

FAITH AT WORK

“I SAW MY HUSBAND”: APPARITION OR HALLUCINATION?

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It is common for loved ones to be seen after death by those left behind [1,2]. In addition to those who see, many more feel a sense of presence after a loved one has died. In the anguish of loss, deep, peace and joy can derive from these experiences. Are these experiences real or hallucinations? How should we approach this challenge?

Years ago, I visited a dying man at home cared for by his wife. He was in pain and discomfort and it was a Sunday night. His wife was struggling with his personal care as he weakened. His abilities the week before had not led to the care he needed and by Sunday night he was wet and sore. I did as anyone else would do, got a bowl, soap and she got sheets and we washed and changed him. Sometimes in medicine you see the gratitude on a face in a way that says it all. That night was one of those occasions. As he lay back in bed in dry warm sheets with a backside that no longer screamed in pain, a peaceful and comfortable face exuded gratitude. We fixed up a care package the next day and he died peacefully the same week.

About a fortnight later I popped into see his wife to ask how she was. “I saw him” she told me. “standing at the end of the bed. He said nothing but smiled, and he was well again”. I realised straight away two things. She genuinely was convinced that she had seen her husband. Having been taught in medical school that hallucinations of a loved one are common after death, I judged that she had seen a hallucination and not her husband. I was just about to interject that really this was a hallucination when I realised that I could not.

How did I know this was a hallucination? I believe there is an afterlife, and am confident that saints have, at times appeared after death, so I cannot state with certainty what this was. Conversely, atheists must accept that they may be wrong in their faith and so cannot discount the possibility that this was real. In a flash, I understood that I should just say, that’s wonderful, and I was pleased that he seemed to be at peace. I wondered if indeed, she had really seen him. I hoped she had. But even if it had been a hallucination, seeing him had helped her hugely. Help that I must not take away. But we just do not know if this was, or was not a hallucination.

As scientists, we can be quite judgemental really and I very nearly imposed a rationalist answer upon a poor lady who had just lost her husband. Many have done this in the past. In a Christmas BMJ article entitled “Ghosts, visions and voices”, angels and visions were analysed by a colleague of mine solely in terms of psychopathological mechanisms. Klemperer wrongly asserted that “*whether we describe visions and voices as psychotic, dissociative, hypnagogic, or normal, uncertainties remain about their underlying psychophysiology and the relations between these seemingly very different states of mind*”. She left out entirely the possibility that at least some voices and apparitions may be both real and truly supernatural experiences.

If we can recognise the possibility of the divine in our work, it saves a lot of conflict and may prevent harm. In my case, my sudden ability to accept that what had happened might have been real and not simply a hallucination meant that I left his widow confident that she had seen her husband and greatly cheered in that confidence. Further, my acceptance of the possibility of the divine avoided my having to judge the nature of what I was told about.

I learnt a huge amount that day. We should not allow ourselves to base our judgements upon an assumption that God does not exist.

[1] Parkes CM. Bereavement and mental illness. *Br J Med Psychol* 1965;38:1-25.

[2] Rees WD. The hallucinations of widowhood. *British Medical Journal* 1971 ;iv:37-41.

[3] Klemperer F, 1992. Ghosts, visions and voices, sometimes simply perceptual mistakes. *British Medical Journal* **305**: 19-26 December 1518-9.