

FOLKLORIC EXPRESSIONS OF ELECTRONIC VOICE PHENOMENA
BELIEVERS: THE SYNCRETIZATION OF TECHNOLOGY
AND SPIRITUALITY

By
JESSICA E. BEST

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of English
and the Honors College of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

September 1999

APPROVED:  _____
Dr. Daniel Wojcik

Copyright 1999 Jessica Best

An Abstract of the Thesis of
 Jessica E. Best for the degree of Bachelor of Arts
 In the Department of English to be taken September 1999
 Title: FOLKLORIC EXPRESSIONS OF ELECTRONIC VOICE PHENOMENA
 BELIEVERS: THE SYNCRETIZATION OF TECHNOLOGY AND
 SPIRITUALITY

Approved:


 Dr. Daniel Wojcik

Humans seem to have a need to express a spiritual facet of their experience. This causes conflict for some people in today's Western society because doing so usually means contradicting the cultural authority which we assign to science and the discourse of science. Science gives credit to repeatable and disprovable experiences, not numinous ones.

Believers in Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), however have found that they can reconcile their spiritual needs with their need for cultural authority by contacting the spirit world, and thus proving its existence, with technology. In this paper I explore how a particular group of EVP believers which meets on the internet use both the search for EVP and the EVP Internet Center to negotiate their beliefs and express their spiritual beliefs in terms their culture, at least in their minds, finds acceptable. They use new technology to innovate upon old traditions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dan

For my fellow night-owl, slacker spirit, here is my tribute to working under pressure. Thank you for your expertise, understanding, patience, humor, friendship, and for saving me from burnout during my last two terms at the U of O.
'K, see 'ya, bye!

Peter

Thank you for moving and forcing a fixed deadline on me. Your energy and enthusiasm for teaching are unparalleled and you will be missed by at least this Duck. Best of luck in Wisconsin.

Louise

Always the mentor, always with an open door for your students, you are the reason I am happy to be graduating from the Honors College.

Austin

Thanks for the kick in the pants I needed. You were right, I *can* (and did!) fulfill a requirement without having to produce something that does not matter to me.

My Family

Everyone must thank their family, but I really have reason to thank mine. You never once thought I wouldn't pull this off, and reminded me of that when I did. Without the great start you all gave me, I could not have gone as far as I have.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	VARIOUS FORMS OF SPIRIT COMMUNICATION.....	4
III.	HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF EVP.....	8
IV.	REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.....	14
	Telephonic Communication with the Spirit World.....	14
	<i>Voices of Eternity</i>	18
	Ouija Board Rituals and Traditions.....	22
V.	EVP'S PLACE WITHIN THE FIELD OF FOLKLORE.....	27
VI.	GREAT AND LITTLE TRADITIONS: THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF EVP.....	38
VII.	THE EVP INTERNET CENTER.....	43
	Description of the EVP Internet Center.....	47
	The Community of the Message Board: Social Context.....	51
	Profiles of the Contributors: Individual Context.....	56
VIII.	THEMES EXPRESSED THROUGH EVP.....	60
IX.	CONCLUSION.....	68
X.	NOTES.....	72
APPENDIX		
A.	NARRATIVES OF EVP ATTEMPTS.....	74
B.	“TRANSCONFERENCE”: AN EVP SHORT FICTION.....	80
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....		88

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For as long as human beings have had the ability to imagine beyond their immediate experience, they have contemplated the fate of their consciousnesses after death. In every culture, people have constructed elaborate individual eschatologies¹ about the fate of the soul after death in an attempt to predict what the afterlife will be like. Imagining communication with the inhabitants of the spirit realm has historically been part of Western art and ritual, from ancient Greece with Odysseus's trip to the underworld, to the twentieth century use of Ouija boards.

Many people feel that only at the end of the world will they be able to gain perspective on and understand the meaning of history. Similarly, finding out what happens after each of our own individual deaths would ostensibly do that for our own lives. Many feel that a meaningful afterlife is the only way to justify this life being so brutish and short. If we, the living, were able to converse with the spirits of the dead, then we would be able to see life from the "other side" and perhaps gain a better understanding of its meaning. Also, if we were to know what happens after death, it would not have to be such a frightening prospect; it would cease to be an unknown.

Since the Enlightenment, this spiritual search for meaning has run up against the modern scientific ethos. At this point in history, Western culture highly privileges science and empirical proof over non-repeatable sensory experience. Science will not accept something as true unless it is provable through experimentation and repetition.

Since (arguably) no one has come back from the dead with tangible, empirical proof of what they have experienced, devising a tangible, repeatable means of producing evidence of conversations with spirits would bridge the gap between science and spirituality. It would validate spiritual belief by using the scientific method. This is precisely the aim of those who attempt to record electronic voice phenomena (EVP). EVP is “a process whereby unexplained snatches of voice or voices are embedded onto magnetic recording tape by a process that is not yet fully understood” (Rev. Jarvis’ EVP Page). The voices are usually not heard during recording, but only upon playback.

