

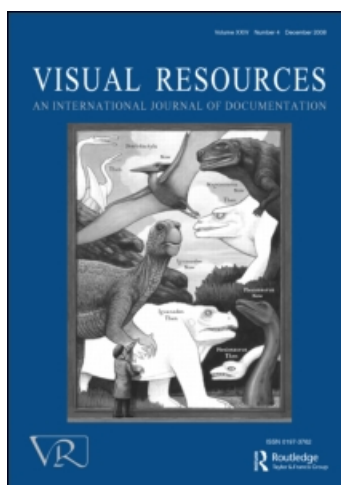
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# Channeled Apparitions: On Visions that Morph and Categories that Slip

Ann Taves

This paper examines apparitions that morph into embodied or channeled entities through a comparison of JZ [Judy Zebra] Knight (b. 1946), who claims to channel a 35,000-year-old spirit-warrior named Ramtha, and turn-of-the-last-century case studies of spirit possession and multiple personality. Considering visions as arising, like dreams, from internally rather than externally generated percepts and both as grounded in fluctuating states of consciousness, allows us to analyze the range of perceptions that arise without external stimulation of the senses, the extent to which they morph into other unusual states, and, in cases where this happens, the factors that seem to encourage this. In Knight's case, her ability to see and then embody Ramtha most likely rests on a combination of personal abilities and contextual factors linked by an openness to implementing suggestions from self and others.

*Keywords:* Channeling; Spirit Possession; Multiple Personality; Visions; Suggestion; Knight, JZ [Judy Zebra] (b. 1946)

Historians too often study visions as if they are a determinate "thing." While many accounts of visions may give this impression, closer analysis often reveals a variety of perceptions (visual, auditory, tactile, proprioceptive, and the like) that seem very real to subjects but are most likely, like dreams, generated from internal rather than external sources. Such experiences are often associated with mental states such as sleep, trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and psychosis. Theoretical integration across various lines of psychological research is laying the foundation for an increasingly sophisticated understanding of such experiences in terms of cognitive processing and fluctuations in consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Considering visions as arising, like dreams, from internally rather than externally generated percepts and both as grounded in fluctuating states of consciousness, allows us to analyze the range of perceptions that arise without external stimulation of the senses, the extent to which they morph into other unusual states, and, in cases where this happens, the factors that seem to encourage this.

This paper focuses on one such transformation: apparitions that morph into "incarnations," instances where people first see a vision or apparition of an entity seemingly apart from themselves and then in time embody or channel the entity. What I here refer to as "channeled apparitions" could be framed in a medieval European idiom in terms of the relationship between visions and demonic or divine possession. With the rise of the Spiritualist movement in the mid-nineteenth century, religious options in the West expanded to include spirit possession along with demonic and divine possession. Late nineteenth-century psychologists and psychical

researchers studied Spiritualist mediums alongside hysterics manifesting multiple personalities, thus further expanding the interpretive options.<sup>2</sup> In recent decades, we have seen a resurgence of interest in apparitions, exorcisms, multiple personality disorder, and mediumship, now recast in the New Age idiom of channeling.<sup>3</sup>

As Nancy Caciola has argued for the medieval period, divine and demonic possession, multiple personality, and mediumship are not discrete, self-evident phenomena but rather experiences that both subjects and observers recognized as requiring interpretation.<sup>4</sup> The central problem that guided the Society for Psychical Research (founded in 1882) and its investigations of mediums was whether they were indeed channels for spirits or unconscious performers in an elaborate dissociative drama played out between sitters and mediums. Some women, such as the famed Mrs. [Leonora] Piper (1859–1950), allowed themselves to be studied for decades in the hope of resolving this question. Early cases of multiple personality suffered from similar interpretive ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> In the case of Clara Norton Fowler (b. 1875), referred to in the publications of her physician Morton Prince as “Christine Beauchamp,” there was considerable debate over the status of the impish child personality (B III) referred to by all as “Sally.” The adult personalities (B I and B IV) regarded themselves as “possessed” when Sally was in control. B IV initiated a conversation with Sally through the automatic writing often utilized by mediums. Richard Hodgson, a psychical researcher who worked closely with Mrs. Piper for many years, assisted Prince with Miss Beauchamp in the initial years of her treatment. Prince, however, rejected the idea that Sally was a spirit and, within a few years, refused Hodgson access to his patient, presumably because he did not want Hodgson to reinforce the idea. The psychologist William McDougall took up the idea again, however, with respect to the Beauchamp case and others with an interest in psychical research took it up in relation to subsequent cases as well.<sup>6</sup>

