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"Can You Handle the Truth?"

A Conversation with Edwin May, Parapsychology Research Scientist

By Norman M. Goldfarb

Edwin May received a Ph.D. in nuclear physics in 1968 from the University of Pittsburgh. He conducted research in experimental low energy nuclear physics for nine years before entering the field of parapsychology research.

How did you get into parapsychology research?

As an experimental physicist, I got to play with accelerators and all kinds of fancy gear and computers. I was good at it. But then I discovered, much to my horror, that I really hated the discipline. I couldn't care less about the underlying reason why I was doing all of these fun things. Back in the early 1970's, in San Francisco, I decided to drop out. For about nine months, I tried all kinds of stuff. I went to a conference where somebody gave a talk about extrasensory perception. I had never heard of it. I talked at some length to a scientist by the name of Charles Honerton. I said, "This can't be real, but I can't see anything wrong with what you're doing." I spent some time in India chasing miracles and found absolutely none, and then came back to work with Honerton. There was a parapsychology research laboratory in the Division of Psychiatry at Maimonides Medical Center in New York City. I worked there for eight months and saw all kinds of wild stuff that I couldn't understand. It was fun in those days because we would answer the phone "Hello, Division of Parapsychology. May we tell you who's calling?" There would be this dead silence on the phone.

At Maimonides, I met a really wild, interesting character; his name is Ingo Swann. He was chief psychic at the time at the Stanford Research Institute. The parapsychology program at SRI had been established by Hal Puttof and Russell Targ in 1971.

I joined SRI in 1975. Russ Targ left in 1982 and Hal Puttof left in 1985. I was director of the parapsychology program from 1985 to 1989, when I closed it down. Then I moved the government program over to Science Applications International until 1995 when we had to close that program down too.

Because of my background as an experimental physicist, Ingo asked me to come out to SRI. He said, "Look, I'm doing some pretty wild stuff out here under a Navy contract, using my mind to mess with a magnetometer. I don't want my work to go down the tubes because some secretary flipped a light switch. I'll get you a job and I want you to debug the experiment." It took me about three months to kill the experiment, but I saw enough, with some work for the CIA, to convince me that something interesting was happening. I had no idea what. It was producing, occasionally, useful intelligence. I started working there and took over the project in 1985. I ended up getting a \$10 million Army contract. I had a staff of twelve people and a \$2 million per year budget. We drew interest from Congress. After the Army contract ran out, they wanted to give me \$2 million to continue the research. SRI didn't want it, so I took the program to SAIC.

What kind of phenomena did you explore?

Parapsychology phenomena fall into three broad categories. The first category is passive: extrasensory perception – ESP, remote viewing, precognition, or the term we use,

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anomalous cognition. Most of our work was in this category. The second category is mind influencing matter, for example, using your thoughts to make something move. We were unable to verify that the second category is real, but you can't prove a negative. The third category is called survival after bodily death. The idea is that mind and body are separate; that the mind can transcend the death of the body. Many world religions hold that belief very firmly. We didn't look into this category at all.

What research did you do for the military?

This was during the Cold War. The military wanted to know if they should be worried about Russians gathering information out of our secret safes, or is the President's health in jeopardy when he meets with so-and-so? We looked at a lot of really weird stuff. Most of it we couldn't confirm at all as being real. The military said, "If you can sit in this chair here in Palo Alto and tell us what's underground in Kazakhstan, that's a hell of a lot cheaper and a lot safer than the alternatives." So we did a lot of work on that. Were we successful? Not often, but often enough to be worthwhile. We were no better or worse than HUMINT, human intelligence gathering. Because of the Nixon problems in 1974, the CIA just quit using spies for the most part, so they really hoped we could do something. You can't know anything about Osama bin Laden from a satellite.

There were places that the intelligence community had reasonable ground truth. In other words, they knew what was there. The question was, could SRI remote viewers get any information that the military already knew to be there? The answer was sort of, enough to make it intriguing, enough to warrant further investment.

For example?

One of the people, in fact the only guy I can name of the whole program, was Joseph McMoneagle. He was the Army's top-of-the-line remote viewer. We gave him an aerial photograph of a building, completely generic, about three kilometers from the North Sea in northern Russia.

Joe looked at the photograph for about an hour. Then he made a detailed drawing and described a Soviet submarine that had never been seen before. The military said, "Are you kidding? First of all, it's not on the coast. It's three kilometers from any nearest water. They are not going to build a damn submarine that far from the water." Joe said, "Mark my words. In a few days, it is going to be out there." So, a few days later, the Russians dug a canal and out floated the first Typhoon class submarine, the largest nuclear missile submarine ever built. Joe nailed it. How many of those did we nail? Frankly, only about twenty out of a few hundred.

I'll give you another example. General James Dozier was kidnapped off the streets of Italy by the Red Brigade. There was a massive manhunt. Joe phonetically described the town in which Dozier was eventually recovered. He drew the shape of the building in which he was held and the circumstances under which he was held. Joe debriefed Dozier afterwards. Dozier said, "Oh, my God. We should teach military officers what to think about to help guide psychics to find them." I don't know if that's true. But that's what Joe said.