The EVP Internet Center is a virtual meeting place for people involved in researching EVP. In this paper, I will show that the beliefs and modes of expression of the contributors to the EVP Internet Center fall within the realm of the study of folklore and I will discuss how their personal spiritual needs are fulfilled through their practice of EVP, their use of the EVP Internet Center and the relationships they develop with both the spirits and other “EVP’ers.” I will also discuss technology as a means of validating spiritual belief. Does the technology used affect belief? If so, how? My research shows that EVP’ers use technology to gain direct access to and participation in the numinous world of the supernatural. This direct access to the spiritual fulfills certain psychological and religious needs. My research also suggests that the female EVP’ers tend to look more for reciprocal relationships with the spirits they contact than do the male EVP’ers. All of the believers, regardless of gender, use technology as a way to innovate supernatural traditions and to give their supernatural beliefs scientific legitimacy.

It is easy to dismiss EVP believers as kooks because their beliefs could be considered a bit unconventional or eccentric, but we do not have to agree with their beliefs in order to look at the meanings they attribute to their beliefs and what needs these beliefs answer in their lives. We can also explore the ways in which they express their beliefs and how they are related to ways people have expressed beliefs throughout history. When we look at EVP'ers in those terms, they may turn out to be not so eccentric after all.

CHAPTER II

VARIOUS FORMS OF SPIRIT COMMUNICATION

People have claimed to be able to contact the dead for centuries. These communications have manifested in a variety of forms such as apparitions, direct-voice, poltergeists, writing appearing mysteriously on walls, and telepathy. In the second half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th, Spiritualism was all the rage, emphasizing direct communication with the dead. Séances were held at which spirits manifested by speaking, moving objects around, or rapping on a table (Wojcik 1999:2).

In their chapter on “Ghostly Voices” in their 1989 book *Unexplained Mysteries of the 20th Century*, Janet and Colin Bord trace some of the reports of the more communicative spirits of the last hundred years. The voices can seem to come from the air, walls, and rocks, as well as through a human medium. Often, voices accompany other paranormal activity as yet another manifestation of the supernatural forces at work.

The Bords do cite a few examples of EVP, one, in fact, involving Sarah Estep, perhaps the most influential person studying EVP in America and whom I will discuss in detail later, but they also reported some other interesting cases. They report cries of help coming from rocks off the coast of China which “may be the cries of drowning sailors which have somehow been recorded in the rock and are played back when the conditions are right” (Bord 1989: 187). Also, at the Prince of Wales inn at Kenfig in Wales, an engineer and chemist fed 20,000 volts of electricity through a stone wall from which voices had reportedly been heard and left a tape recorder next to it all night. When they

played the tapes back, “they found they had recorded a variety of sounds including voices, organ music, and a clock ticking” (Bord 1989: 191). They have theorized that the walls contain “similar substances, like silica and ferric salts, to those in recording tapes” (Bord 1989: 191), implying that the wall had recorded sound in the past and the electricity enabled playback. Apparently, EVP does not have the sole claim on paranormal recording.

With the invention of sense-enhancing devices such as the microscope and telescope and recording technology such as photography, film, and audio recording, we have extended the human experience beyond our former notions of time and space. We no longer need to travel to Stonehenge to see what the strange stone formations look like. We no longer need to travel to Vienna to hear the Boys’ Choir. We can watch a video clip of the young, thin Elvis playing the guitar on a Hawaiian beach and the next moment see him fat, sweaty, and leisure-suited in Las Vegas. Our sense of linear time and space has been shattered by technology.

Some people have applied this new concept of space and time to the supernatural world as well as the natural world. Thomas Edison, for instance, postulated that the spirit world would try to contact the living through technological means and attempted to construct a device which would enable that communication.² In this spirit, Georg Meek and William O’Neill, a retired engineer and a medium, respectively, cooperated with a deceased scientist, George Mueller (contacted through O’Neill), to build SPIRICOM. This was a device designed to enable two-way conversations between the living and the dead. Meek invested over \$500,000 of his own money in developing the device and

made his blueprints available at no cost in the hope that other people could repeat his success and a reliable method of communicating with the dead could be found.

According to Sarah Estep, Meek's success was comprised of "mostly clear conversations, easily audible to anyone in the room" (Estep 1988: 159). To the disappointment of all those involved, no one achieved results as stellar as Meek and O'Neill's. Many people attribute this failure to the idea that it was O'Neill's psychic ability which enabled their prototype to work as well as it did (Guiley 1992: 107-108).

Other technologies used to document paranormal activity include personal computers, video tape, and photography. People have claimed to have recorded spirits on video tape, or to have taken photos of fairies, and even Polaroids of the Virgin Mary. One of the most famous cases involved Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and two girls who claimed to have taken pictures of fairies near their home in Cottingley in 1917. He investigated the photos and "pinned [his] public reputation on the authenticity of the images" which were later proven to be a hoax (Randles 1996: 144). The an author who created one of the most logical characters in English literature was willing to believe in the fairies because of the technological proof which accompanied the girls' story.

