

The Discovery of a “White Crow”

I am baffled as to spirit return.

– William James

During his final years at Harvard University, where he received his degree in medicine, William James is said to have suffered from fits of depression, what he called “soul sickness.” Apparently, the “death of God” and the increasingly materialistic worldview of the times brought on by the Ages of Reason and Enlightenment and then accentuated by Darwinism seriously affected him, even to the point that he considered suicide. However, he overcame his depression to some extent in 1872 when he accepted a position to teach physiology and anatomy at Harvard.

Soon thereafter, James integrated his physiology course with psychology, and in 1876 founded the first laboratory for experimental psychology in the United States. Along with Wilhelm Wundt, John Dewey, and Sigmund Freud, James is considered one of the pioneers of modern psychology. However, after concluding that the root cause of man’s behavior was to be found in philosophy, where the meaning of life was explored, he gradually moved from psychology to philosophy.

When, in 1885, James was told by his mother-in-law and sister-in-law that they sat with a medium named Leonora Piper, a Boston resident, and were given much information about deceased relatives, James, though skeptical, was curious and decided to have his own sitting with Mrs. Piper. He left his first visit with her convinced that she either had supernormal powers or was an excellent detective. After a dozen sittings in which deceased relatives and friends communicated with him through the entranced medium, James came to accept her supernatural powers, certain that much of the information that came through her could not have been researched. Writing in the July 1886 Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research, he reported:

“This lady can at will pass into a trance condition, in which she is ‘controlled’ by a power purporting to be the spirit of a French doctor, who serves as an intermediary between the sitter and the deceased friends. This is the ordinary type of trance-mediumship at the present day.....I am persuaded by the medium’s honesty, and of the genuineness of her trance; and.....I now believe her to be in possession of a power as yet unexplained.”

Born on June 27, 1859 in Nashua, New Hampshire as Leonora Evelina Simonds, young Leonora (or Leonore, her nickname) is said to have had clairvoyant experiences as a child. She recalled that, at age 8, she was playing in the garden when she felt a sharp blow on her right ear accompanied by a “prolonged sibilant sound” that gradually

resolved itself into the letter “S,” which was then followed by the words, “Aunt Sara not dead, but with you still.” Leonora ran to her mother and told her of the experience. Two days later, Leonora’s mother was informed that her sister, Sara, had died unexpectedly. She estimated the time of death to be around the time that Leonora ran into the house.

Several weeks later, Leonora informed her mother of a bright light in her bedroom with many faces in it and said that her bed wouldn’t stop rocking. Except for a few more experiences of this kind, she seems to have had a normal childhood. Her father and mother were both of English ancestry, deeply religious and members of the Congregational Church, in which Leonora was baptized. Her father gave her a small Bible on her ninth birthday as a reward for having read the book from cover to cover. The fourth of six children, Leonora was fond of athletic activities during her teens and became an expert needlewoman. She was described as tall, slender, with Grecian features and masses of golden hair, carrying herself with grace and dignity. She married William Piper of Boston on October 6, 1881, at age 22, and gave birth to their first child, Alta, on May 16, 1884, and their second child, Minerva, on October 7, 1885.

Shortly after Alta’s birth, Leonora was persuaded by James Piper, her father-in-law, to consult Mr. J. R. Cocke, a blind healing medium. In Alta’s 1929 biography of her mother, she states that an injury in a “coasting” accident was the reason for seeing Mr. Cocke, but Leonora told Dr. Richard Hodgson, who began studying her in 1887, that she was suffering from a tumor. Whether she believed that the accident gave rise to a tumor is unclear, but whatever the reason, she took the advice and first visited the clairvoyant on June 19, 1884. Cocke claimed to be controlled by a deceased French physician whose name was pronounced Finny. During her first visit with Cocke, Leonora felt curious twitchings, and thought she might become completely unconscious. “On a second visit to Mr. Cocke he placed his hands on her head, and shortly after she became unconscious,” Hodgson related the story as told to him. “As she was losing consciousness she was aware of a flood of light and saw strange faces, and a hand moving before her. The ‘flood of light’ she had experienced once before, a few months previously; it immediately preceded a swoon, caused by a sudden blow on the side of the head.”