While the adult personalities of Miss Beauchamp may have considered themselves to be “possessed” by “Sally” in a metaphoric rather than a real sense, other research subjects disagreed sharply with researchers over how their experiences should be interpreted. Psychologist Theodore Flournoy’s study of the medium Hélène Smith (born Catherine-Elise Muller; 1861–1929), published as *From India to the Planet Mars* (1900), provides a case in point. While Smith and her followers viewed her “controls” as authentic spirits, Flournoy interpreted her elaborate channeled Indian and Martian worlds (complete with invented Sanskrit and Martian languages) as subconscious mythopoetic fantasies. While researchers interested in mediums viewed the claims of many mediums as deliberately fraudulent, there was a general consensus among the researchers that the best mediums, e.g., Mrs. Piper and Hélène Smith, were not involved in conscious deceptions. Ruling out conscious deception on the one hand and, in most instances, actual spirit possession on the other, researchers moved toward interpreting mediumship in terms of unconscious performances rooted in unusual abilities that overlapped to some degree with abilities demonstrated by multiples, such as Miss Beauchamp, in contexts of psychic distress and abilities that could be tapped using hypnosis.<sup>7</sup>

While turn-of-the-century researchers speculated along these lines, they had little at their disposal with which to test their subjects for such abilities. With the epidemic

of cases of multiple personality disorder in the 1980s and 1990s, a number of psychological tests were developed to provide a measure of such abilities in both clinical and non-clinical populations. JZ [Judy Zebra] Knight (b. 1946 as Judith Darlene Hampton), who claims to channel a 35,000-year-old spirit-warrior named Ramtha, has cooperated with researchers, allowing them to give her and some of her followers a series of personality tests. Equally important, for my purposes, Knight's autobiography gives a detailed narration of her life and the emergence of Ramtha from his first appearance as a glowing "giant man ... made all of light" that she could see and hear to an incarnating entity that completely displaced her from her body in the context of public performances.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I will pick up where the turn-of-the-century discussions left off in order to root the performance theory more deeply in relation to recent work in psychology. I will focus on the point where Ramtha shifts from being seen and heard to being embodied in relation to some of the earlier cases. I am interested in what we can piece together of this shift from "vision" to "incarnation" as it was experienced internally by the subject and engaged by others with whom the subject was involved. I will argue that Knight's ability to see and then embody Ramtha rested on a combination of personal and contextual factors linked by her openness to implementing suggestions from self and others. The primary personal factors are a personality type that blurs the boundaries between dreaming and waking (Hartman's "thin boundaries" and Flournoy's "subconscious mythopoetic abilities"), an ability to enact the apparition with a split-off part of her personality (also demonstrated by many mediums and multiples), and an unconsciously developed ability to "leave her body" on cue (similar to that of Mrs. Piper). Culturally, her connection to currents of New Age thought through her second husband ("Jeremy Wilder") and a spiritualist minister (Lorraine Graham) played a critical role in her ultimate interpretation of herself as neither insane nor possessed nor a medium, but as a "channel" for a spiritual being. Finally, comparing Knight with turn-of-the-century case studies of a medium and a multiple, who also provided detailed descriptions of a transition from seeing to incarnating another personality, suggests that suggestions from self and others (auto- and hetero-suggestion) played a significant role in the morphing of the phenomena in question.

## **Knight's Account**

JZ Knight describes Ramtha's initial appearance as occurring while she and her second husband Jeremy were experimenting with the New Age phenomena of "pyramid power" in their living room in Tacoma, Washington, in February 1978. Ramtha appeared as a glowing "giant man ... made all of light" at a point when Knight placed a pyramid on her head, aligned it correctly, and announced that "in moments, gentlemen, you will witness a truly magnificent transformation."<sup>9</sup> Knight describes her eyes as going "glassy, like those of a sleepwalker" and reports that she "could hear voices about [her], but they were far away, like in a dream" (p. 9). Her husband, she says, described her as looking "like someone in shock. You were staring, and muttering things that didn't make any sense, and you looked, I don't know, like

