

ESSAY

Ian Stevenson's Contributions to the Study of Mediumship

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In 1965 Ian Stevenson wrote: “Among all the cases which seem to provide impressive evidence of survival, a most important group consists of those in which a communicator appears whose existence neither medium nor sitters know anything about at the time of the manifestation” (p. 65), a phenomenon he christened “drop-in” mediumistic communications (e.g., Stevenson, 1970: 53). He argues that if “subsequent checking verifies the existence of a person and details corresponding with the communicator and his message ... [then] the explanation of the communication as resulting from telepathy between the medium and the sitters breaks down” (Stevenson, 1965: 47). He goes on to discuss the difficulties in excluding the possibilities of latent subconscious memory (cryptomnesia) and fraud, but he also emphasizes the great importance, when these can be excluded, of *purpose* or *intent* that seems to lie behind such “drop-in” cases.

In the same paper, and again a few years later (1970), Stevenson writes that he is preparing a monograph reviewing some 60 cases of the “drop-in” type, mostly from the published literature but some of which had not yet been reported. This planned review of “drop-in” cases was never finished, probably because of his increasing commitment to the study of cases of the reincarnation type. He did, however, publish 10 papers on mediumship, eight of them dealing with cases of “drop-in” communications or communicators (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974, 1975a,b; Ravaldini, Biondi, & Stevenson, 1990; Stevenson, 1965, 1968, 1970, 1973, 1975; Stevenson & Beloff, 1980).

The “Drop-In” Cases of Abraham Florentine, Hans-Peter Pasona, and Robert Marie

Stevenson's first paper on mediumship deals with a well-known case, that of Abraham Florentine, which was first published by the highly regarded medium Stainton Moses in 1875. Stevenson (1965: 48) quotes from Moses' report of the case:

In the month of August last [1874], I was staying with Dr. Speer of Shanklin, Isle of Wight. We had a number of sittings, and at one of them a spirit communicated, who gave his name as Abraham Florentine. He said that he had been concerned in the war of 1812,

and that he had lately entered spirit-life at Brooklyn, U. S. A., on August 5th, at the age of eighty-three years, one month, and seventeen days.

An entry in one of Moses' notebooks reveals that the actual date of the sitting had been September 1, 1874, and that Abraham Florentine had died after a painful illness. Inquiries in the United States led to the identification of Abraham Florentine and an interview with his widow. She verified all the details, except she said that her husband had died at the age of 83 and 27 days (not one month and 17 days, as reported in the communication). Much later, in 1921, Dr. E. J. Dingwall made further inquiries in the United States and found obituaries of Abraham Florentine in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and *New York Daily Tribune*, both of which stated that Abraham Florentine, a veteran of the war of 1812, had died on August 5 after a painful illness at the age of 83 years, one month, and 17 days. Steamers to Europe sailed two days after publication of the obituaries, and so there would have been time for someone concerned to see a copy before the sitting took place on September 1. "The case obviously seemed best explained as an instance of cryptomnesia, the similar error about Florentine's age in the obituaries and in the communication being regarded as almost conclusive evidence that the communication itself had derived somehow from the obituaries" (Stevenson, 1965: 51).

Stevenson undertook new inquiries more than 40 years later and learned that records of veterans of the United States Armed Services, as well as records of the Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn, showed that the age of Abraham Florentine given by the communicator and the obituaries was in fact most likely right, and the widow wrong. Stevenson acknowledged that these new inquiries had not changed the status of the case markedly: Whereas before it "was properly regarded as *almost certainly* one of cryptomnesia," its status now was "*possibly* a case of cryptomnesia, but by no means definitely so" (p. 53). Stevenson was "inclined to regard the case as still best explained by cryptomnesia" (p. 53), and he gives four reasons for that conclusion, one of which was that there was no *purpose* behind the communication—a feature, he notes, often characteristic of cases of cryptomnesia and fraud. Nevertheless, he argues that the case illustrates an important lesson, namely, that "every case, no matter how old, still deserves attention to its details," since these might "modify our interpretation of the case" (p. 54).