After she lost consciousness during her second visit, Leonora got up from her chair, walked to a table in the center of the room, picked up a pencil and paper, wrote rapidly for a few minutes, then handed the paper to Judge Frost, a hard-headed and respected jurist, and returned to her chair, still entranced. After regaining consciousness and having no recollection of what took place, she was told by Frost that the paper contained a remarkable message from his son, who had been fatally injured in an accident some 30 years earlier. The spirit who controlled Leonora was said to have been an Indian girl named “Chlorine.” Leonora had several more sittings with Cocke and each time was again controlled by Chlorine.

As researchers eventually came to understand, the “control” is a spirit entity that takes over the body of the entranced medium and speaks through her or him, or, as with Mr.

Cocke, administers healing. Apparently, few spirits have the ability to take control of a medium's body, and thus the control often functions as an intermediary between the sitters and spirits who want to communicate with them, passing on messages and acting as something of a medium on the other side of the veil. It was said that the control has to put him- or herself into an altered state of consciousness on that side of the veil in order to control the medium's body. In addition to relaying messages, these controls sometimes attempt to communicate higher truths to the sitters. When another spirit is able to communicate directly by controlling the medium's body, the primary control acts as something of a "gatekeeper," by maintaining order among the spirits who want to communicate and fending off low-level spirits who attempt to invade the sitting.

Word spread fast of Frost's experience and Leonora began receiving many requests for sittings. She tried sitting at home with relatives and friends with some success. In addition to Chlorine, various sprits controlled her and communicated, including Dr. Phinuit (believed to be Cocke's Finney), Mrs. Siddons, Bach, Longfellow, Commodore Vanderbilt, and Loretta Ponchini. Mrs. Siddons reportedly recited a scene from Macbeth through Leonora, while Longfellow wrote some verses and Loretta Ponchini, who said she had been an Italian girl, made some drawings. Sebastian Bach claimed to have formed her "band," and Chlorine acted as the principal control during those first few months. Phinuit came initially only to give medical advice to sitters and claimed that other matters were "too trivial" for him to bother with, but by the time Professor James began studying Leonora during the autumn of 1885, Phinuit had become her primary control for communication purposes. Leonora (hereinafter, "Mrs. Piper") recalled that she had not given sittings several months before and several months after the birth of Minerva during 1885 and when she started up again Phinuit had taken over. She described the trance condition as she experienced it:

"I feel as if something were passing over my brain, making it numb, a sensation similar to that I experienced when I was etherized, only the unpleasant odor of the ether is absent. I feel a little cold, too, not very, just a little, as if a cold breeze passed over me, and people and objects become smaller until they finally disappear, then, I know nothing more until I wake up, when the first thing I am conscious of is a bright, very very bright light, and then darkness, such darkness. My hands and my arms begin to tingle just as one's foot tingles after it has 'been asleep,' and I see, as if from a great distance, objects and people in the room; but they are very small and very black."

Prominent author and publisher Dr. Henry Holt had several sittings with Mrs. Piper. He related that after being seated a minute or two, her eyeballs rolled upward, her face became slightly convulsed, and then she began talking in a rough voice not her own. He recalled the voice affecting him as if it were coming from a statue, "pouring forth at one moment some brusquerie in the rough deep tones of Phinuit; at the next, in the same voice softened to gentleness, petting a child; then, perhaps, a return to the gruff tones in some biting sarcasm to some interloping control; then perhaps issuing from the same mouth, a child's voice singing the little boat song – all going on amid the weeping relatives who join in the song."

Barrett Wendell, who sat with Mrs. Piper on May 26, 1886, described her recovery from the trance states as “perhaps the most shocking sight I ever witnessed.” It was said to have involved convulsion-like movements that alarmed many people.