you were lit up, shining, like an angel” (p. 11). At his first appearance, Knight asked a question, “Who are you?” and Ramtha answered, “I am Ramtha, the Enlightened One.” A few days later, she attributed the “firm but gentle [...] voice” that instructed her to Ramtha (p. 14). With his second visual appearance, Knight and Ramtha engaged in a more extended dialogue in which Ramtha read her mind. Knight reports a dream-like sense of hearing, in which, as she said: “I did not understand ... most of what he said to me, but I *felt* like I did” (p. 22). Knight was alone for Ramtha’s third appearance and it is not clear whether their conversation would have been audible to others. At that point, she referred to him as a “spirit” or “ghost” and his “materialized form” had characteristics commonly associated with such: he “floated” from room to room, “walked through” doorways that were too short without ducking, and manipulated physical objects, turning the faucets and the gas stove on and off (p. 237). The fourth visit occurred when her husband was present. Jeremy “felt him,” but couldn’t see him. In this instance, Ramtha addressed Jeremy and JZ relayed his words. Her mouth, she said, “was moving with Ramtha’s words,” though she also interjected her own. At the end of the visit, she said she “shook [her] head as if [she] were coming out of a trance” (pp. 244–45). While her husband enthusiastically embraced Ramtha, Knight says she worried that she was going crazy: “I could feel myself mouthing his words, but they were *his* words, not *mine!* Anybody else would think I was having a conversation with myself. Loony Tunes time!” (p. 245).

In search of interpretive help, Knight called various churches remembering “that when I was younger, a few of the members of my church testified about being visited by angels or even by Jesus Himself.” None of the church people were of any help until she happened on a “Spiritualist Church.” She explained to the “psychic” who answered that she had a “spirit” in her house. The pastor of the church, Lorraine Graham, reframed her experience in Spiritualist terms, explaining that certain individuals have mediumistic abilities that allow them to “connect with spiritual teachers on the other side.” The minister pronounced Knight a “medium” and told her she was not “crazy, just gifted” (pp. 253–54). Knight incarnated Ramtha for the first time during her first meeting with Graham. While Knight reported experiencing only a momentary dizzy spell, she said that Jeremy announced to her that “the Ram just came *through* you.” In the face of Knight’s incredulity, Jeremy explained:

Zebra, you know how you would use your voice to speak to me for him?  
Yes. Well, this time you just disappeared somewhere else, but your body changed too. ... I guess to look something like Ramtha’s. He spoke to us, Lorraine and me, and it was through your body, Zebra. It was wonderful.  
(p. 256)

Knight worried at this point that she had been “possessed.” Knight and Wilder later returned for a longer visit. Over the course of several days of conversations with Graham, Graham provided Knight with a metaphysical framework for understanding her experiences. She instructed Knight that she could choose whether to engage with Ramtha or not and gave her a number of books to read, including books by Helena Blavatsky, Edgar Cayce, and Arthur Ford. Graham linked Ramtha to Arthur Ford’s

spirit teacher's prophesy that "a great teacher would come during the latter years of the century [...] through the body of a woman" (p. 263). Knight was startled to learn that the spiritual world about which Graham was teaching her "acknowledged [Jesus] as the Christ." She said that she found the spiritualist belief that Jesus taught "that the Father is within [...] rare and refreshing" (p. 267).

Not long thereafter, Knight received a call from the Rama Center, a spiritual center in Oregon, asking her to speak to their group. After agreeing, she turned to Ramtha, asking him "*how* [she] was supposed to do this." Ramtha informed her that she was going to be a "channel" rather than a "medium." As if this were not the case with mediums, Ramtha described a channel as one who entirely abdicates the body (p. 302). He then explained what the experience would be like, saying: "you will follow a great light until you become that light. Within a moment in your time you shall return into your body and, indeed, time will have ebbed by." He explained that the light is God and that time does not exist in the light. "Remember, time and its past [...] do not exist within the light, yet *all-knowingness is the light*" (p. 303).

At the Rama Center, events unfolded as predicted. JZ described herself as having no clue as to what she should do once she was seated facing an expectant audience. To her whispered "Ramtha, please get me out of here," he replied "go in peace," thus initiating an experience in which she says she felt like she was "jerked" from her body by "a great hand." Then, she wrote:

