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[Letter in Response to Doug Stokes about the Role of Spontaneous Experiences]

To the Editor:

Doug Stokes sent me a prepublication copy of the preceding letter that discusses his thinking about the role of personal spontaneous psi experiences in forming beliefs about paranormal phenomena. In the letter, Stokes said that he has had a few personal experiences that he takes as “genuine psi events.” But he also said “I feel squeamish about overthrowing the laws of physics based on the few experiences I personally witnessed” and “I am a little reluctant to say that I *know* that psi exists, but then I am a solipsist at heart, doubting the existence of almost everything.” He also stated “I do not believe that psi can be made to manifest on demand in the context of a controlled experiment or that psi has been experimentally *proven* to exist.” In addition, he said that some personal mystical experiences significantly influenced his views about the nature of reality.

Stokes’s letter was inspired by my comment in a book review that I am certain that paranormal phenomena sometimes occur based on my personal experiences (Kennedy, 2016c). In his letter, Stokes encouraged me to provide more explanation than my brief comments in the book review. His letter motivated me to write this letter describing my views about psi and the role of spontaneous experiences.

I am less philosophically inclined than Stokes and for me the matter is relatively straightforward. I have had personal experiences that I am convinced were paranormal (outside currently accepted scientific understanding) and therefore I am convinced that such phenomena sometimes occur. Science continually evolves. I take it as a given that some phenomena are currently not understood. However, that does not mean that I believe that all or most claims about psi are true.

I agree with Stokes that psi has not been experimentally proven to exist and I think he is probably correct that psi cannot be made to manifest on demand in controlled experiments. However, I am not certain that he is correct about the latter point because the severely underpowered exploratory research methods used in virtually all past experiments make any conclusions questionable. I expect that the matter will become clear with preregistered, well-powered, confirmatory research and other related methodological improvements, including measures to prevent experimenter fraud (Kennedy, 2016b).

I described some of my personal paranormal experiences and how they affected my life in a paper published in 2000 that is available online (Kennedy, 2000). Prior to that time, I considered the best strat-

egy for handling personal psi experiences was not to talk about them. However, during the 1990s Rhea White frequently advocated that I write a paper about my experiences. Such writings were the basis for her approach to exceptional human experiences. Finally, at the end of the decade, I realized that my personal experiences shaped my thinking about psi. Given the lack of properly designed confirmatory research and the high probability of psi-mediated experimenter effects if the working assumptions for experimental parapsychology were true, I concluded that the available experimental research provided virtually no reliable insights about psi. The phenomena for which I had the most confidence were my personal experiences—and they should not be withheld.

Working on that paper brought into focus the fundamentally different worldviews about psi for spontaneous cases and for experiments. For spontaneous cases, psi is generally viewed as something external to a person that guides a person and is related to spirituality. For experiments, psi is generally viewed as something that a person uses to fulfill his or her personal motivations and is related to technology.

One major point of the paper was that the great majority of my experiences did not have the practical, motivation-driven benefits that would be expected if the assumptions of experimental parapsychology were applicable. The overall effects of the experiences were a sense that my life was guided and had purpose—psi guiding me (spirituality) rather than me guiding psi (technology). When I looked back on the experience that had the most striking practical benefit, I realized that the benefit could have been achieved more easily in a way that was much less dramatic and that was more normal for my behavior. In retrospect, the experience appeared to have been contrived to be a dramatic paranormal experience. A similar evaluation of alternatives would be a useful investigation for other ostensible paranormal experiences that appear to have tangible practical benefits.

I had many other personal psi experiences that are not described in the paper. The paper was intended to convey a sense of the types of events that influenced my thinking about psi. The experiences were not described with the level of detail that would be needed to attempt to convince readers of their paranormal validity. I do not believe that those who are skeptical of psi by disposition and experience will change their worldview based on reading about personal psi experiences of others. My current working assumption is that people basically live in different worlds with regard to the occurrence of and beliefs about paranormal phenomena (Kennedy, 2016a). Research that characterizes these different worlds for paranormal experiences and beliefs would be useful. I do not expect that scientific research will provide bridges between these different worlds in the foreseeable future. However, I hope that this expectation is proven incorrect, and I am supportive of those who conduct research with more optimistic expectations.

My original book review was substantially longer than the word limit for book reviews in the *Journal*. As a compromise, the published review was a condensed version (Kennedy 2016c) and the longer review was posted online (Kennedy, 2016d). The longer version has more explanation of my views and includes the reference with my personal experiences. Given the frequent misunderstandings of my views about psi, I posted on my website a concise (two-page) summary of my current conclusions about paranormal phenomena (Kennedy, 2013).

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