Mrs. Gibbins, Professor James’s mother-in-law, heard about Mrs. Piper from her maid, Bridget, who had been informed of “the queer doings of young Mrs. Piper” by the Pipers’ Irish servant, Mary. At the time, Leonora and William were living with his parents in Arlington Heights, a suburb of Boston. In addition to his 12 sittings with Mrs. Piper, James arranged for a number of friends, relatives, and associates to sit with her. Twelve of the sitters got nothing, except unknown names or trivial talk, but 15 of the sitters received meaningful information, which, James concluded, the medium could not have come upon in a normal way. James admitted, however, that he was “derelict” in keeping a record of his own sittings with Mrs. Piper, as, at the time, he was interested in satisfying only himself about her and did not recognize it as a possible contribution to psychical research.

Dr. Minot J. Savage, a Unitarian minister and one of James’s friends, did keep a written record of his first sitting with Mrs. Piper early in 1886. He reported:

“Immediately on becoming entranced, her control, Dr. Phinuit, said there were many spirit friends present. Among them he said was an old man, whom he described, but only in a general way. Then he said, ‘He is your father, and he calls you Judson.’ Attention was also called to the fact that he had a peculiar bare spot on his head, and Mrs. Piper put her hand on the corresponding place on her own head.

“Now for the facts that give these two apparently simple points whatever significance they possess. My father had died during the preceding summer, aged ninety years and six months. He had never lived in Boston, and Mrs. Piper, I am quite sure, had never seen him nor been in any way interested in him. He wasn’t all that bald, but when quite young had been burned; so that there was a bare spot on the right side of the top of his head, perhaps an inch wide and three inches long, running from the forehead back towards the crown. This he covered by combing his hair over it. This was the spot that Mrs. Piper indicated. Now as to the name by which he addressed me: I was given the middle name, Judson, at the request of a half-sister, my father’s daughter, who died soon after I was born. Out of tenderness for her memory (as I always supposed) father always used, when I was a boy, to call me Judson, though all the rest of the family called me by my first name, Minot. In his later life father also got to calling me by my first name. No one, therefore, had called me by my second name for many years. I was therefore naturally struck and surprised by suddenly hearing one who claimed to be my father giving me once more my old boyhood name. I was not consciously thinking of either of these things; and I am convinced that Mrs. Piper couldn’t have known anything about them.

“During this same sitting Mrs. Piper’s control also said, ‘Here is somebody who says his name is John. He was your brother. No, not your own brother, your half-brother.’ Then, pressing her hand on the base of her brain, she moaned, as she swayed to and fro. Then she continued, ‘He says it was so hard to die way off there all

alone! How he did want to see mother!’ She went on to explain that he died from a fall, striking the back of his head. Her whole account of this was realistic in the extreme. My half-brother, John, the son of my mother – for both father and mother had been twice married – died several years previous to this sitting. While building a mill in Michigan he fell, striking the back of his head on a piece of timber. He was far from friends; and was a most tender lover of his mother. I was not thinking of him until told that he was present.

“Many other things occurred during the sitting. But I mention only these, because, though simple, they are clear-cut and striking, and because I see no way by which Mrs. Piper could ever have known them.”

On a much later visit to Mrs. Piper, Savage was told that his son, who had died at age 31 three years earlier, was present. “Papa, I want you go at once to my room,” Savage recalled his son communicating with a great deal of earnestness. “Look in my drawer and you will find a lot of loose papers. Among them are some which I would like you to take and destroy at once.” The son had lived with a personal friend in Boston and his personal effects remained there. Savage went to his son’s room and searched the drawer, gathering up all the loose papers. “There were things there which he had jotted down and trusted to the privacy of his drawer which he would not have made public for the world,” Savage ended the story, commenting that he would not violate his son’s privacy by disclosing the contents of the papers.