I remember faintly seeing the room from the ceiling ... everything and everyone seemed frozen. I looked down and saw the top of my own head. [...] Then the misted light filled the room [...] I somehow *felt* and *knew* that I was part, yet all, of that light. A flash came [...] I was racing or flowing down a tunnel, but I couldn't see the sides. I just remember that there appeared to be a *wind* taking me toward a brilliant light at the other end of the tunnel. [...] The closer I came, the more brilliant the light was. Its lightning flashes began to bathe me in a warm peaceful glow that I cannot possibly explain. I just know that I had no fear, no regrets, and no limitations. I was rapturously free. [...] No sorrow, no pain [...] just oneness with the great light. [...] I was not detached from the whole but *was* the whole. I did not want to leave the light. Then a flash came and I felt heavy once more, with eyelids, arms, legs that tingled as if they were asleep, and a head that pounded. I slowly opened my eyes. [...] Images were moving, and voices that were faint were becoming audible. (pp. 305–6)

## The Formation of Experience: Personality Types and Individual Abilities

In 1996 Stanley Krippner, Ian Wickramasekera, Judy Wickramasekera, and Charles Winstead were given permission to administer three tests to JZ Knight and six others who had studied at Knight's Ramtha School of Enlightenment (started in 1987 in Yelm, Washington) for five years or more. Five of the participants were male and two were female, ranging in age from twenty-six to fifty-seven. The tests administered

were the Tellegen Absorption Subscale (TAS) of the Differential Personality Questionnaire, the Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES), and the [Hartman] Boundary Questionnaire (BQ).<sup>10</sup> The TAS was designed to measure “openness to absorbing and self-altering experiences” and has been shown to correlate with hypnotic ability.<sup>11</sup> Scores below the 25<sup>th</sup> percentile are categorized as low in absorption, 26<sup>th</sup> to 74<sup>th</sup> as moderate, 75<sup>th</sup> or higher as high, and 87<sup>th</sup> or higher as very high. The DES is a self-reporting questionnaire that is widely used in clinical settings. Although there is considerable overlap between the TAS and DES, the wording of the DES reflects a concern with pathology and emphasizes phenomena such as absence of memory (amnesia) that could be construed as a manifestation of more extreme states of absorption. High scores on the DES correlate moderately ( $r=.40$ ) with anomalous and paranormal experiences and more modestly with hypnotizability ( $r=.21$ ) as measured by the Anomalous Experience Inventory.<sup>12</sup> A raw score of 30 or above is rated as highly dissociative. The BQ was constructed to measure a personality dimension whose end points are said to reflect “thin” versus “thick” boundaries. Those who score at the thick end of this scale would typically be characterized as solid, organized, rigid, and “thick-skinned,” while those scoring at the thin end would typically be described as sensitive, open, vulnerable, and intellectually and emotionally “fluid.”<sup>13</sup> Scoring at the thin end of the BQ is moderately correlated ( $r=.54$ ) with high scores on the TAS and with number of dreams recalled ( $r=.40$ ;  $p<.0001$ ).<sup>14</sup> A total raw score below 250 is categorized as “thick,” 250–300 as “mixed,” and above 300 as “thin.”

Knight and four of her six students scored very high (in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile) on the TAS, high (30 or above) on the DES, and thin (above 300) on the BQ. The two students with lower scores on the TAS and DES also scored thin on the BQ, but their scores were closer to the average range (250–300) than were the others (Table 1). The authors conclude that the three measures tap essentially the same personality dimension and indicate the ease with which subjects can enter into altered states of consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

Hartman thinks it is likely that both genetic and environmental factors contribute to thin and thick boundaries.<sup>16</sup> In addition to testing as very thin-boundaried as an

**Table 1** Psychological Test Scores. (Adapted with permission from Joan H. Hageman, Stanley Krippner, and Ian Wickramasekera II, “Sympathetic Reactivity during Meditation” [submitted for publication].)

Meditator	Knight	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7	Mean	S.D.
TAS Percentile	91**	63	94**	45	98**	94**	98**	.83	.21
TAS Raw equivalent	30	23	31	19	33	31	33	28.57	5.41
DES Raw first test <sup>a</sup>	39*	12	38*	12	46*	23	46*	30.86	14.99
DES Raw second test <sup>b</sup>	30*	12	30*	12	51*	16	47*	28.57	15.77
BQ Total	376***	302***	329***	319***	401***	341***	357***	346.43	34.21

Notes: \* High, \*\* Very High, \*\*\* Thin Boundaried. <sup>a</sup>Tests given by Krippner, Wickramasekera, Wickramasekera, and Winstead on 26 June 1996. <sup>b</sup>DES given again in July 1996 by Ian Wickramasekera and Ian Wickramasekera II.

