

Disclosure of Childhood Spiritual Encounter Phenomena

Encuentros Sobrenaturales y Espirituales en la Infancia

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Abstract

Data show that children of all ages have experienced some form of encounter phenomena with non-corporeal entities ranging from ghosts to religious figures. Those child percipients experienced a variety of reactions to the disclosure process of their experiences ranging from benign to traumatizing. Two studies were conducted that collected short and long answer questionnaire responses from 97 adults (ages 25-80 years) who reported one or more encounter phenomenon experiences before the age of 20. Analyses of both studies revealed 6 reaction categories: (a) acceptance, (b) rejection, (c) pathologizing, (d) condemning, (e) demonizing, and (f) deifying. Further, the results showed that encounters with religious figures were categorized in the most negative response categories in comparison to encounters with other types of entities.

Keywords: transpersonal research, supernatural phenomena, childhood spirituality, transpersonal experiences, religious apparitions

Resumen

Diversos informes han mostrado cómo niños de todas las edades han experimentado algún tipo de encuentro sobrenatural con entidades que van desde fantasmas de personas difuntas hasta entes religiosos. Estos niños experimentaron una gran variedad de reacciones a tales revelaciones que van de lo beneficioso a lo traumatizante. Dos estudios recogieron las respuestas a un cuestionario aplicado a 97 adultos (de entre 25-80 años) y éstos contestaron haber tenido un o más encuentros sobrenaturales anteriormente a los 20 años. Los resultados de ambos estudios mostraron 6 categorías de respuesta a tales encuentros; (a) aceptación, (b) negación, (c) patologización, (d) condenación, (e) demonización y (f) divinización. Estos resultados también mostraron que los encuentros con entidades religiosas recibieron los tipos de respuesta más negativa.

Palabras clave: investigación transpersonal, fenómeno sobrenatural, espiritualidad en la infancia, experiencias transpersonales, apariciones religiosas

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Introduction

Documented and anecdotal evidence exists indicating that children have experienced sudden and unexpected appearances of ghosts, deceased loved ones, religious figures, and other spiritual entities (Blackbourn, 1993; Blinston, 2005; Robinson, 1983; Sprinkle, 1988; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). These types of experiences are also known as spontaneous encounter phenomena—the same types of encounters sought by adult practitioners who have been mentored by sages, apprenticed under adepts, and trained for years in specific practices in order to prepare for such encounters (Black Elk, 1932/1988; Inge, 1899/1995). Child experiencers had no preparation for these events, and subsequently, most had no one to help or guide them after their profound experiences (Blackbourn, 1993; Blinston, 2005, 2008; Sprinkle, 1988; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). Ironically, many children kept their encounters a secret out of fear of being considered crazy (Blinston, 2005). In the case of Native American, Black Elk (1932/1988), in his culture he was too young to experience this type of encounter (he experienced his first encounter at 5 years old).

There is a need to tell, and at the same time, a fear to tell. In my study of 97 adults who experienced an encounter event before the age of 20 years, 12.4% of the participants kept their encounters a secret until they participated in my study, and 16.5% disclosed for the first time when they were adults. Of the participants who did disclose as children, 34.4% were not believed. Of those who were not believed, the responses resulted in seeming benign reactions such as hurt feelings (i.e. “She crossly told me I was imagining nonsense” and “was told not to repeat myself and to stop talking nonsense”) to varying degrees of trauma (i.e. “I never spoke about it again. I just cried myself to sleep for about 2 years” and “I became very depressed as a teen and tried to find ways out all the time.”).

Child experiencers have been and may continue to be traumatized by the people they trust and depend on the most (Blackbourn, 1993; Blinston, 2005, 2008; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). When child experiencers need to confide in someone concerning such an event, usually they depend on the adults in their lives such as one or both parents, teachers, nuns, priests, ministers, and other members of the clergy. Unfortunately, some of these children find out the hard way that there is rarely a safe and understanding person to whom they can disclose their encounter experience (Blinston, 2005; Schlarb, 2004). There are two main reasons trauma may occur, (a) the child is not believed when he or she discloses; and ironically, trauma may also occur when (b) the child is believed (Blackbourn, 1993; Blinston, 2005; Robinson, 1983; Sprinkle, 1988; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). Disclosure appears to be a two-edged sword. The information in this article will provide the reader a better understanding of how this potential double jeopardy of trauma occurs.

