

Thinking Outside the Box. - Angela Howard

Introduction to a discussion session at the Quaker Fellowship for Afterlife Studies Conference, 30th April, 2011

What is the role of the Quaker Fellowship for Afterlife Studies now? Has it changed in ten years? What have we learned?

We set up the group in 2000 up to be a forum for discussion. Since then QFAS has held over 20 conferences and produced leaflets and booklets, and we've discussed a wide number of topics in groups and in private conversation. I feel that we have lived up to our name. I think we have truly built a 'Fellowship' where members trust one another and can share experience and ideas freely.

I hope QFAS will continue to welcome new members and Friends (with a large F and a small one) who think in a similar way, and I hope the Fellowship will also welcome enquirers who are new to the subject, and be of help to them as they begin to explore this fascinating area of life. I hope too that QFAS will always continue to make links with other like-minded bodies. This way lies strength.

But I hope that anyone new to the subject here today will understand if I now address myself for a few minutes to those who have been on the journey of discovery at least for a while, in some cases for a lifetime, and to all who would like to see a move forward in the acceptance of the fact that survival of the human personality has been proved beyond doubt.

We live in a very strange world, and I don't just mean the world of paranormal phenomena which I'll come to in a minute, I mean the world of current thinking in this country at the present time. I'll try to sum it up as it appears to me. See if you agree.

QFAS' first Woodbrooke conference held in September 2009 was entitled "The Afterlife: How Good is the Evidence?"

Don Mason (a member of Witney Area Meeting) who has a degree in physics from London University and also in medicine from Oxford University, and has had a distinguished scientific career was one of the speakers. This is a quote from the beginning of his talk.

"I would like to ask a different but related question. How is it that we are still actually asking the question 'How Good is the Evidence for an Afterlife?' The Society for Psychical Research has been in existence for over 120 years and with its foundation started a truly scientific investigation of paranormal phenomena and of the evidence of an Afterlife. Those involved in these investigations were commonly well established academics. In the first century of its existence there

were among the 51 presidents of the SPR, nineteen Professors, ten Fellows of the Royal Society, five Fellows of the British Academy and one Nobel Prize Winner. One can be confident that these distinguished individuals would not have prejudiced their academic reputations by accepting nomination to the position of president unless they had been confident that psychical research was a subject worthy of their attention."

He went on to say that "over the period of its existence the Society has accumulated a large archive of many detailed accounts that bear on the reality of paranormal phenomena and, more particularly, on the survival of life after death. Despite the mass of accumulated data both from the SPR and its equivalent organisation in the USA and many independent researchers around the world that seriously challenge the current materialistic paradigm, most scientists and probably most lay people too believe that there is no real evidence to support the existence of the paranormal, let alone Life after Death." (1)

The current materialistic paradigm. That is what we are up against, and it is powerful.

Set against all the strong indicators that there is something paranormal at work in our world, is the ability of human beings to look the other way and not examine the evidence. And this is encouraged and supported by mainstream science and the media who are repeatedly telling us that the different phenomenon can all be explained away. And really the Church and Science, which in previous centuries have often been engaged in open conflict, seem to be much more in accord nowadays. (In this country anyway.) Possibly because the Church is in a much weakened position.

This can leave many of us who have examined the phenomenon, and accepted that it exists, with the feeling that very little can be done to alter the mindset of the majority of the population. And when I say 'alter the mindset' (which sounds a bit like Big Brother) I mean simply through offering people the kind of evidence which in other areas of life would most likely be found acceptable and convincing.

Let's look for a moment at the evidence I am referring to. Most of us who feel we have had undeniable proof of survival will have received that proof in a highly personal way. It will either have come to us directly, or through the mediumistic gift of another person. That is the most precious kind of evidence we can receive, but unfortunately it is not the sort of proof that is likely to convince a sceptic.

And often we wish that names, addresses, descriptions of places, dates and times, came more readily from our loved ones. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. Why they don't come more readily is a point frequently raised by investigators.