adult, Knight's autobiography reveals a family history of anomalous experiences, such as premonitions in dreams and the appearance or sensed presence of non-corporeal figures, which correlate with high scores on the DES. Knight recounts the appearance of a "beautiful woman [...] glowing with a light that seemed to fill the room ... an unearthly kind of light" in her room one night. The woman seemed familiar and said she had come to "say goodbye."<sup>17</sup> The next day she learned that a friend had died that night and recognized the apparition as her friend. Her mother indicated that she always knew ahead of time through dreams "who's fixin' ta die in the in the family" (p. 136). Her mother said she felt "a presence" with her most of her life. Her brother said, when he was feeling depressed, he felt "a kind of cool hand" pressing on his brow. Another family member reported seeing "some kind of powerful figure in her kitchen" from time to time (pp. 136–37). Knight was also sexually abused by an uncle on one occasion as a child (p. 40). While the abuse may have made her adult relationships more difficult, Hartman also indicates that thin-boundaried persons are likely to enter and leave relationships much more impulsively and frequently than more thick-boundaried persons.<sup>18</sup>

Krippner and colleagues acknowledge similarities between "Ramtha" and the alter personalities of multiples, indicating, as does the most recent edition of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders*, that in other cultural contexts, dissociative abilities are not necessarily considered pathological. They note, however, that Knight differs from most multiples in being able to "access Ramtha through a voluntarily-induced procedure, whereas the 'multiples' afflicted with dissociative identity disorder are taken unaware by their 'alters.'"<sup>19</sup> This ability to cue trance, however, is characteristic of mediums, such as Piper and Smith, as well as contemporary trance channelers and does nothing to undercut the view that all these experiences involve dissociation.

### The Formation of Experience: Relational and Cultural Factors

Both turn-of-the-century researchers and contemporary scholars have noted the role that those intimately involved with the subject may have played unconsciously in shaping the form of the subject's experiences. Hodgson's influence on Mrs. Piper, Flournoy's influence on H el ene Smith, and Prince's influence on Christine Beauchamp have all been discussed in the literature.<sup>20</sup> The most immediate influence on JZ Knight seems to have been her second husband, Mark Burnett, whom Knight refers to as "Jeremy Wilder" in her autobiography.<sup>21</sup> Wilder and Knight, who met in January 1977 and married the following August, immediately connected with respect to their unconventional religious views. Knight described herself at their first meeting as "seeing things [...] like ghosts," as believing in reincarnation "because she was her sister in a previous life," as having experienced a UFO, and as "talk[ing] to God because he answers back" (p. 234). Wilder, a dentist, not only shared her views on these matters, but seems to have brought a more developed New Age perspective to the relationship.

Their relationship was catalytic in terms of Knight's spiritual development. The entire process—from Ramtha's initial appearance in their living room in February



1978 to his first public appearance in November 1978—took place within the first two years that they knew each other. Wilder kicked off the process when he became obsessed with “pyramid power” after hearing it discussed at a party. He filled the house with paper pyramids, instructed the children not to invite their friends over lest their activities appear too strange, and sent JZ to look for books on pyramid power. The literature on pyramid power published in the 1970s most likely provided the initial kernel of information regarding Atlantis and Lemuria from which JZ unconsciously elaborated the character of Ramtha, a self-described 35,000-year-old Lemurian (pp. 241–42).<sup>22</sup>

Ramtha first appeared as an apparition at a point when Wilder and Knight, having filled the house filled with white pyramids, were becoming “giddy and downright silly” (pp. 8–9). While Knight indicates that she expected her husband not to believe her and had the impulse to recant the whole experience, he noticed her trance-like state and immediately believed she had had “a holy experience [...] that [...] has something to do with the will of God” (p. 11). Wilder continued to interpret her experiences in spiritual terms throughout the period in which Knight expressed doubts about her sanity and it was only under pressure from him that Knight agreed to the crucial second visit with Lorraine Graham. Wilder’s intimate involvement in the interpretive process suggests that Ramtha was in a sense a co-creation of Knight and Wilder. Knight played unconsciously into Wilder’s fascination with New Age phenomena by hallucinating (unconsciously generating) a New Age warrior, while Wilder in turn confirmed the authenticity of what she had seen and supported the process of interpreting and developing her experiences within the New Age metaphysical framework offered by himself and elaborated by Lorraine Graham.

