

Reunions: Visionary Encounters with Departed Loved Ones by Raymond Moody, Jr., with Paul Perry. New York: Villard Books, 1993. 211 pp. \$6.99. ISBN 0679425705.

Raymond Moody, known for launching modern near-death studies with his book, *Life After Life* (1975), may be credited with other innovative work. His 1993 book, *Reunions*, is a popular account of how to induce visionary experience of one's "departed loved ones." In near-death experiences (NDEs), one seems to encounter such departed ones, often with notable therapeutic effects. Dr. Moody, trained in psychiatry, began to explore ways of inducing these visions as a tool for grief therapy. He recalled methods of ancient Greek oracles and seers, attempting to create a modern *psychomanteum*, a kind of "theater of the mind." As director of this theater, Moody would help the performers (seekers of a vision) enter a suitable state of mind. He provided them with a comfortable, relaxed, almost completely dark environment. As a method for stimulating visions, Moody settled on using a speculum: a crystal or glass ball, or glass of clear liquid such as ink, blood, wine, or water, or a mirror; in fact, just about any shiny surface or transparent substance might do the trick. What was needed was a focus for gazing that was hypnotic and suggestive, conducive to dreaming and free association. Gazing at perceptually ambiguous objects like crystal balls or mirrors—in the right mood and with the right lighting—could stimulate fantasies, dreams, visions.

Moody's theater of the mind is designed to lend itself to visionary experience; the author abstains from theorizing the nature of the envisioned entities. His main concern as maverick psychopomp and psychiatrist (in Greek, "soul-doctor") was to facilitate a visionary encounter with a departed loved one, and to measure success in terms of the therapeutic benefits. Surprised and delighted, Moody found that his visionary theatrics were successful in (a) producing real hallucinations and (b) causing (via self-report) beneficial effects with his subjects.

The book's seven chapters cover three main topics. The first talks about crystal and mirror gazing, followed by one that highlights the history of crystal gazing. The next chapters describe Moody's therapeutic experiments and enthusiastically presented results. It also describes Moody's own experiment with the mirror, in which an apparition of his grandma popped out and hung around for a while; the experience, he says, convinced him of the reality of the other world. Elsewhere, however, he seems to express the view that life after death is not amenable to scientific inquiry. His own experience, as he reports it, appears like nothing more than a powerful, self-induced hallucination. This is not to say that all crystal-caused visions are devoid of paranormal content; but as far as I could see, in none of Moody's cases, his own included, did I find

anything paranormal. But for Moody this was not the point of the experiments, for which dwelling on such questions might ruin the therapeutic benefits. Moody's unspoken assumption seems to be: If the experiment makes the subject feel good, it qualifies as a success. The scientific quest for proof would inhibit something else Moody regards as important: the humorous, wonder-inspiring, fun-and-entertainment value of psychical phenomena. In defense of Moody, according to Skeat's etymological dictionary, the Sanskrit root of the word miracle is *smi*—related to *smile*. Miracles make us smile with wonder, which Plato said was the mother of philosophy. (Do people antipathetic to anomalies and "miracles" generally lack a good sense of humor?) In any case, Moody would prefer to leave the humorless, grim task of assessing evidence, calculating probabilities, and qualifying unto death one's conclusions to the grunts and kobolds of parapsychology.

Moody's procedure was to invite a person motivated to have a visionary reunion to join him for a day at his home in Alabama. From the description, the preparation for the show in the theater of the mind consisted of two main things. The first was to get the client to unwind mentally and physically, and to put him into a state of relaxed expectation. Moody's psychomanteum was a collage of devices used to elicit visions from the subliminal mind. Central was the use of darkness, candlelight, and some form of "shew-stone"—a mirror. To suggest the sense of being dislocated in time, all timepieces were removed. One brought and dwelled on mementos of the departed one hoped to see. Like the masters of Baroque Rome, music and art are deployed in service to the induction of spiritual vision. Moody used prints of the Surrealists, also featuring posters of Donald Duck and a life-size statue of a wooden Red Indian, along with other oddments and antiques; the aim was to create a mood of playful fantasia, psychically permissive and mentally fluid.

In terms of inner preparation, Moody encouraged his client to talk about the deceased target person, the feelings, motives, and needs for seeking the vision. Clients were invited to bring photographs and personal effects that might facilitate an encounter. The author quotes some very positive and enthusiastic accounts of the visions experienced, and there is enough reportage to suggest that the experiments were emotionally effective with some of his client-performers. How long and how deep the alleged therapeutic impact we are not told.