This is a slight digression, but Frederic Myers, that great pioneer of psychical research, communicated the following on this subject from the next life through the automatic writing of Geraldine Cummins, in her book, *The Road to Immortality*. It is a bit complicated to follow but it has helped me:

"Memory out of the body is a different affair altogether. When we become discarnate beings we are far more detached from the early images for the reason that they are no longer bound to us by matter through the medium of the brain cells. The threads, you must realise, are broken by death.... We do not draw them to us as when we are alive, with labour and difficulty, we simply make the necessary effort which places us in the state that makes it possible for us to perceive the images we desire. Now, we are not in that state when we communicate through you. That is our difficulty. We are quite detached from these images, and unless the medium has the psychic power of absorbing the facts demanded from our memory – with our assistance, of course – we cannot provide you with the evidence you require."

However, there is plenty of proof that would surely convince even the ultra sceptical. At the QFAS conference at Charney Manor last autumn, Tricia Robertson, psychical researcher and lecturer at the University of Glasgow, gave this example:

"In 1973, the gifted medium Gordon Higginson gave a demonstration to the Glasgow Association of Spiritualists. 200 people watched him materialise figure after figure. Tricia has four sworn affidavits which say exactly what happened on that occasion, from a minister, an accountant, a housewife and a tax inspector.

"The hall was dimly lit but not blacked out. Gordon sat in a 'cabinet' - a chair surrounded by black cloth – to keep in the energy. White stuff like smoke (ectoplasm) came out from under the cloth round the cabinet and slowly built up into what is called a 'puddle'. One witness, Diane, saw a figure build up which she recognised as her Father. The head and one arm were distinct but the rest of the figure was not clearly defined. The apparition came to her and said, "Where's Flo?" which was her Mother's name! They had an appropriate conversation. The figure then appeared to go down into the puddle and the puddle moved across the stage and built up into another materialisation which came to another person who recognised it. This continued for an hour and a half. Some figures were men some were women, but all were recognised and spoken to by people in the hall."(3)

There were 200 witnesses. And unless they were all in some kind of mass hypnotic state, they actually watched the same phenomena with their own eyes over a period of an hour and a half. I have never heard a sceptic confronted with this sort of evidence.

Let's list some of the paranormal phenomena experienced by people in ordinary life quite frequently – intuitions, premonitions, actual awareness of loved ones who have died, déjà vu. That sort of thing. They're really very common but often not talked about for fear of being thought odd. And what about dreams?

And then there are the rarer kinds of experiences:

- out of the body experiences, including near death experiences,
- psychic awareness and the gifts of mental and physical mediumship,
- reincarnation memories including memories obtained through hypnotic regression.

All these phenomena we might gather together and sum up in the phrase 'there is more in this world than meets the eye and the other four senses.'

Of course, there have always been people with significant psychic and mediumistic gifts. For them the world is a very different place from the world most of us know. Often from birth they have been aware of seeing auras, of being visited by spirit people and receiving spirit messages, for themselves and for others, on a regular basis. Perhaps they also see fairies and devas, and so on.

They are examples of human beings with extra gifts and yet, by sections of society, which would be considered 'intellectual' and 'educated' they are simply ignored or ridiculed. And because of this they often have a very hard time learning how to live with their gifts, especially in their early lives.

They may have a large following, but they are not recognised as having importance by the scientific community. The medium Doris Stokes could fill the Sydney Opera House, but did scientists generally take her gift seriously?

Why is it so difficult to get people to accept evidence for the existence of the paranormal, of *survival* evidence? Even to *look at it* and make up their own minds? Later this year at another QFAS conference at Woodbrooke, we're going to be developing this theme and examining the psychological reasons – but probably most of us who've thought about it would agree that fear, however it is disguised, is a major factor.

It may be fear connected with the phenomena themselves. This fear is of course fuelled by fiction and always has been. Novels, TV dramas, films, sensationalise the paranormal. They give a horrific view of ghosts and evil entities, which has invaded the unconscious minds of millions of people. And then there are the semi-factual articles in the tabloid press about such things as poltergeist phenomena which often distort the facts and make them more horrifying in order to sell the paper. And then there are the psychics and mediums with egos larger than their gifts who attract bizarre coverage in the media.