### **The Role of Suggestion in the Transition from Vision to Incarnation**

Knight’s ability to create a character such as Ramtha unconsciously does not seem so unusual when Ramtha is compared with the spirit “controls” of Leonora Piper or Hélène Smith or even when compared with the less spectacular characters channeled by relatively ordinary people in the context of trance channeling workshops. In the trance channeling workshop described by anthropologist Michael Brown, individuals worked with inner voices, sounds, emotions, and images in a series of exercises designed to channel knowledge from unseen spiritual sources. By the end of the workshop, some were contacting “spiritual sources with names and personalities.”<sup>23</sup> In the case studies of Hélène Smith and Christine Beauchamp, we have more detailed descriptions of a transition from seeing to incarnating another personality in which suggestions from self and others (auto- and hetero-suggestion) played a significant role in the transition.

Hélène Smith began her career as a “visual and auditive medium” and soon after Flournoy began attending her séances made the transition to a fully “incarnating medium.” As the former, Smith experienced visions which she described to the assembled sitters. At the point of transition from visionary to incarnating medium, Smith was recounting a dramatic narrative set in fourteenth-century India in which she was the reincarnation of Simandini, the eleventh and favorite wife of an Indian

prince (Sivrouka), “of whom,” Flournoy noted facetiously, he had “the honor to be the actual reincarnation.” There were a number of other characters in what Flournoy referred to as her “Hindoo romance” and the narrative unfolded from one sitting to the next in the fashion of soap opera or telenovela. As a visual and auditive medium, Smith viewed the scenes playing out in India from a distance and could ask Simandini questions and relay answers to the sitters, much as JZ Knight did in her early encounters with Ramtha. On 6 March, however, “the visual hallucination of the woman with the black hair [Simandini] was changed into a total coenaesthetic hallucination—i.e., instead of a simple vision an incarnation was produced.”<sup>24</sup> According to Flournoy:

The séance had hardly started when Mlle. Smith stopped hearing us while continuing to look at us [...] she could still read and understand my written communications to her, but the level of possession increased. She seemed to be absorbed with some inner vision. Shortly afterwards she entered a state of somnambulism, during which she moved onto the corner of the settee where I was sitting, pressed my head hard with her hands, made vain efforts to speak, then little by little released my head, and raising her hands majestically, suddenly uttered in a solemn voice these two words separated by several sighs: *Atiétyâ ... Ganapatinâmâ*.<sup>25</sup>

While there is much that could be teased out here regarding the relationship between Smith and Flournoy, the key point for our purposes is that Smith went from seeing and hearing Simandini in a vision to being (incarnating) Simandini and interacting with Flournoy as if he were her husband Sivrouka. In this instance the process was described by Flournoy from a third-person perspective as a transition from absorption in an inner vision to a state of somnambulism (sleep-walking).

In the case of Christine Beauchamp, we get a first-person account from the B IV personality as reported to and recounted by Morton Prince:

B IV, in a depressed, despondent, rather angry frame of mind, was looking at herself in the mirror. [...] Suddenly she saw, notwithstanding the seriousness of her thoughts, a curious, laughing expression—a regular diabolical smile—come over her face. It was not her expression, but one that she had never seen before. It seemed to her devilish, diabolical, and uncanny, entirely out of keeping with her thoughts. (This expression [Morton Prince interjects] I recognized from the description to be the peculiar smile of Sally, which I had often seen upon the face of B I or B IV.) IV had a feeling of horror come over her at what she saw. She seemed to recognize it as the expression of the thing that possessed her. She saw herself as another person in the mirror and was frightened by the extraordinary character of the expression. (Here [Prince again interjects] she broke off her story to ask if it was possible to see oneself as another person in this way.)<sup>26</sup>

This is not a vision in any usual sense. B IV was looking at herself in the mirror, yet saw her expression as that of another person, because the facial expression she saw

there was incongruent with her (B IV's) serious thoughts. The mirror, in other words, allowed her to see and personify that which she otherwise would not have seen. Having seen this "other" person, Prince continued:

It suddenly occurred to her to talk to this "thing," to this "other person," in the mirror; to put questions to "it." So she began, but she got no answer. Then she realized that the method was absurd, and that it was impossible for her to speak and answer at the same time. [...] Thereupon she suggested to the "thing" that it should *write* answers to her questions. Accordingly, placing some paper before her on the bureau and taking a pencil in her hand, she addressed herself to the face in the glass. Presently her hand began to write, answering the questions that were asked [...] <sup>27</sup>