In his 1911 book, *Glimpses of the Next State*, Vice-Admiral W. Usborne Moore, a retired British naval commander turned psychical researcher, told of a sitting he had with Maggie Gaule Reidinger, a New York City medium. Before sitting with Reidinger, Moore visited Minot Savage to discuss Mrs. Piper. Savage told Moore of the sitting with her in which his son communicated, and pointed to a picture of his son hanging in his office. He also gave Moore a letter of introduction to Mrs. Piper. At the sitting later that day, Reidinger mentioned Moore’s visit with Savage and said that Savage’s son was there at the time. “He is beside me now,” Reidinger continued, “and he wishes me to tell his father that he was with him in his study this morning when you called upon him. He says: ‘My father pointed to a picture, and said, “That is my son.”’ He afterwards showed you another portrait of him. He gave you a letter, or authorized you to use his name, to assist you to obtain an interview with Mrs. Piper. Let me tell you, you will not get that appointment yet, next week, nor the week after, but you will achieve your objective before re-crossing the ocean. Will you convey the message to Dr. Savage from his son? You have written to Dr. Hodgson today.” Moore was very much impressed and certain that Mrs. Reidinger did not know his name. He recontacted Savage to confirm that he had not spoken to Mrs. Reidinger to inform her of his visit that night.

Savage further reported on a December 28, 1888 sitting which his brother, the Rev. W. H. Savage, also a friend of William James’s, had with Mrs. Piper. Speaking through Mrs. Piper, Phinuit told him that somebody named Robert West was there and wanted to send a message to Minot. The message was in the form of an apology for something West had written about Minot “in advance.” W. H. Savage did not understand the

message but passed it on to Minot, who understood it and explained that West was editor of a publication called The Advance and had criticized his work in an editorial. During the sitting, W. H. Savage asked for a description of West. An accurate description was given along with the information that West had died of hemorrhage of the kidneys, a fact unknown to Savage but later verified.

“There was no reason for the [apology] unless it be found in simply human feeling on [West’s] part that he had discovered that he had been guilty of an injustice, and wished, as far as possible, to make reparation, and this for peace of his own mind,” Minot Savage recorded.

When W. H. Savage sat with Mrs. Piper two weeks later, West again communicated, stating that his body was buried at Alton, Illinois. He gave the wording on his tombstone, “Fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.” Savage was unaware of either of these facts, but later confirmed them as true. “Now the striking thing about this lies in the fact that my brother was not thinking of this matter and cared nothing about it,” Minot Savage ended the story, feeling that this ruled out mental telepathy on the part of Mrs. Piper.

Gertrude Savage, the daughter of Minot Savage, sat with Mrs. Piper on October 23, 1888. She reported that she went under the name Margaret Brown, while also giving a false address. Mrs. Piper informed her that she had been suffering from a headache and wasn’t sure if she could provide a satisfactory sitting. However, she offered to give it a try, after which they went into a darkened room, where Mrs. Piper took Gertrude’s hand in her hand. Gertrude Savage, who was a stenographer, recorded:

“Immediately her fingers began to twitch and then her whole body, and she groaned and ground her teeth, and constantly muttered, ‘Oh, what’s the matter? What is the matter?’

“Before entering the dark room, I had taken three locks of hair, each one enclosed in an envelope, and had placed one in the front of a book, one in the back, and one in the middle. The one in the middle I knew was my mother’s; it was only a few hairs, taken by stealth, for she would not give her consent to my having them. The other two I had not looked at, and had no idea to whom they belonged. They were sent me by a friend, already enclosed in the little envelopes, and I was purposely ignorant concerning them – all to make the test more complete. It was on this errand, for this friend, Mr. Fred Day, that I went to see Mrs. Piper.

“On going into the trance state, Mrs. Piper’s voice became guttural, harsh, and she spoke with a decided accent. Keeping my hand in hers, and pressed against her forehead, she began instantly to speak, and she talked with me incessantly for an hour. She said: ‘I never talked with you before, and you are very peculiar; it is not easy for me to tell you anything about yourself personally, you are so queer. I do not know who you are. I cannot get your name.

My name is Dr. Finway (sic). Can you understand me? Sometimes people cannot, because I speak with an accent.’ ‘Oh, yes,’ I answered. ‘I can understand you perfectly. I want to give you a lock of hair for you to examine.’ I then gave into Mrs.