For the scientists, it may be fear of losing one's status or career prospects through being out of step with colleagues. Scientists generally appear very confident in their materialism, and don't want their world view shaken. Not all scientists, of course, especially not all physicists, but those who represent mainstream science and seem to be accorded a position of authority.

Perhaps we could say that the majority of humanity is confused, worried, afraid, or at least perplexed by death and what comes after, and – I believe – being fed false information, fictional and supposedly factual.

These are the people I wish it was easier to reach. Some of them are very vulnerable and are suffering. They are less able to get hold of information than some of us here today, and they are being denied the hope that there is anything beyond materialism. This is the culture that prevails.

I'd like to read you this example. It was written by a man who lost his daughter and granddaughter in the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004.

"It's terrible to lose somebody, for them not to be there, to recognise the fact that they're not only not there, they've completely gone. You ask yourself, over and over, where have they gone? They were here, their being was here. They can't just be wiped out. And yet they are. It would have been easier if I'd had a religious faith. Overwhelmingly so. It would have been such a help. You can't suddenly switch faith on. You can say, yes, I try to follow the Ten Commandments, or, yes, I believe in goodness and concern for other people. But you can't suddenly decide, because it suits you, that there is life after death." (4)

This was written by Richard Attenborough, actor and director of such wonderful films as "Gandhi". A highly intelligent person, left in total darkness and confusion by the prevailing culture in which he lives. And how are his daughter and granddaughter feeling, unable to reach him?

There is still darkness and confusion for many, many people on this subject on which the evidence has actually thrown so much light. This is the box that I feel myself to be in and I wonder if anyone else here feels the same?

And yet are we really as powerless as we may sometimes feel? Perhaps there is something we can do. Quakers have traditionally made the first small cracks in structures which seemed invincible. I'd like to tell you about one suggestion that the QFAS committee have considered. We haven't got very far with it but in principle we thought it worth pursuing.

Nowhere except within the scientific community itself is scepticism more apparent than in the attitude of the BBC. The BBC is a public body with a charter, and we

all pay a licence fee. It is accountable to us, and for many people it is a very authoritative voice.

The relevant part of the BBC Charter which I looked up recently says:

The Public Purposes of the BBC are as follows—

- (a) sustaining citizenship and civil society;*
- (b) promoting education and learning;*
- (c) stimulating creativity and cultural excellence;(5)*

With respect to its attitude to paranormal phenomena and psychical research, is the BBC promoting education and learning? Does it present programmes which are at the cutting edge of all that is known and being studied on this subject? Very occasionally there are programmes on NDEs or the evidence for reincarnation. These programmes tend to be isolated events and not part of any pattern of wider consistent enquiry on the subject. There is never any attempt to build on them and make them part of a changing world view.

Some examples.

Driving to the Charney Manor conference last autumn I was listening to Radio 4. It was Halloween, and there was an entertainment programme about four celebrities: they were comedians, of course, who had spent a night in what was reputed to be the most haunted old inn in England, to see what if anything would happen.

I can't remember many of the details. As usual it was all predictably ridiculous. There was a medium who took part in a séance – using, I think, a ouija board. I felt that the medium was treated very badly. Nothing much happened during the séance and nothing much happened during the night. The whole programme ended with one of the celebrities announcing that that was hardly surprising because, of course, there never had been any memorable contact received from the afterlife. And he repeated, as if he was the voice of the BBC, "Absolutely nothing." Silence. End of programme.

Another was an intellectual chat programme which mentioned among others, Alfred Russel Wallace and his scientific work. The presenter said with an apologetic laugh that Wallace had become interested in Spiritualism towards the end of his life. Cue for the others on the panel to laugh also. Which they did. They made it sound as if he should be forgiven for becoming weak minded as a result of old age. I wrote a letter of protest to the Radio Times as did Beryl Spence. They weren't published and no reply was received. The programme was repeated later, intact.