Stevenson's next contribution to the question of "drop-ins" concerns a case that was brought to his attention in 1964 while he was on a sabbatical in Zürich, Switzerland. The medium, Frau Schütz, was a non-professional trance medium who gave regular sittings to a small private circle in Zürich. At such a sitting in 1962 there appeared "a little lad." He gave his name as Hans-Peter Pasona (apparently an Indian surname), said that he had dark hair and brown eyes, died (of something to do with the appendix and "an unusual illness with a lot of fever") in a children's hospital "a long time" ago, lived in the seventh district in Zürich, and had two living brothers. He also said that his father had something to do with tea, and he said "give my love to my mother."

In the telephone directory for Zürich there was a family of Passanah. They were of Portuguese (not Indian) origin, but they had lived in India and were British citizens. They had three sons, all born in India. After the birth of the youngest child, they moved in 1931 to Zürich, where they lived in the seventh district and where the father engaged in the business of importing wares from India, probably including tea. The youngest son, who had indeed had dark hair and brown eyes, died in 1932. Although the boy was named Robert, not Hans Peter, nearly all the other details were accurate. Stevenson concluded that “although the communicator gave rather scanty information about himself, he did provide enough information to establish his identity clearly. There is only one family of the name of Passanah in Zürich and they had lost one of three brothers. Nearly all the communicated details fitted their circumstances very well” (Stevenson, 1970: 60).

With his usual thoroughness Stevenson examined possible normal sources of information available to the medium: the telephone book, newspaper obituaries, hospital records, and the gravestone. After a detailed discussion of the pros and cons of the case, Stevenson argues that he considers fraud and cryptomnesia unlikely but not firmly excluded and that “the communication contained information paranormally derived.” Motivational factors in the case made him “favor the idea that a real discarnate communicator influenced the communication,” and he concludes that cases of this kind seem “of very great potential importance for advancing the evidence for survival after death” (p. 64).

In 1973 Stevenson published “A Communicator of the ‘Drop In’ Type in France: The Case of Robert Marie.” In the introduction he mentions that it was perhaps a slight defect in the Passanah case that the medium and the sitters lived in the same city as the communicator and “that the information given by the communicator referred only to events that had occurred prior to his death” (p. 47). In contrast, in the case of Robert Marie the medium lived and worked in Paris, whereas the communicator had lived in a town far away from Paris, and the communicator referred to several events that took place after his death, such as the death of his son. This is a lengthy paper in which no stone is left unturned in attempting to verify the 14 different statements made by the communicator. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the details of this investigation, but suffice it to say that many of the statements were verified, although there was some uncertainty about which of two brothers the communicator was, especially because both had been killed in World War I. Stevenson concludes that “perhaps the communications would make most sense if we suppose that *both* brothers were attempting to communicate during the sittings” (p. 74).

The Icelandic Medium Hafsteinn Björnsson

Now on a more personal note: My association with Ian Stevenson started in the fall of 1970, when I entered into a year-long internship program in clinical psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia.

At my request I was allowed to spend a part of that year in the Division of Parapsychology (now the Division of Perceptual Studies). I soon learned of Stevenson's keen interest in mediumship, and we discussed my observations of mediums in Iceland and books I had read about them. The most prominent medium at that time was Hafsteinn Björnsson (1918–1977), about whom books had been written (in Icelandic) with interesting accounts of individual cases, including drop-in communicators and one impressive case of xenoglossy. For example, Elinborg Larusdóttir (1946) had written a few books consisting of reports obtained from sitters whom she had interviewed. She usually included in these reports only details about which all the interviewed sitters agreed, and she often cited published written documents, including affidavits from sitters affirming that her reports accorded with their memories.

Some years earlier I had attended a few sittings with mediums in Iceland, although not with Hafsteinn (in Iceland we always refer to each other by the personal name). During a visit to Iceland in the spring of 1972, however, I spent a month studying Hafsteinn's mediumship as an observer at his sittings. He was cooperative at all times and agreed that I could attend every sitting that he held during that month and audio-record them.