Piper's hand the lock of hair from the envelope in the front of the book – not knowing myself whose it was. Immediately on receiving it, Dr. Finway exclaimed. 'Fred! Oh yes, Fred, a young man, very thin, wears glasses, little beard, great friend of yours. This Fred – I never had his hair before, but the influence does not seem new! Imogene – who's Imogene?' 'I do not know,' said I. 'Yes, Imogene, a young lady, friend of Fred's, influence very strong. Who is she?' 'I am sure I do not know. I did not know he had a friend named Imogene. I do not think he has.' 'He has! Don't contradict me!' exclaimed he. Then he resumed, 'This Fred is an only child, mother plump, a lovely lady, but she is not long for your world. This Fred is going on a long journey, across the water, within a year or two. He has already taken two long journeys, one across the water, hasn't he, now?' 'I am not sure,' said I. 'Well, he has,' replied he. 'You ask him. What I tell you I know...I can see it all, and I only tell you facts, and you will find that they are so.'

"I then gave him the other unknown lock of hair, from the back of the book. Immediately, he exclaimed, 'Ugh! This is crazy! It makes me sick!' 'Well,' he said, 'I cannot tell you anything about this, because the influence is so mixed; it has been handled by too many people, and it was not cut off near the head, where the magnetism from the body could permeate it. I can't tell you about it.' (It proved to have been the hair of Mr. Day's aunt Mary, who died within the year, and it has passed through several people's hands, and was cut off near the end of the hair.)

"Then I gave him the little lock of my mother's hair, from the center of the book. 'Ella,' he cried, 'she is stingy enough with her hair! This Ella is very sweet dispositioned, very, but she is not at all well. She has trouble with her head; she has fearful bilious headaches, and they come from the weak state of the nerves of the stomach; and her liver is, of course, disordered; you tell her that I am a physician, and that I say for her to take hot douche baths; now remember! She is, it seems to me, some relation to you. Wait a moment – she is your mother, I think.'" Yes, she is your mother. And she has un, deux, trios, quatre – four children – two girls and two boys. You have a brother who is off, away from you, somewhere, a little west of you; he is very independent; he is a strong influence in Ella's life. And you have a younger brother, and a sister; her name begins with H—e—. Hellen, I think it is. But there is an old lady here – in the spirit. She has only left the body within a month, and she is your grandmother. You, young lady, are a flirt!' 'No,' said I, 'I am not.' 'The devil you aren't. You are!,' cried he. 'You are flirty, because you do not know; you have not made up your mind; you like your friends in general, but no one of them in particular. I can see the picture of some of them. There is Clifford – he is moody. And his brother Fred is cranky, like you; he does not know his own mind. Then there is Chester; he is out West making his fortune; and he will make a big one, too. And who is Bert?' 'I do not know,' said I. 'Yes, you do. He is a very good friend to you, very good, although he is not very demonstrative in his speech.' (I then knew he meant a young friend of mine, a Harvard man, whom I call Herbert, usually.) Then he said, 'And there is this Fred; he is a true friend to you; his last name is Day – Fred Day; and oh! I can see books, papers, and pictures all about him; I think he must take pictures himself for amusement.

'I suppose you think I cannot see you, but I can – you have dark eyes and light hair. I always liked dark eyes and light hair – now, what are you laughing at? – and you will be married. But there is no hurry, not a bit – and in the latter part of your life, you will not live here – it will be in some foreign country – England, I think. I can see you crossing the water with a middle-aged lady and a young man. Your life, so far, has been rather even, not eventful, but it will be full of action, later on. But you are so peculiar; and this Fred is so peculiar...you tell your father that he will, within a year, realize something from some money he invested out West, about two years ago; you tell him I said so, and I know. And you tell Ella that she will be better in a few years if she takes care of herself; she is a little over forty now, and she is often, on the street, even, taken with dizziness, and with darkness before her eyes. It all comes from the weak state of her nerves. And now I am getting tired. Is there anything you want to ask me? I will tell you if I can. I cannot seem to get your influence separate from the others – Fred, and Ella, and all. If you will come some time without any locks of hair, I will see how it will be then.'

"Mrs. Piper then came out of the trance, with a face drawn and haggard, and with a dazed look in her eyes. 'Who are you?' she said. 'I do not know who you are, do I?' I said, 'No, but I will tell you now. I am Gertrude Savage; you have met my father, I think.' She was delighted to know me, and who I was, and asked if she had told me anything satisfactory. She was very glad when I told her she had.