In this case, B IV *saw* "another person" in the mirror and asked it to speak. Realizing that she and this other shared one set of vocal cords, she invited the other to use her hand to respond in writing, in effect *incarnating* the other through her hand. Here we have a clear instance of incarnation through suggestion, in this case the self-reported suggestion of one part of the self (B IV) to another, who self-identified as "a spirit." The interchange between B IV and the spirit, identified by Prince as Sally, was written down by the spirit with added commentary from B V and reproduced in full by Prince.<sup>28</sup>

While we are provided no details of the mechanics of the shift from vision to incarnation in the case of H el ene Smith, it is hard to avoid the thought that it was fueled by Smith's unconscious desire to engage Flournoy in a more intimate fashion through the personas of Simandini and Sivrouka. This was only possible if she became Simandini and then engaged Flournoy as Sivrouka. In the case of Beauchamp, we have a direct account of auto-suggestion from one part of the personality to another. In the case of JZ Knight, she incarnated Ramtha for the first time immediately after Graham explained the concept of mediumship to her and introduced it experientially by means of a visualization exercise. (Graham had Knight visualize a scene in which she alternately viewed the river of past and future as if in a canoe floating down stream and from a vantage point a hundred feet above the canoe. Graham described the higher vantage point as analogous to "inner vision." She told JZ that if the "vibrational frequency" of one's inner vision is high enough, "then you can become an instrument through which a contact can be made from the other side" [p.254].) Though JZ claimed not to understand what Lorraine was explaining to her, she almost immediately thereafter performed what Lorraine had described by incarnating Ramtha for the first time.

While Knight was largely unprepared for this first experience of incarnating Ramtha, her return visit with Graham provided additional cognitive support, such that by the time the Rama Center invited her to speak, Ramtha was prepared to take charge of the process. When JZ asked Ramtha how she was supposed to speak to the group, Ramtha responded that she would do so as a "channel" rather than a "medium," following a suggestion made by Graham on their second visit. When Knight asked Graham what she would do if she accepted her "mission," Graham said:

I'm not sure, maybe you will channel. I'm still getting used to the word *channel* since all that has ever been before are trance mediums. [...] As I understand it, a channel leaves her body, as in death, and allows the entity to express his own personality. A medium serves only as a bridge between dimensions but does not entirely leave her body. (p. 266)

Ramtha picked up on this suggestion from Graham, elaborating on the idea of a channel leaving the body “as in death” in terms of the familiar descriptions of near death experiences in which individuals “journey to the light” (pp. 302–4). JZ then had the sort of experience that Ramtha suggested she would.

In all three cases, the transition from vision to incarnation involved some sort of visual practice. Smith was absorbed by an inner vision, which when enacted allowed her to engage directly with Sivrouka/Flournoy. Christine Beauchamp's B IV personality encountered Sally when looking at herself in a mirror, then encouraged her to speak through her hand.<sup>29</sup> Graham had Knight perform a visualization exercise in which she viewed herself as if from a vantage point outside herself, which then allowed Ramtha to manifest in her body. The practices allowed each to make a transition from looking at to embodying that which they saw. Although Graham and, following her lead, Ramtha and JZ Knight, all distinguished between channeling and trance mediumship, Knight's experience of being entirely absent when the possessing entity is present was shared by some trance mediums, as for example, Mrs. Piper. While Mrs. Piper experienced her absence as sleep-like, Knight experienced her absence as a near-death style out-of-body experience entirely in keeping with Ramtha's suggestion of what the experience would be like.<sup>30</sup>

### **Virtuoso Performers of Involuntary Performances**

Traditionally, hallucinations have been defined in relation to external data. Thus, psychologists traditionally associate “real” perceptions with external data and “distorted” perceptions, such as illusions, delusions, and hallucinations, with the misinterpretation or absence of external sensory data.<sup>31</sup> In offering these definitions, the American Psychiatric Association notes that ordinarily the term “hallucination” is not used to refer to false perceptions that arise in dreams.<sup>32</sup> This exclusion, however, simply sidesteps the fact that both hallucinations and dreams arise in response to internal data (endogenous percepts). There is no compelling reason to assume, however, that perceptions arising from internally generated percepts are necessarily pathological. Not only do dreams meet the traditional criteria for hallucinations, hallucinations are reported by about 10 percent of the normal population.<sup>33</sup> The pejorative (and presumptively pathological) definition of hallucinations as false perceptions artificially divides the class of phenomena that arise from internal percepts and completely ignores visions that occur (remarkably frequently) in the normal population. If, following the lead of dream researchers,<sup>34</sup> we define hallucinations in terms of internally generated (endogenous) percepts rather than “false” (i.e., non-externally generated) percepts, we can consider a wide range of phenomena including dreams and non-pathological visions together. In

other words, by emphasizing what they are, rather than what they are not, we can consider the wide range of hallucinatory phenomena that normal people experience while sleeping and awake in relation to one another without necessarily pathologizing them.

