

Opinion


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# Now They Tolerate Parapsychology

By Francine du Plessix Gray

Every few days, as a spiritual exercise, former astronaut Edgar Mitchell, lunar module commander of Apollo 14, the sixth human being to walk on the moon, meditates with the aid of his portable biofeedback machine.

Roughly the size of my Smith-Corona typewriter, Mitchell's custom-made instrument connects to his scalp with small electrodes to register the four basic rhythms of the human brain — alpha, beta, theta and delta. Between beta, the routine wakeful state of everyday consciousness, and delta, the rhythm of deep unconscious sleep, lie alpha and theta, the slower cycles registered in the state of meditation.

Mitchell's contemplations are based on a variety of Eastern doctrines that he studied after the spiritual conversion he underwent on his lunar journey. He strains, for half an hour or so at a time, to get down from the busy level of beta into the more contemplative terrains of alpha and theta.

I BEGIN WITH Mitchell because few Americans offer a more striking symbol of the newest high in our culture — our shift from outer to inner space, our avidity to explore the mythic and mystic areas of consciousness.

Shortly after his sudden retirement from NASA, Mitchell founded a center for parapsychology, which is the scientific study of various psychic phenomena — in part known as extra-sensory perception — still unexplained by Western science. As I ventured deeper into parapsychology, I was startled by the rigor of its recent research, and by the growing tolerance it has been receiving from the scientific community.

I discovered, for instance, that parapsychology is being taught in some 100 educational institutions in the United States, including Yale University, that it had enjoyed

increased respectability since it was voted into the National Association for the Advancement of Science in 1969, and that in research centers throughout the United States, Ph.D.'s from varied disciplines are studying the occurrence of ESP with the most refined technological tools — psychiatrists are documenting telepathic dreams with the aid of electro-encephalograph machines, biologists are studying radioactive generators, physicists are testing clairvoyance with the help of computers.

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**HOWEVER, SURROUNDING** this hard new core of scientific probity, there continues to flourish an exotic lunatic fringe that has haunted psychic research ever since its spiritualist origins in Victorian parlors. And so, throughout my journey in parapsychology, I was obsessed by the enormity of its contradictions: Would we ever be able to separate the wheat from the chaff in a field plagued by more deceit, kookiness, showmanship, gullibility and Messianism than any other discipline claiming to scientific rigor?

In my attempt to probe this question, I met with Uri Geller, a charming Israeli who is the most flamboyant psychic of our myth-starved 1970s.

The 6-foot-3 former paratrooper sits with me in his airy apartment in Manhattan ebulliently alternating tales of his prowess with his plans to redeem the world. For some three years, Uri Geller says, he has been performing innumerable feats of psychokinesis, which is the influence of mind over external objects or processes. He has broken keys, spoons, metal pipes and Werner Von Braun's wedding ring by simply staring at them, erased tapes and stopped cable cars by sheer concentration, and managed equally splendid exploits of telepathy and clairvoyance.

Uri is flashy, mercurial, shrewd, and almost lovable for the candor of his unabashed egomania. "In Israel I am a household word... in Europe there isn't a person who doesn't know me... the only reason I'm not famous in the United States is that it's such a big country..." He is most candid about the fact that his powers are not always with him. "Unlike magicians, it doesn't always work for me," he says,

waving his arms about. "But so what, so it doesn't work? It proves I'm real."

**WHEN URI GELLER** arrived in the United States, his feats caused a great flurry of excitement among American parapsychologists, who are always on the lookout for the new medium who will bring about the psychic millennium.

One of Uri's greatest fans, Edgar Mitchell, arranged to have him tested under rigorous laboratory conditions at the Stanford Research Institute in Menlo Park, Calif. Although initially enchanted by the notion of being taken seriously by "such a mind-blowing, fantastic organization," Uri had stage fright when he first arrived in California, and almost declined cooperation. "I saw all these instruments and these skeptics, and I said, 'Oh, my God, it's not going to happen.'" However, the moody showman-psychic was cajoled into cooperating by the two young physicists assigned to study him, Hal Puthoff and Russell Targ, both of whom have a 10-year background in laser research and a long history of interest in parapsychology. (Targ was particularly well-equipped to deal with a temperamental subject because Bobby Fisher is his brother-in-law.)

Under their supervision, Uri performed a variety of striking ESP feats — accurately predicting the upper face of a die shaken and thrown in a closed box, picking the one can that contained an object from a group of 10 identical cans and making reproductions of drawings "sent" to him by Puthoff and Targ from a building a quarter of a mile away.

Meanwhile, Uri's presence in Menlo Park had piqued the curiosity of the Defense Department's Advance Research Projects Agency — ARPA — which invests several million dollars a year in behavior-

Those ancient opposites, mind and matter, seem to gain a new synthesis as technology enables new and impressive research to bolster the credibility of parapsychology.

al science research that might have implications for national defense.

Could Uri Geller's metal-bending talents be used to jam foreign computers? Such could have been the Defense Department's reason for sending a group of observers to California to look in on the Geller experiments. It included George Lawrence, the head of ARPA, and Ray Hyman, a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. They spent part of one day at Stanford Research Institute.

Although they saw Geller perform not in controlled laboratory conditions, but in informal living-room style, the Defense Department observers left Palo Alto vociferously critical of the SRI work, calling it "incredibly sloppy."

Professor Hyman, who like Targ is a skilled magician by avocation, refers to Geller as a brilliant conjurer who simply duped the SRI scientists by classical tricks of mentalist magic. "They already believed in ESP and therefore their goal was to make Geller as comfortable as possible in order to make him produce it," says Hyman, who is starting a foundation "to stop the psychic movement."

**DURING THE THREE HOURS** we spent together, Uri finally managed to bend my household key a modest 10 degrees after a 20-minute session of stroking it in my hand, and when that failed, on a metal tray. Once the key was bent, he was not satisfied with its angle and stroked it for another few minutes under the running water of his bathroom faucet, where the bend increased to some 45 degrees.

Our telepathic drawings were considerably more dramatic:

"I'll turn around and close my eyes and you draw something, then say, 'Ready.' Then I'll concentrate on it and try to duplicate it." He turned his back to me. I drew

a sailboat with a small flag at the stern bobbing on a wavy sea.

"Ready," I said, folding my notebook on my lap. He turned around and drew for about a minute, and we lifted our doodles up in the air to compare them. He had drawn two pictures, one of a small tugboat on a wavy sea and another of a flag rising out of the water.

"Fantastic!" Uri yelled.

**A FEW DAYS AFTER** seeing Uri, I met with the magician William Randi. Randi's career has been thriving lately on exposing Uri's feats as classical tricks of "mentalist" magic, and he is a partner of Ray Hyman in the foundation to stem the black tide of psychism. Randi's file on Geller is so extensive that he even possesses translations of Der Spiegel articles published in The Hong Kong Standard. He readily bent my key 20 degrees while appearing to stroke it in my hand, explaining the key can be bent by a second's pressure against any hard surface. He also advanced the hands of my wrist watch by six hours and bent a teaspoon in the wink of an eye without my ever noticing he had touched them.

Randi was considerably less impressive than Uri on thought transmission, however. When I tried to "send" him the geometrical figure I had drawn — a square within a rectangle — he drew a triangle within a circle. And in "receiving" the name of a world capital, one of Uri's most popular performances, he guessed London for my Budapest.

**THE RECENT PROLIFERATION** of parapsychological research, whose tools have enabled parapsychologists to work with unprecedented precision, has still led to new recognition of parapsychology as a

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