"Everything she told me when in trance was true as to fact: the prophecies remain to be verified. The 'Imogene' so insisted upon, was immediately verified by Mr. Day, as his old friend, Miss Imogene Gurney, whose first name I had forgotten. The lock of hair was his own – and everything she said in connection with it was true.

"During the sitting Dr. Finway talked with me a little in French, but I assured him I had forgotten my French. 'Oh,' he said, and laughed. 'I suppose je ne sais pas is all you can say?' And one thing further: He insisted upon it that I must either play or embroider or draw, or do something with my fingers. 'No,' said I; 'my accomplishments are highly practical.' 'Well, I see notes of music, anyway,' said he. 'What do you do?' 'I write shorthand.' 'Why didn't you say so before? That's it. Shorthand looks like music notes. You do not print it afterwards, though; you are not a regular stenographer; you just do it for some friend, to help him, I think.'

"All of which, as well as all of the whole interview, was perfectly true."

It was later noted by Minot Savage that Fred Day visited England in 1889, that Clifford and Fred were friends of his daughter, that Chester's home was in Pennsylvania, and that he (Dr. Savage) had invested money out West about two years previously, but, while he still considered it a good investment, there had been no significant change of any note.

William James also arranged for a Mr. "A.Y." of Boston to sit with Mrs. Piper on June 13, 1886. A.Y. provided a written report to James, stating, in part:

“At the first interview several remarkable phenomena occurred. Although I was introduced by another name, my true name was early given and some incidents of my life stated, which by no conceivable way could have been known to the medium, even if she had known who I was. The persons seeking communication with me were described by name and by person, with much particularity, and the inquiries made were such as they would have made if in conscious communication with me. I was told that I was about to make a journey to a distant part of the country, which I had no intention to make, and which, indeed, had never been in my mind, but which soon afterwards it became necessary for me to make, and I did make it. One thing prominent at this interview and very unusual, so far as I know, was the concurrent descriptions of persons in life and in the other world and their relations to each other. For example: It was said to me that there was an elderly gentleman in the spirit world, who was very desirous of speaking with me, and a full description of his person and his occupation, while in this life, was given, also a like description of an elderly lady, as to her person, and what she was at the moment doing. After a moment it was said that the lady is in the flesh, and the gentleman was her husband, and in the spirit world, and that he wished me to give his love to her. A moment later I was told that I am his son-in-law, which is correct, as all of the other circumstances were. At this interview I do not remember that there was one thing incorrect, but some statements were more vague than others, and this seemed not only to be known but to be accounted for in this way, namely, that the communicators had less power with the medium than would be the case after some further experience but that there would be an increase of power with a repetition of attempts.”

A. Y. further reported that his second “interview” was less satisfactory as Mrs. Piper seemed less composed and somewhat anxious. Some of her own personality seemed to be coming through. However, some evidential information was communicated, including information that a friend of his was fatally ill, a fact unknown to A.Y. at the time but later verified, and the pet name by which he addressed his wife when she was living was given. A third sitting was uneventful, apparently the result of rainy weather causing unfavorable conditions for the medium.

Although William James did not record his initial sittings with Mrs. Piper, he did record several later sittings. On March 6, 1889, Alice James, his wife, and Robertson James, his brother, sat with Mrs. Piper and were informed by Phinuit that “Aunt Kate” (Kate Walsh) had died early that morning and that a letter or telegram saying she was gone would be received later that day. It was known to the two sitters that Aunt Kate had been seriously ill, but neither was aware that she had died. After leaving Mrs. Piper’s home, Robertson James reported the sitting to Professor James and Dr. Richard Hodgson. “On reaching home an hour later I found a telegram as follows,” William James recorded: – ‘Aunt Kate passed away a few minutes after midnight. – E. R. Walsh.’”