In a programme which was part of the 2001 BBC TV series, "What the Victorians Did for Us", with Adam Hart-Davis, a Victorian séance was re-enacted with people

with fishing rods standing behind the sitters, who were grouped around a table. The people with the fishing rods were raising and lowering small items (or apports) on the table from above the heads of the sitters. Ludicrous. There was no serious evaluation of the work of any of the scientists of the period who researched the phenomena so meticulously. The work of William Crookes was not even mentioned.

Stephen Fry is another celebrity, highly regarded for his intelligence, who constantly mocks at the idea of communication with 'dead people', on his programme "QI", which purports to celebrate the inquiring mind.

I would argue that according to its Charter the BBC is not fulfilling its obligation to promote education on the historical background of the last 130 years of paranormal phenomena and psychical research, and that it should put on a series of programmes to rectify this.

I'd like to conclude by reading you an extract from a statement which the QFAS committee wrote in November 2009 as we entered a new decade in the life of the Fellowship.

"One cannot continue to look at evidence for ever. Sooner or later a verdict has to be reached. So the committee agree that the time has come to move on, and in the next ten years of the life of QFAS to take our "verdict" to a wider audience with confidence and fresh energy.

"The reason for this, of course, is to help people overcome the debilitating fear of death! Knowledge about life beyond death can bring comfort and reassurance to those approaching their own death or that of family members; and for younger people it can bring a new sense of meaning and purpose, once physical life is seen as part of a greater whole. We believe that the existence of life beyond death is a truth, and that an understanding of this truth is part of our birthright, and not something which should remain hidden.

"Belief in an afterlife is linked to no particular religion. We believe that a large body of overwhelming evidence has accumulated over many years clearly indicating the survival of the human personality. One day we hope that the strength of this evidence will be widely accepted.(6)

Perhaps in its second decade, as members of QFAS, we could individually and collectively begin to apply a bit of pressure! We might discover that this was a very empowering thing to do.

The evidence is on our side!

References

(1) "The Afterlife: How good is the evidence? Talks from the Quaker Fellowship for Afterlife Studies Conference held at Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, in July 2009."

Available from David Britton, Captain's Cottage, 35 Churchfields, West Mersea, Essex, C05 8QJ. Cost £2.00.

Don Mason has written "Science, Mystical Experience and Religious Belief". Pub. Sessions. ISBN 1-85072-357-5. Available from Don Mason, 5 Larch Lane, Witney, Oxon, OX28 1AG.

(2) From "The Road to Immortality", by Geraldine Cummins, first published by Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd, 1933.

(3) From a talk, "Apparitions", given by Tricia Robertson to the QFAS conference at Charney Manor in October 2010. Available from Angela Howard on a set of 3 CDs. Cost, £10.00 to members and £12.00 to non-members.

(4) From "Entirely Up to You, Darling!" by Richard Attenborough and Diana Hawkins, pub. Hutchinson, 2008.

(5) BBC Charter. An Agreement between Her Majesty's Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation. Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport by Command of Her Majesty, July 2006 HMSO Cm 6872 £11.00. On the BBC website.

(6) Statement by the QFAS Committee circulated to members November, 2009. Full statement available from Angela Howard.
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Quote from "Can we Trust the BBC?" by Robin Aitkin. Pub. Continuum, 2007.

Robin Aitkin is a former BBC reporter and journalist. He spent 25 years working across all levels within the corporation, from local radio to the Today programme.

"The BBC believes it enshrines all the journalistic virtues; that is, as an impartial truth-teller with a deserved reputation for integrity. It embodies the virtues of 'public service broadcasting', but that phrase is often misused by the BBC and its supporters simply to mean broadcasting free from the profit motive. The common assumption is that commercial influence is the only threat to impartiality – which is obviously false; 'public service broadcasting' should be free of *all* bias. The ideal is an accurate, dependable service free from partiality, serving all citizens equally: an inspiring concept as well as a very practical one in a complex democracy. But

if a public service broadcaster covertly promotes its own agenda, excluding voices it doesn't like, then it becomes a hidden persuader; and, what is more, one which enjoys the huge privilege of public funding.”