Hafsteinn's abilities as a medium had already attracted much attention in Iceland, and there was always a long waiting list for his sittings. During the day he was employed full time collecting bills for the State Radio. In the late afternoon and early evening of every working day, and sometimes also on weekends, he usually held two séances (each for six to seven sitters). Easter fell during my time with him, and he visited the eastern part of Iceland, where he held many séances during five days there. I attended 48 sittings and gathered valuable observations about how he operated.

Hafsteinn was primarily a trance medium with regular controls who would describe the departed at the séance and bring messages from them, often giving their full names so that they were easily identified. One of his controls in particular, Runki (see below), described deceased persons, often associated with or related to each other in some way, who he said were present with the various sitters. Twenty to 30 persons or more might thus be described or identified at each séance.

At practically every séance, most of which lasted up to an hour and a half, a few direct communicators (that is, those who seemed to speak directly through Hafsteinn rather than through a control) also appeared. Usually these direct communications were of brief duration, but long enough for the communicators to reveal their identities, express some message, and exchange a few sentences. They would also sometimes send greetings to people not present but with whom one of the sitters had a relationship. The direct communicators nearly always came to a particular sitter and addressed him or her. The sitters were often deeply impressed by the characteristic features, manner of speech, and behavior expressed by the direct communicators.

I did not make a systematic analysis of the frequency of direct communicators, but in my notes from a séance on April 14, 1972, I recorded nine direct communicators,

most of them seemingly recognized by the sitters. As I recall now, this might have been a rather typical séance. I remember in particular how relatively frequent were manifestations of direct communicators who had suffered a violent death.

Hafsteinn was also able to describe while in a waking state discarnate entities which he claimed to see around people. He would sometimes have public meetings, usually in a cinema or assembly hall, held in semi-darkness, at which up to a few hundred people were present. At these “clairvoyant (non-trance) meetings” he would describe 80 to over 100 deceased persons, usually describing one group at a time of people related or known to each other or from the same location, giving their names, relations to each other, appearance, and sometimes short messages from them, usually of a rather general kind, such as greetings saying that they were with the deceased and observing their life from the “other side.” Often Hafsteinn would invite the audience to ask questions, which he would apparently relay to the deceased entities and which might bring out further details about the deceased persons.

When Stevenson learned about the reports of Hafsteinn’s mediumistic abilities, he decided that a serious investigation should be conducted. He thus visited Iceland in 1971 and 1972, and I then had the opportunity to investigate thoroughly with him two cases of “drop-in” communicators (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1975a,b). For me it was a great learning experience to work with Stevenson, to plan the research we did together, including an experiment we designed and carried out (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974, described below), and to get acquainted with the thoroughness of his inquiries, his skillful art of interviewing witnesses, and his interest in improving methods for the study of mediums (Stevenson, 1968). This experience proved to be of great value for me later during my studies of Indian religious figures and psychics (Haraldsson, 1987) and in my investigations of children in Sri Lanka and Lebanon who were claiming past-life memories (Haraldsson, 1991a; Haraldsson & Abu-Izzeddin, 2004).

The Case of Runolfur Runolfsson

The more impressive of the two cases that Stevenson and I investigated together was that of Runolfur Runolfsson, often referred to as the Runki case (Runki was the nickname by which Runolfur came to be known). The case had some unusual features. The term “drop-in” derives from the fact that many such communicators just “drop in,” and then after registering, so to speak, they just as quickly “drop out,” giving little or no reason for appearing. For example, the communicator Abraham Florentine never gave any reason for appearing in England, after having died in Brooklyn several weeks earlier. Robert Passanah also gave no reason for his appearance, although Stevenson speculated that he appeared to reassure his grieving mother of his survival at a time when the removal of his tombstone in the cemetery had renewed her sorrow. Robert Passanah appeared at only one séance, Abraham Florentine at two, and Robert Marie appeared about four times. The case of Runki differs widely from these cases, as will become clear in the following paragraphs.