Alice James recorded her version: “It may be worth while to add that early at this sitting I inquired, ‘How is Aunt Kate?’ The reply was, ‘She is poorly.’ This reply disappointed me, from its baldness. Nothing more was said about Aunt Kate till towards the close of the sitting, when I again said, ‘Can you tell me nothing more

about Aunt Kate?’ The medium suddenly threw back her head and said in a startled way, ‘Why Aunt Kate’s here. All around me I hear voices saying, “Aunt Kate has come.”’ Then followed the announcement that she had died very early that morning, and on being pressed to give the time, shortly after two was named.”

Six months later, Aunt Kate communicated from the other side. James wrote: “The ‘Kate Walsh’ freak is very interesting...In September, sitting with me and my wife, Mrs. Piper was suddenly ‘controlled’ by her spirit, who spoke directly (i.e., without the assistance of Phinuit) with much impressiveness of manner, and great similarity of temperament to herself. Platitudes. She said Henry Wyckoff had experienced a change and that Albert was coming over soon; nothing definite about either. Queer business!” In a subsequent report James wrote that he knew nothing of the health conditions of Henry and Albert at the time of the sitting, but that he later found the comments to be factual.

In another sitting, James was told by Phinuit that the spirit of a boy named Robert F. was the companion of his deceased child, Hermann, who had died as an infant in 1885. The F.’s were cousins of his wife and were living in a distant city. On his return home, James told his wife of the reading and asked for particulars on the baby lost by her cousin, as he did not recall the name, sex, and age of the child mentioned by Phinuit. However, his wife corrected him and confirmed Phinuit’s version.

According to James, Phinuit would often introduce other spirits and at times would give long lectures about things he (James) was certain were well beyond Mrs. Piper’s intellect. He wrote:

“The most remarkable thing about the Phinuit personality seems to me the extraordinary tenacity and minuteness of his memory. The medium has been visited by many hundreds of sitters, half of them, perhaps, being strangers who have come but once. To each Phinuit gives an hour full of disconnected fragments of talk about persons living, dead, or imaginary, and events past, future, or unreal. What normal waking memory could keep this chaotic mass of stuff together? Yet Phinuit does so... So far as I can discover, Mrs. Piper’s waking memory is not remarkable, and the whole constitution of her trance-memory is something which I am at a loss to understand.”

Perhaps out of concern for his reputation in the scientific community, James continued to struggle, at least outwardly, in accepting the spirit hypothesis. However, in the end, he appeared to see it as more probable than other explanations, such as telepathy of a limited or more cosmic scope. “One who takes part in a good sitting has usually a far livelier sense, both of the reality and of the importance of the communication, than one who merely reads the records,” he offered. “I am able, while still holding to all the lower principles of interpretation, to imagine the process as more complex, and to share the feelings with which Hodgson came at last to regard it after his many years of familiarity, the feeling which Professor (James) Hyslop shares, and which most of those who have good sittings are promptly inspired with [i.e., the spirit hypothesis].”

And while James remained perched on the fence relative to the spirit hypothesis, he had no difficulty professing his faith. He concluded *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by stating: “I can, of course, put myself into the sectarian scientist’s

attitude, and imagine vividly that the world of sensations and of scientific laws and objects may be all. But whenever I do this, I hear that inward monitor of which W. K. Clifford once wrote, whispering the word 'bosh!' Humbug is humbug, even though it bear the scientific name, and the total expression of human experience, as I view it objectively, invincibly urges me beyond the narrow 'scientific' bounds."

In 1909, the year before his death, James, who called Leonora Piper his "white crow," the one who proved that all crows are not black, wrote:

"I am baffled, as to spirit return, and as to many other special problems. I am also baffled as to what to think of this or that particular story, for the sources of error in any one observation are seldom fully knowable. But weak sticks make strong faggots; and when the stories fall into consistent sorts that point each in a definite direction, one gets a sense of being in a presence of genuinely natural type of phenomena. As to there being such real natural types of phenomena ignored by orthodox science, I am not baffled at all, for I am fully convinced of it...I personally am as yet neither a convinced believer in parasitic demons, nor a spiritist, nor a scientist, but still remain a psychical researcher waiting for more facts before concluding."

But James admitted that he was willfully taking the point of view of the so-called 'rigorously scientific' disbeliever, and making an ad hominem plea, stating that tactically, it is better to believe too little than too much.