

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Editor:

A response to the obituary for Carl Sargent in the April 2019 issue

I was sad to learn of Carl Sargent's death, and read Trevor Harley's obituary with mixed feelings. I remember being in awe of the young Carl, when we were both PhD students. I remember the overwhelming after-shave and open shirts that Trevor mentions, and the gold medallion swinging over the ginger hair. Yet he was so clever, so well-read, could quote so much literature, and was doing ground-breaking ESP research. He even claimed to have read the entire SPR Journal and Proceedings, which I could readily believe. When, in 1975, I got a positive result in my first telepathy experiment, it was he who pointed out an obscure statistical error which, when corrected, reduced the result to chance. I was disappointed but hugely impressed with his statistical knowledge.

That is why I was thrilled when, in 1979, the SPR gave me a small travel grant to go to Cambridge, work with Carl for a month, and try to find out why he found evidence for ESP in the Ganzfeld and I did not. Carl was enormously welcoming, giving me the run of his lab, and making a space for me to work at in his own office.

The upshot, as is well known, was not what either of us would have hoped for. In one of the worst weeks of my life I came to conclude that Carl's impressive results were due either to errors in carrying out the complex experimental protocols, or fraud, or both. My personal hero was toppled, and this terrible week profoundly affected my own research and my view of the whole field. The whole story has been written about extensively (Blackmore, 1987; Harley & Matthews, 1987; Sargent, 1987, and later Blackmore, 1996) but I would just like to reflect on a few of Harley's points.

After watching the first few trials, I concluded that Carl's excellent experimental design allowed only two possible explanations for the results: genuine psi or fraud. Determined to find out which, and wavering in my own beliefs, I thought up possible ways to cheat by manipulating the randomisation. One method predicted that two envelopes, not one, would be removed from the pile on a single trial and I was shocked when this happened. As Harley points out, Carl said he threw away an envelope because its corner was bent, but this seemed odd because a bent corner could not affect the choice of target.

This proposed method may be, as Harley says, "cumbersome and unreliable" but on one trial a more serious deviation from protocol occurred. Carl was not officially involved in this trial, and his presence was not written in the blue record book. Yet he managed both to do the randomisation himself, which would allow him to choose the target, and to come into the judging session, where he appeared to encourage the subject towards picture "B". "B" was chosen and was correct. The only plausible explanation seemed to be deliberate manipulation.

I have often wished I had never discovered all this but, looking back, I know I tried to be fair, and we should remember how young we all were.

Quite rightly, Harley says it's unreasonable 'to accuse someone of fraud and ruin their career' but I tried not to do that for a long time. At first, I told only Trevor and Tony Cornell what I had found, and later Donald West and John Beloff. I corresponded with Carl but failed to reach any resolution. This is why the papers by Carl, Trevor and myself were not published until 1987, eight years after the events and when Carl had already given up parapsychology. I had hoped he would continue his research with better randomisation methods, but he did not. Sadly, I believe he ruined his own once-brilliant career.

We will never know what really went on forty years ago. Yet I think it still matters, not just because Sargent's results are still used as evidence for psi (Blackmore, 2019), but because if psi exists, then much — perhaps all — of our current science is flawed; time, space, consciousness, and mind would all need to be re-thought, and much of psychology abandoned. So, reliable psychical research was important then and still is now.

Harley writes that he dreamt of Carl the day before he died, and even now this brings me a little twinge of — could it be? ... was it precognition? I fetched my dream diary and, I must admit, sat on the side of the bed wondering — what if I too dreamt of him the night before he died? I recorded two dreams from that night, but no, I did not.

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To the Editor:

When choosing examples of ESP experiences to illustrate your talk

Should they be chosen from anthologies, as in Rhine (1961) and Feather and Schmicker (2005), of personal experiences quoted in their own words from "ordinary people"? Or from cases that have become classics through retelling by successive authors who assure readers that every case has been checked? These questions came to mind when reading an account by Martin Caidin of an RAF pilot's precognitive vision of how a deserted airfield would look four years later when rebuilt as a RAF airfield.