In 1937, quite early in Hafsteinn's mediumship, there manifested, sometimes forcefully, a disturbing communicator who used rude language and would not reveal his identity. When asked what he wanted, he replied, "I am looking for my leg. I want to have my leg." This continued at many sittings until a new sitter, Ludvig Gudmundsson, unknown to the medium, joined the group. Ludvig was a fish merchant who lived in Reykjavik but who owned a fish-processing factory and a house in Sandgerdi, a village some 36 miles from Reykjavik. The disturbing communicator expressed pleasure in meeting Ludvig, and after a few sittings he said that his leg was in Ludvig's house in Sandgerdi. Somewhat later he finally revealed his identity, saying that Runolfur Runolfsson had been his name and that he had drowned in 1879 when walking drunk along the seashore to his home in bad weather. He had stopped to drink, had fallen asleep, and had been taken out by the tide. His body later washed up to the shore, "where dogs and ravens came and tore me to pieces." Three months after his disappearance "his bones were found dismembered," according to the record book of the clergyman of his parish. These bodily remains were buried in January 1880. Records from his parish church confirmed his identity and burial.

To make a long story short, in the end a long thigh bone (femur) was found between the inner and outer walls of Ludvig Gudmundsson's house in Sandgerdi. This happened in 1940, 60 years after Runolfur's death. Although it is known that he was a very tall man, it is impossible now to know for sure whose femur was found. The femur was given a burial in the churchyard of Runolfur's old parish. Runki expressed his gratitude at the next séance. He then became Hafsteinn's main control and was particularly liked by the sitters for his jovial nature and vivid, forceful personality. The question of cryptomnesia seemed remote. Runki's death had occurred almost 60 years before the relevant sittings, and his statements could not be verified by any *one source*, but rather by three different sources: the parish records, at that time kept in the National Archives; an obscure manuscript which was not published until long after the relevant sittings took place; and information obtained from Runki's grandson.

Runki's case illustrates another feature that Stevenson noted frequently in his reports of various kinds of cases. In five of the six individual cases of "drop-in" communicators that Stevenson published, the communicator had suffered a violent death through war, accident, murder, or drowning, whereas only one had died naturally. This observation immediately brings to mind the high frequency of violent deaths in cases of the reincarnation type (Stevenson, 2001: 165), among Hafsteinn's direct communicators (as I mentioned above), and in apparitions of the dead (Stevenson, 1982: 346–347; in a large representative sample in Iceland, the figure was 30%; see Haraldsson, 1991b).

Experiments with Hafsteinn Björnsson

In August 1972 Hafsteinn visited New York. That visit provided Ian and me with an opportunity to conduct an experiment in which we could control Hafsteinn's contact and interaction with sitters. The experiment was conducted

on the premises of the American Society for Psychical Research, and its purpose was to test the paranormality of Hafsteinn's clairvoyant (non-trance) public sittings (Haraldsson & Stevenson, 1974).

Ten Icelandic persons living in New York and unknown to Hafsteinn took part as sitters. For the experiment Hafsteinn and I sat at the end of an oblong room. Stevenson brought the sitters into the room at the opposite end, one at a time and in an order known only to Stevenson. A curtain across the room prevented both Hafsteinn and me from seeing the sitters or Stevenson. The sitters had earplugs in their ears, and they also wore earphones in which stereophonic music was played loudly while Hafsteinn made his reading for each of them. The sitters were thus visually and acoustically isolated from Hafsteinn, and their identities were unknown to Hafsteinn and me. In his readings, which usually lasted about 10 minutes, Hafsteinn would describe the deceased persons that he perceived with each sitter. The readings were tape-recorded. There was a short break between individual sitters.

The recordings were later transcribed by a person who had not been present for the readings and who was also ignorant of the identity of the participants. The order of the readings was randomized and each marked alphabetically so that it was impossible to know whether a particular reading was from the early or later part of the experiment.