Dream researcher J. Allan Hobson provides a dynamic neurological model that can help us to conceptualize the relationship between dreaming and other mental states, normal and abnormal, which fall in the gray area between sleeping and waking. His “AIM” model of consciousness locates these mental states, some more stable than others, in relation to a set of three neurological continua. Lucid dreaming, hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations (visionary experiences upon waking or falling asleep), and hypnotic trance assume distinctive locations in the three-dimensional space of the model depending on the level of brain activation (A), the origin of input (I), and the relative level of aminergic and cholinergic neurotransmitters (M) involved in each instance.<sup>35</sup> Movement along the I-axis determines the openness of the system to external information, while movement along the M-axis affects the way that the information is processed. The mix of neurotransmitters represented by the M-axis determines whether experiences are remembered or not and the type of associative processing that takes place, whether tight and logically connected or loose and emotionally linked. Normal waking consciousness is located at one end of the I and M continua and dreaming at the other. Waking hallucinations can be located toward the same ends of the I and M axes as dream consciousness. Consciousness moves along these axes in regular patterns across the sleep–wake cycle.<sup>36</sup>

It would seem likely that persons who score at the thin end of the BQ and high on the Absorption Subscale and DES move more easily along the I and M axes while awake than those at the other ends of these scales. They remember more of their dreams and are more likely to have dream-like experiences while awake. They are more open to suggestion and more easily hypnotized. Hypnosis researchers speculate that absorption may inhibit higher level processing, i.e., critical thought, and increase reliance on automatic processes and suggestion-related schemata.<sup>37</sup> This latter state in their view is broadly congruent with what has been traditionally referred to as the trance state.

Hypnosis researchers have also found that suggestions operative at this lower, more automatic level of processing activate basic perceptual systems more effectively than imagery and thereby result in experiences that seem more real. Highly hypnotizable subjects can not only produce hallucinations in response to suggestion but the hallucinations may be “tagged” neurologically as externally rather than internally generated events.<sup>38</sup> This suggests that some hallucinators’ difficulties distinguishing between real and imaginary perceptions may reflect an ability to translate suggestions into neurologically “real” perceptions.<sup>39</sup> In the absence of an appropriate stimulus, these seemingly real perceptions are inherently ambiguous and difficult to interpret. Research by cognitive psychologists indicates that individuals rely more heavily on cultural theories to interpret their experiences in situations of uncertainty.<sup>40</sup>

Over the last several decades, hypnosis researchers have proposed different models to account for the seemingly involuntary experiences of hypnotic subjects,

with some arguing that hypnotized subjects are adept performers, capable of imaginatively enacting what is suggested as if it were true, and others that the subjects actually perceive the suggested reality as real.<sup>41</sup> This new research would support a proposed distinction between virtuosos and more ordinary sorts made by Kallio and Revonsuo.<sup>42</sup> The former are those who are actually able to perceive the suggested reality as real, while the latter are better understood as performing what is suggested as if it were true.

This suggests that highly hypnotizable persons, easily able to translate suggestions into subjectively real experiences, can readily elaborate their hallucinations in culturally congruent ways if offered encouragement (further suggestions) regarding the direction they should take. If offered the right sort of encouragement, virtuosos, in other words, can be unusually (religiously) innovative. Conversely, if particular interpretations are discouraged, we would anticipate that the process of elaboration would be curtailed in the absence of organic pathology, such as schizophrenia. We can see examples of innovation in the cases of JZ Knight, Hélène Smith, and Christine Beauchamp, though in the latter case, we can also see the converse process at work in Prince's rejection of the idea that Sally was a spirit.

## Implications

What are the implications of experiences that morph in this way for our own understanding of the relationship between personality, cognition, and culture?

- (1) We should not be too attached to categories, such as visions. They are part of a complex set of phenomena that might better be characterized as hallucinations understood broadly and not necessarily pathologically.
- (2) Over attachment to the category runs the risk of obscuring the malleability of these phenomena, the fluidity of the underlying neurological processes, and the way that cultural factors, e.g., religious traditions, are involved in elaborating and containing them.

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