Interesting* (Two Roads, 2021) Sir Billy Connolly makes it very clear how he has never been much of a believer in ghosts or psychics. [5] During the Covid-19 pandemic, he ended up watching a lot of cable ghost-hunting shows “I’m not a believer, but I find them riveting. The search for the entity is always disappointing, but I live in hope. I keep waiting for a ghost to appear; I wish someone would come in the door with no head, or there would be a visitation by a ‘Lady in White’ or ‘Lady in Grey’ – they always gave them names like that, to make them sound elegant.” However, Sir Billy does recount one night during his stand-up comic act where he did encounter something unusual. That night in Dublin, he decided to take a walk through the corridors of the theatre and backstage. His stage manager Steve would normally be there to check the audience as they filled up the theatre and announce Sir Billy as he made his entrance. On this particular night, Steve wasn’t there. He explains, “Instead of Steve, there was a man sitting at a desk right beside the stage. He was a dapper wee guy, with short hair and a moustache. I said, ‘How are you doing?’ He said, ‘Fine, I don’t always come in.’ I said, ‘Oh, aye? Fair enough.’ Then I said, ‘How is it out there?’ Meaning the auditorium. ‘Is it full yet?’ And he said, ‘It’s fine.’ So I said, ‘Great, I’ll go on.’” He went on only to find the auditorium two-thirds full and still filling, instead of starting his act he noticed a commotion in the audience between two men arguing over tickets and seating [a story in itself]. He continues “I sorted it out, but when I went backstage again the wee guy at the desk had gone. He was nowhere to be seen. I asked about him, and someone said, ‘Oh, he doesn’t actually exist. He’s just one of the Gaiety Theatre Ghosts. There are several of them!’.”

He also reports a deathbed type experience, regarding his birth mother who left when he was very young, later establishing a new family and had more children. But Sir Billy reconnected with his mother in adult life and developed a new relationship with her. He stated, “I heard through my cousin Neil that my mother was gravely ill with motor neurone disease. I had a strong urge to go to see her. I drove to Dunoon and arrived at three in the afternoon – I saw the time on the town clock – but then I felt overwhelmed with conflicting feelings and indecision. What would be the point of seeing her? What would I say to her? Would she even want to see

me? Maybe her family wouldn't like my showing up... In the end I just couldn't face seeing her, so I turned round and went right back to Glasgow. Later, I was told that at that exact time, three o'clock, she'd said to her daughter Mary: 'Billy's here'."

My most recent delve into a life journey, was the autobiography of rock legend Ozzy Osbourne. [6] The book is full of intense honesty about drugs – to the extreme – marriage breakdowns, and all kinds of wild behaviour, which many writers could only dream of coming up with for a bestselling novel. But for Ozzy, it all happened. This is why his presence is so notorious and the fact that he is still alive, given what he has gone through, has shocked many, especially those in the medical profession who have dealt with him. His own accounts of exceptional experiences, remarkably, are not during the highs of the drug fuelled years, but by the late 1990s when he was actively trying to become completely clean of drugs and alcohol, spurred on by family. He reports two phenomena in the process of becoming clean. Firstly, thinking about people not seen or mentioned for sometime, and then soon after, they came back into his life (very much akin to telephone telepathy and similar phenomena discussed by Dr Rupert Sheldrake) and promotions. Ozzy states in his own words "I swear that being sober has made me a bit psychic, too. I'll say to Sharon [his wife], 'I wonder how so-and-so is' – someone I haven't seen for years – and the next day he'll pop out of the wood-work. I had something similar when Princess Diana died, y'know. The week before the crash, I had a dream about it. It was so vivid I told Tony Dennis [his personal assistant] about it. Then, a few days later, she was gone. 'Don't have any fucking dreams about *me*' Tony said."

I was going to end this article with Ozzy's account. However, in recently watching the Jonathan Ross show again on the 29th October, quite unexpectedly, another guest and poet, Benjamin Zephaniah, presented another experience for all to hear. Following asking about attitudes towards Halloween, Ross, already primed with information on his guests, asks Zephaniah, "am I right in thinking that you had a sort of supernatural experience once?" Drifting into thought and recollection, he replied, "Yes, I had a very, very weird experience, and interestingly y'know, a lot of these experiences happen in the night when there's shadows y'know and stuff like that, but this happened in broad daylight. Me, and five other people, were in a house in Birmingham. We were waiting for cousin to come home. She walked in [through] the front door, through the front room, and out the backdoor. And we went to see her, and she wasn't there." The other guests on Ross's show clearly shocked with stunned reactions at this point. He continues, "And we all saw her. Later on that day, we found out that she'd been hit by a

car, died for about five minutes or whatever it is, and came back to life [Ross lets out a ‘wow’ with his eye fixated on Zephaniah], and it wasn’t just me, like I said there were five others who witnessed it... And I’m not really one of those people that believes in that stuff, I’m into science y’know, but I also understand that there is stuff that we can’t prove.” Ross remarks that normally he would dismiss that sort of thing, and yet, it was hard to with Zephaniah’s account as it sounds so convincing, especially as sober and level headed gentleman.

People of public status, like any other, clearly do know of and experience the unknown. I wasn’t even looking for these experience in the lives of people I watched being interviewed or avidly read about, but still, the events jumped off the page at me. It goes to show just how common such experiences and relationships to psychical phenomena are, no matter what the possible explanations for the occurrence may have been. It further adds to the very old sceptical assumption that only those of poor education or working-class background may be so fooled into thinking that they have experienced something exceptional. Indeed, to bring things full circle to one of the lives I explored, Walter Franklin Prince answered this assumption almost a hundred years, in the book *Noted Witnesses to Psychic Occurrences* [7]. He evidenced that people of science, lawyers, physicians, the army and navy, diplomats, poets, playwrights, artists, actors, musicians, clergymen, people of title, teachers, magicians and many others, all have related to exceptional experiences at some point in their lives. Many of these experiences, certainly for the experient, are difficult to explain and rationalise, considering the circumstances. It is clear that things are no different to this day, no matter what profession you have, or beliefs held, exceptional experiences are commonplace and often highly therapeutic. They are something that most can relate to at least once in our lives, and become so significant, they are an important part of our life story to be retold.

Reference

- [1] Ebon, M. They knew the Unknown
- [2] Brian, The Enchanted Voyager
- [3] BSPR (1935). *Walter Franklin Prince: A tribute to his memory*. Boston Society for Psychic Research.
- [4] Clary, J. (2005). *A young man’s passage*. (Ebury Press, 2005).
- [5] Connolly, B. (2021). *Windswept & interesting*. Two Roads.
- [6] Osbourne, O., with Ayres, C. (2009). *I am Ozzy*. Sphere. pp.380-381
- [7] Prince, W.F. (1928). *Noted witnesses to psychic occurrences*. Boston SPR.

For information on my ADC research, please visit: www.adcrp.org