There were a lot of failures. We were as good and as bad as human intelligence, but we were cheaper and safer. The only time the military came to us was when they had a problem they couldn't solve. The fact that we could get any of them right is truly amazing.

That applied work was haphazard, but our basic science program was highly systematic, carefully overseen. We have quantitative ways of making the measurements. In those experiments, we've done very well.

These were human experiments, so did you use an IRB?

Prior to 1985, we were basically spying on the Russians; we didn't need an IRB for that. Later on, we did some research for the Army medical command, and we needed an IRB for that research because it involved human subjects.

I built this exquisitely expensive, totally useless piece of hardware that did nothing but spit random binary bits into an optical pipe. We spent a quarter of a million dollars to make sure the thing was really random, never connected to the wall, and all of the details you want to have. The subjects sat down in front of a computer and saw a line going across the screen. The line was the output data stream from the random number generator. Your job was to use mental psychokinesis to make the line go up instead of down as the trace moved across the display screen. We used a military IRB. They restricted us from using females in that experiment for fear they might be pregnant and thus place a fetus in some sort of harm's way.

When I got my big Army contract in 1985, we had to constitute our own IRB. It was all classified. The Army supplied us with a list of people who had security clearances. We chose individuals who we thought would be skeptical but honest. We followed the HHS guidelines. You had to have a member of the community, and a member of the clergy, and physicians, and what have you. We ended up with a Buddhist priest who had a clearance; talk about weird.

We also had twelve members on our Scientific Oversight Committee, including a philosopher, a medical person, engineers, physicists, physiologists, psychologists, and so on. Two of them were Nobel laureates.

What experiments did the IRB review?

They reviewed all of them. One example involved lucid dreaming – a dream during which the dreamer is aware that what they are experiencing is “just” a dream. As it turns out, dreamers can signal the waking world by moving their “dream” eyes, which actually moves their physical eyes, which can be detected. We asked psychics to sleep in the lab and be monitored for eye movements and other indicators of sleep. If they had a lucid dream, they were to signal us using their “dream” eyes, examine (in their dream) the contents of a sealed envelope in another room, and then signal us again when they were done. We would then wake them up and have them report what they saw in their dream. This experiment worked quite well.

The experiments were designated as minimal risk, but we had to get full medical examinations of all of our subjects. We spent \$30,000 on medical tests for one of the subjects. He was a disabled Vietnam veteran with heart problems. Everybody was terrified that he might die in the middle of the experiment.

We had to demonstrate that we had done our science and the protocol was designed so we weren't wasting the subjects' time.

Unrelated to our program, the military took some people to a place called the Monroe Institute in Virginia. One of the people was doing the out-of-body stuff that they did at the Monroe Institute and he had a psychotic break. We had to write a lot of documentation that we didn't do altered states of consciousness in our work. It was a big problem.

Do all of the subjects sign informed consent forms?

Yes. The form describes the experiment. It has the usual sections. The experiments are minimal risk, but we do advise them that their credibility or career may be harmed if they

disclose their participation. We also tell them that positive results in an experiment do not mean they have powers they can use for gambling or speculative investments.

Did you do any experiments that were unqualified successes?

Many. In the first year of my big Army contract, we did 38 different experiments. About one-third of them generated unqualified positive results. If I do a remote viewing study now, even with novice people off the street, it rarely fails. Up to 1989, the work was secret, so we could not publish our results. Since then, however, our lab has been active in publishing the experiment we are doing now and slowly, over time, will publish the huge, now declassified, experiments of the 1980s and 1990s.

If ESP is real, it has to be part of the evolutionary process and, in many regards, normal. That does not mean everybody has it; not everybody can play the violin like Jascha Heifetz. It also doesn't mean that it has to happen every single time you try. If you believe that, you would think that hitting a baseball is impossible.

Most people have some capacity. Like anything else, there are experts in the field and lots of good people. We can't predict in advance who's going to be good. I sure as hell wish we could. The Army gave us lots of money to answer that question. There was a book written in the 1970s called Executive ESP. This guy conducted weekend executive training courses in New York City. He gave them various tests, and covertly embedded an ESP test. At the end of the weekend, he asked them if they believe in ESP. The result was really fascinating. Their scores on the test did not correlate at all with their belief in ESP, but it did correlate significantly with their salary. It turns out that the ones who were smarter as measured by their salaries have slight ESP.

Has anybody used parapsychology for a practical purpose?

There are examples that have been successful and examples that have failed. My former colleague, Hal Puttof, used some psychics to make \$50,000 in the futures market to put his kid through school. What you are essentially asking is "If you're so smart, how come you ain't rich?" The problem is that the information transfer rate is thousandths of a bit per second. It's really low. You sit down and try to use your psychic ability to get red or black at the roulette table, it ain't going to work; it takes too long.

Interviewer

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