One merely needs to look at the literature, both popular and scholarly, to see that the percipient of a visionary event has a very high chance of suffering some trauma due to the disclosure of his or her experience (Blackbourn, 1993; Blinston, 2005; Robinson, 1983; Santos, 2005; Schlarb, 2004; Sprinkle, 1988; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). Exemplars of this double jeopardy are children who experience religious apparitions (Blackbourn, 1993; Blinston, 2005; Santos, 2005; Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). Adults also suffer due to the disclosure of visionary experiences (Cochran, 2004; Mack, 1994; Palmer, 1999; Sprinkle, 1988). They may undergo the scrutiny of their peers, therapists, phenomena topic experts, and the clergy among others. However, most adults may have the knowledge and capacity to seek and obtain safe and trusted help for their upsets or outlets for their need to share. Sadly, children are often brushed aside or punished, and the tale of the event is considered a result of (a) fantasy proness or imaginary friend, (b) a need for attention, (c) compulsive lying, or (e) an evilness in the child (Blinston, 2005, 2008; Santos, 2005, Schlarb, 2004). If the child persists concerning the encounter, he or she may be assessed for pathology by a mental health practitioner. Thus, the child is left with no outlet to process the event, assimilate it, or eventually integrate it. From my past and ongoing research, and my review of the literature, disclosure of an encounter event results in six possible reactions: (a) acceptance, (b) rejection, (c) pathologizing, (d) condemning, (e) demonizing, and on occasion (f) deifying. These reactions are explained in more detail below.

Reactions to a spiritual encounter in childhood

1.- Acceptance

Acceptance of the account as a normal human experience is the ideal reaction, allowing percipients to process and assimilate their experiences. Due to the acceptance of their accounts, the percipients are able to integrate their experiences with greater ease. The events become a normal part of their lives. Unfortunately, acceptance is uncommon when disclosing certain types of experiences. According to the results of my research, only 13% of my participants who experienced a religious apparition encounter reported a positive outcome to their disclosure. Experiencers of nonreligious encounters fared much better with 63.6% of those who disclosed reporting a neutral or positive response.

Two examples of reported positive responses to disclosing a religious encounter came from a female participant from Japan and a female American.

"I kept telling my encounter with Jesus to my mother and my grandmother when I was 3 till 18 years old. They weren't surprised at all. My mother told me that when I was a couple of months old, I looked in the air and smiled/laughed. She strongly thought I was looking at the angels or Jesus. So when I told her I saw Jesus, she wasn't surprised. My grandmother often sees spirits. So it's not unusual for her either". (Japanese female)

"I told her "Mommy, mommy, there's a beautiful woman in a long white dress. Out there, out there. She's so beautiful!" We went to look together, but by then she wasn't there anymore. . . . My mother recounted this event from time to time . . . She was a spiritual person but not overtly religious by any means. She was accepting of what I saw, and very loving about it". (American female)

2.- Rejection

As one of the most common initial reactions, particularly to religious encounter experiences, rejection takes place when the child seer is ignored or dismissed. When a child confides in a trusted adult and is rejected, he or she may be traumatized to varying degrees by the rejection. Further trauma may occur by reactions from the child experiencer's peers. Children often reject another child by shaming, humiliating, or even inflicting physical harm. My research and review of the apparition literature showed that disclosure of religious encounters can bring very traumatizing rejection reactions (Blinston, 2005; Santos, 2005).

One of the three child seers of the 1917 apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Fatima, Portugal, Lucia dos Santos (2005), recounted the response to their disclosure. All three of the children (ages 6, 8, and 10 years old) were locked in a jail cell. They were threatened to be tortured and killed if they did not reveal the secret the apparition told them to keep, or confess that they had lied about seeing an apparition. Lucia was also repeatedly beaten by her mother and snubbed by the rest of her family (Santos, 2005).

Fatima was not the only religious apparition account in which the children suffered emotional or physical harm at the hands of adults. Bernadette Soubirous of Lourdes, France, was 14 years old at the time of her apparitions in 1858. She was punished by her mother and shamed by her peers (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). In Marpingen, Germany in 1876, three 8-year-old girls were removed from their Catholic homes and placed in foster Protestant homes in other towns after they disclosed their apparition encounters (Blackbourn, 1993). There are other cases, but space constraints prevent me from mentioning them all.