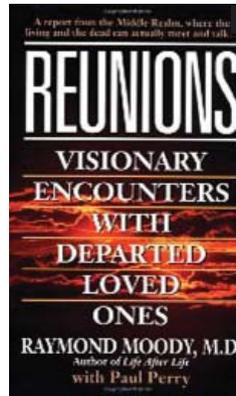
Moody is clearly excited by his work with crystal gazing, but seems intent to isolate it from other forms of divination. He states, for instance, that what he is about has "nothing to do with mediumship and séances" (p. xix). Actually, crystal gazing is just one of many forms of mediumship and divination. *Séance* is just a French word for "sitting," and the cornerstone of Moody's psychomanteum is sitting in the dark in front of a crystal or mirror, gazing and waiting for an image, ghost, apparition, or other hallucination to

show up. As with mediumship, so with crystal gazing, it's done in the dark, because the darkness shuts out the distracting visual world and moreover is sleep-and-image conducive; medium and scryer try to bypass reason and communicate directly with some discarnate or higher intelligence. Crystal gazing is one of many ways people have discovered for trying to do this; the general procedure is to divert the conscious mind and allow the unconscious to bubble up freely without impediment. The diversion may occur through crystal gazing, invoking a mediumistic control, native vision questing, chanting or prayer or repeating a mantra, fasting, prolonged wakefulness, immobility (as with the pillar saints), ingestion of psychoactive substances, and so on and so forth.

Even modern gadgetry has vision-producing potential. Moody points out that peering through a telescope toward the starry cosmos may induce visions, and suggests that we return to the art of contemplating nature as a way of inducing visions. Of course, low-tech induction works as well. Jacob Boehme was gazing at sunlight reflected on a pewter dish when he suddenly beheld a transformative vision. Spinoza made his living as a lens grinder and might often have been lost in thought as he focused on the lenses he spent his time finely grinding.

The last three chapters move from a report on mirror-gazing experiments to discussion of mirror gazing as an intuitive skill to learn as an instrument of self-discovery. Cultivating the gazing art itself—the contemplative life—is recommended. In the Indian school, we find the idea of *vipassana* meditation; practicing pure awareness without object, without fixation on anything. Moody sees the skill necessary to open one's visionary eye as playing a role in our spiritual development. Crystal gazing may be thought of as practice for a more contemplative, less analytic and scientifically suspicious, approach to the world at large. Once in possession of more contemplative skills, we may learn to divine much that is hidden in everyday life. This is similar to André Breton's surrealist plan to occupy the real with the surreal, and superpose the space of dreams upon the space of ordinary life—an intriguing, even disturbing idea of *metaphysical* revolution.¹

In the final chapter, Moody discusses possible future uses of mirror gazing. Grief therapy has already been noted; we don't know how effective the psychomanteum was for those who came with grief issues; Moody's treatment of everything in this book is sketchy. There is, however, a genuine potential to explore. The difficulty with the idea of grief therapy is this: Everything about Moody's method involves using suggestion to induce a vision of the deceased. Will this not weigh against the belief that the encounter was an authentic visit



from a real deceased person? And wouldn't the therapeutic value depend on *really* believing he had met the departed love one? How much benefit could a grief-stricken person obtain from a vision he knew was deliberately induced?

Other suggestions for application are offered. Suppose, for example, we could hook up a crystal gazer to devices monitoring brain behavior? What would the brain of the active visionary tell us? Of course, there have been neurophysiological studies of meditative states, which might be the place to look for hints on how to proceed with crystal gazers. For another conceivable use, Moody would have us consider hauntings; a competent crystal gazer present at the investigation of haunted houses might conceivably be instructive. (In modern-day ghost hunting, mediums are in fact often brought on the scene to comment.) Moody thinks groups of crystal gazers performing conjointly in some necromantic project might produce some interesting effects, but begs off from trying it himself, preferring to experiment with one person at a time.

Yet another suggestion, crystal-mediated mental skills might be a powerful adjunct to the study of history; the visionary experiences of great historians like Arnold Toynbee and Edward Gibbon furnish examples (p. 195). As clairvoyant visitors to the other world, a new form of historical science would become possible (it would be nice to catch up with Shakespeare in the next world and find out if he really wrote his plays).

Moody's mirror-gazing studies taught him to revere imagination and mark the limits of reason. Crystal gazing, a technique for ransacking the treasure-trove of the subliminal mind, permits a veritable re-enchantment of the world. With it in hand, we can understand the secret of Aladdin's Lamp and follow Alice *through the looking glass*. Indeed, we are told, if we follow the mystery of scrying, we are led back to the fount of all magic and mythology.

This is a suggestive book, especially for its emphasis on the need for experimentation with altered states of consciousness; but, allowing for the author's natural ebullience, he overrates the novelty of his findings (there is no word of predecessors such as Frederic Myers and Goodrich Freer)² and exaggerates the implications for science and the understanding of history of his undoubtedly worthy observations on this age-old phenomenon.

Notes

¹ A metaphysical revolution would involve alterations in the fundamental sense of what is real. To this kind of subversive, the real would be treated as unreal; the unreal as truly real.

² See Besterman, T. (1965). *Crystal-Gazing: A Study in the History, Distribution, Theory and Practice of Scrying*. New Hyde Park, NY: University Books.

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