A few days later each sitter was given a copy of all 10 readings and was asked to read them carefully, to identify which reading the sitter thought was intended for him/her, and to explain the choice by describing the correct details and the identities of persons he recognized in the reading. Sitters were also asked to rank the other nine readings. Often the transcripts were also later taken to a close relative of the sitter, usually his parents, since many of the sitters were rather young. These relatives sometimes gave important additional information and served as a check of the sitters' statements about their relations to the persons identified in the readings.

After all this was completed, Stevenson and I exchanged our lists of the choice of readings and the order of participation of the sitters in the experiment. The results were significant ($p < .01$): Four of the sitters had selected the reading which Hafsteinn had given for them, and two sitters gave the report of their own readings a second rank. This experiment established under controlled conditions the paranormality of Hafsteinn's mediumship, at least in this experiment. Further experiments with Hafsteinn that I conducted with other co-experimenters, however, were, with one exception, nonsignificant (Haraldsson, Pratt, & Kristjansson, 1978).

Studies of Xenoglossy

Stevenson defined xenoglossy as the ability to speak a foreign language not normally learned. He was greatly interested in such cases and published two monographs on this rare phenomena: *Xenoglossy: A Review and Report of a Case* (Stevenson, 1974) and *Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy* (Stevenson, 1984). In his writings on xenoglossy and on cases of the rein-

carnation type, Stevenson often emphasized the basic distinction between information, or “knowing that,” and skill, or “knowing how.” The former could be communicated—normally or paranormally—whereas the latter could not. “Knowing how” had to be practiced and learned and could thus not be explained by telepathy or any form of psi. Moreover, “if we can further exclude the possibility that the person concerned [learned] that language earlier in his life, it follows that it was learned by some other personality manifesting through him. That other personality could be a previous incarnation of the persons concerned or it could be a discarnate personality temporarily manifesting through a living subject—possessing the subject, we might say” (Stevenson, 1984: 160–161).

Cases of xenoglossy, particularly of responsive xenoglossy, were hence of great potential importance as evidence pointing toward survival. One of the reasons for Stevenson’s interest in Hafsteinn’s mediumship was a case of xenoglossy that had been published by Larusdottir (1970). Professor Sven Fredriksen of Denmark, visiting in Iceland, attended a séance with Hafsteinn in 1966 and conversed for a short time in the Eskimo (Inuit) language with a communicator purporting to be an Eskimo shaman whom Fredriksen had known in his childhood and youth in Greenland, where he learned the local language. Because of its potential importance, Stevenson encouraged me to investigate this case further, provided financial support for this purpose, and offered suggestions for the investigation. One of the sitters had written a description of the incident the evening it occurred, and I was also able to interview two additional witnesses. One of them was a physician and old friend of mine; he had taken part in the sitting and listened to an exchange between Fredriksen and the communicator in a language unknown to him. The other was the person in whose home Professor Fredriksen had stayed while in Reykjavik. Both of them confirmed that Professor Fredriksen had said that he had conversed in the Eskimo language with the communicator and that he was deeply moved by it. Unfortunately, no tape recording or concurrent notes exist of this exchange, and Professor Fredriksen had died by the time my investigation took place. Although the case thus did not warrant a full report, Stevenson described it briefly in his first book on xenoglossy (1974: 8).

Stevenson and I also made attempts to elicit instances of xenoglossy. During my month of sittings with Hafsteinn in 1972, I brought to his séances some 15 persons, one at a time, who spoke rare languages. I observed a few brief instances of words spoken in German, Danish, and Norwegian, but none in these more distant languages. Hafsteinn had received only minimal schooling and knew no foreign language, but he is almost certain to have picked up some words in German, Danish, and Norwegian, all of which are related to Icelandic. These attempts to elicit instances of xenoglossy were unsuccessful, underlining the great rarity of the phenomena.

Stevenson’s primary interest concerned the question of possible survival after death and the question of pre-existence. He searched for empirical evidence of phenomena which were generally exceedingly rare and hard to find. He pursued

his search with a commitment and a stamina that often left astounded those of us who had the privilege of working with him.

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