In my research, participants described a variety of rejection responses to their religious and nonreligious encounter experiences. Two examples of nonreligious encounters are shared below.

“I was so small when I saw the Tree Keepers that I didn't think twice about telling. I thought everyone knew about them. I told the whole family at breakfast. No one believed me. They said I was just making stuff up. Then I decided I wouldn't tell them anything like that again”. (American female)

“The next morning when I woke up I told my mom about seeing grandma—as usual, she didn't really hear me and she dismissed what I told her as a dream. That was my first realization that my mother doesn't believe anything unless she can see, feel, or experience it herself. It's all about her perspective—if she doesn't believe it could happen, then it didn't happen. Everything else from that point forward went into my journal”. (American female)

3.- Pathologizing

Being considered crazy was a predominate theme among my participants' responses regarding their reason for not disclosing. This was particularly true for my participants who reported witnessing a religious apparition—“My mother said, ‘you are like Joan of Arc, you hear voices.’ At my query of who was Joan of Arc, the answer was that she was a crazy woman.” Pathologizing may also be one of the most devastating reactions to a child's disclosure, and has the potential to mark the child for life. At best, the child will be assessed and released without a diagnosis of pathology. At worst the child could be medicated and hospitalized. This occurred for one of my participants. When he was 19 years old he had a profound spiritual experience that he suspects marijuana may have initiated.

“My energy field remained in a heightened state of excitation for days, weeks at a stretch, triggering confusion and anxiety on my parents' part. They were unable to comprehend my attempts to discuss metaphysics and "higher spirituality" with them and concluded I had smoked too much pot”. (Chinese Male)

He reported his parents took him to a psychiatrist and that he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and hypermania and was medicated.

4.- Condemning

Child seers may be told by parents or members of the clergy, that they will go to hell for lying or blasphemous talk. In Fatima, Lucia's mother repeatedly reminded her of the consequences of lying, which was burning in hell (Santos, 2005). Due to the perceived sacredness of religious apparitions by people of a variety of faiths, children may be coerced into rescinding their story with threats that they will go to hell or suffer some other eternal punishment. Although present in the literature, none of the participants from either of my studies reported being condemned. However, condemning can be an adjunct to demonizing, and demonization was reported in my study.

5.- Demonizing

Demonizing occurs when an adult claims that the figure in the encounter was Satan or some other demonic force. The experiencer may also be told he or she is in league with or possessed by this force. A few of the participants in my research described the reaction of demonizing. One participant shared, “*some people told me it was Satan who created these things in my mind.*” Another participant wrote, “*I was very scared. No*

one would help me. My mom did not believe me. She said the devil was after me, that I should pray every time it happened.”

Being told the religious figure they saw was really Satan or the devil, that it was evil, and subsequently that they are evil, can create a sense of confusion, fear, or disillusionment. In their minds they may wonder how something so good could be considered so bad. I was surprised to discover how well experiencers recovered from this reaction. One study participant from the Philippines recounted her experience when she was 4-years old and was told by a Catholic priest and two separate pastors that what she saw was the devil. She concluded, “I really can't understand why they say so, but we are all entitled to our own opinion, aren't we?” (Blinston, 2005, p. 280).

6.- Deifying

Deification can take place once the child is believed and the story of the incident is spread by word-of-mouth or through the media. The Catholic Church may become involved by questioning the seer and initiating an investigation (Bouflet & Boutry, 1997). There are problems associated with deification, because in the eyes of some of the people, the seer is no longer viewed as an ordinary child. The seer is now objectified and viewed as something out-of-the-ordinary, supernatural, and sacred with special spiritual and/or healing powers (Santos, 2005; Gloria & Vitello, 2006).

People treat the seer as a living saint and prophet with the power to heal and provide blessings (Gloria & Vitello, 2006). Now objectified, the seer needs his or her adult caregivers for protection. People want a piece of the seers; a lock of their hair, and a thread from their clothes, anything that will carry the special quality of the seer (Santos, 2005; Gloria & Vitello, 2006). They are requested to make audiences for people seeking blessings, healings, and other favors. Seers can become superstars, and thus lose any semblance of the life to which they were accustomed. Like superstars, they can be mobbed in the street, not because people want to harm them, but due to people wanting to be physically close to them (Santos, 2005; Gloria & Vitello, 2006). This desire to seek favors and healing continues long after the seer's death.

In the Catholic tradition, the Church begins its canonization process in order to eventually declare the child experiencer a saint. This is a very long process and can only begin once the seer has died (Woodward, 1990). For example, two of the children at Fatima, Portugal were declared saints on May 13, 2000, approximately 70 years after their deaths. The bodies of both of these children have been interred at the Basilica in Fatima. The process for sainthood has now begun for the third child witness, Lucia dos Santo, who died in February 2005 at the age of 97 years. She, too, has been interred at the Basilica, and next to the tombs are collection boxes and baskets in which pilgrims place money and flowers when asking for a range of favors and miracles.

It is very rare that deification will follow demonization, but it has happened. Joan of Arc is an example, but deification took place after her execution. The Catholic Church tried, convicted, and executed her (The Saint Joan of Arc Center, n.d.). And, it was the Catholic Church that later realized its error. In so doing, the Church declared her a martyr and eventually a saint (The Saint Joan of Arc Center, n.d.). If Joan of Arc were to have had her experiences in this day and age, the likelihood is high that she would have been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, placed on medication, and probably hospitalized.

Conclusion

Not only is continued research in transpersonal psychology important, in order to competently handle these types of childhood experiences, but continued and expanded research in transpersonal psychotherapy, clinical parapsychology, as well as pastoral counseling and spiritual guidance is also needed. Parents and children need a safe and knowledgeable practitioner base, whether clinical, religious, or lay, in order to

recognize these cases for what they may very well be—spiritual emergence and at time spiritual emergency (Greenwell, 1990; Grof & Grof, 1989; Krishna, 1970). For example, the male participant in my study who shared that he was diagnosed with schizophrenia and hypermania also shared his experience in the heightened state;

“No wonder [my parents thought] the kid flipped out and thought he was God, staying up nights, chanting “Om mani padme hum” like a mad monk in the streets, throwing away his pocket money (a sure sign of lunacy), forgetting to eat, watching the skies for dancing lights, chuckling spontaneously, announcing to friends and family that the kingdom of heaven was right here, pointing to pictures of Jesus and saying with a mischievous wink that he was back, don’t worry, everything’s perfectly okay now, everyone made it through the needle’s eye. . . . I became everyone and everything around me. All faces, forms, and names were my own. Everything spoke to me: mineral, vegetable, animal, human, angelic, and beyond. A classic case of satori—I was absolutely ecstatic and never wanted to return to mundanity [sic], the prosaic (Prozac?) state humans have been conditioned for countless generations to accept as “real.” If I was inclined towards an open-minded agnosticism before this pivotal peak experience, I now embraced the Gnosis with my entire being. God the Father-Pater-Pattern took the omnipresent form of Electrons and Electricity, speaking the language of Light and Lightning. Goddess the Mother-Mater-Matrix was the entire Matter Universe, the insulation and the copper wire through which the masculine principle coursed; the finite, physical sheath for the metaphysical sword of infinite intelligence. She was the rain, the rivers, the ocean of bliss (and sorrow) within my cellular being. Their lovemaking created the eternal Yin and Yang, and I was born of the ever-changing pulse of their majestic dance as Chronos, as Time; and simply through remembrance of my origins I could reconnect with Eternity”. (Chinese male).

Although his experience mimicked psychosis, it represented a checklist of signs and symptoms for spiritual emergence and emergency (Greenwell, 1990; Grof & Grof, 1989).

In these situations particularly, a transpersonal perspective might be most beneficial and needed. And perhaps, the fear of disclosure would be reduced. If practitioners and researchers listen to children who claim to see apparitions or other phenomena, we may learn a great deal. By dismissing their claims as fantasy, lunacy, or the devil’s work, we are dismissing a chance to broaden our understanding of a dimension of the vast human potential. Delving deeper into these phenomena may also contribute to the fields of consciousness studies, exceptional human experiences, parapsychology, and human development.

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