It makes sense that, if a spirit realm exists, as technology extends our notions of reality, it might extend them even into that realm. Technology is also seen as a way of making experience objective. We make the assumption that if we can videotape an event, then there is less danger of misremembering or misrepresenting it later. We think that "seeing is believing," but we often forget that what we see when mediated through technology is just that, mediated. Along with the desire to use technology to confirm

spiritual belief comes the anxiety that the technology has been manipulated by humans attempting a hoax. Jenny Randles mentions this wariness of human manipulation in her chapter on “Miracle Images.” She says, “no photograph can stand alone, without the support of extensive analysis of the witness’s story” (Randles 1996: 146). Both the physical and narrative components of the experience are important in reaching a conclusion about the believability of a witness’s claims.

The irony of the situation lies in the method of validating the technology. It is through more advanced technology that evidence is proven or disproven. The Cottingley fairie pictures were not revealed as a hoax until the 1970’s with the “availability of modern computer technology” (Randles 1996: 144). The technology of the camera was trusted until a more advanced technology came along which could discredit it, which in turn was trusted as the camera was years before.

The EVP’ers I studied seem to be quite aware of this bind. They have an intense desire to believe that the voice clips they record are proof of survival after death, but they also acknowledge the fallibility of technology. In general, they view the human race as constantly advancing and improving. As technology is a human invention, it also is constantly improving, therefore, better technology is always around the corner. The imperfection of their technology does not, however, prevent them from believing wholeheartedly in the authenticity of their voice samples and in the reality of life after death. They use technology to validate their belief in an afterlife.

CHAPTER III

HISTORY OF THE STUDY OF EVP

While there were a few earlier experiments involving unidentified voices being recorded on tape, the man credited with discovering the phenomenon is the Swedish artist Friedrich Jürgenson. In 1959 he set up his tape recorder to record birds chirping, but when he played the tape back, he could detect male voices discussing “nocturnal bird songs” in Norwegian. In subsequent recordings, the voices gave personal information about him and instructions on how to make further recordings. Jürgenson’s book *Voices from the Universe* (1964) inspired Konstantin Raudive, a Latvian psychologist, to devote his life to researching EVP. He published *The Inaudible Made Audible* in German in 1968 (translated into English as *Breakthrough* in 1971). This book sparked interest in EVP all over the world (Guiley 1992: 107). Raudive identified roughly 25,000 of his 100,000 voice samples, many of them as his deceased family or friends (Smith 1974: 239). As you can see, EVP was used from its very discovery, to extend personal relationships beyond death.

In 1979: D. Scott Rogo and Raymond Bayless published *Phone Calls From the Dead*. While phone calls are not strictly EVP because they are not recorded, these researchers’ work paved the way for other work on vocal spirit communication via technological media and was the first extensive case study on the subject of mysterious phone calls. Bayless, however, had already done some work with EVP starting in 1956.

He and a medium named Attila von Szalay experimented with EVP from 1956-1975 (Rogo 1979: 98).

One of the most influential people to pursue EVP research in America is Sarah Estep. She founded the American Association—Electronic Voice Phenomena (AA-EVP) in 1982 and published *Voices of Eternity* in 1988. Her influence is mainly on the folk, personal-experience-oriented groups of EVP'ers rather than the parascientific communities. She does not focus on the details of the technology she uses. She is more concerned with writing about her individual experience of the phenomenon and the messages about the afterlife that her communicants from the spirit and other worlds give to her. Her main goal is to spread the messages in order that the knowledge about the afterlife she receives will help others live more fulfilled lives.

Some EVP recordings are made in silent rooms, others are made over white noise such as running water, or a television or radio, set to a non-broadcasting channel.³ According to Rev. Jarvis, EVP may be recorded anywhere, but graveyards are particularly fruitful. Sometimes the voices speak in languages other than that of the observers. This fact is cited` as evidence for the voices' physical reality. The argument is made that if the entity(ies) were speaking directly and telepathically to the witness, then the witness would "hear" the message in his/her own language because the aural processing of language would be bypassed altogether. There are also many reports of the voice(s) speaking directly to one or more of the observers, sometimes in response to questions or comments made by the observers.⁴ Believers in the authenticity of the voices cite the specificity of

the voices' messages as proof that they are not simply stray radio signals picked up by the tape.

Believers have come up with many explanations for the existence and mechanics of EVP. Many EVP researchers do not believe the sounds they hear are the voices of the dead. Some alternative explanations that have been offered are that the observers record naturally occurring sounds and interpret them as voices, or that the observers themselves imprint the magnetic tape through psychokinesis and their own intense desire to hear paranormal voices (Guiley 1992: 107). Hibrichan believes that every word ever spoken exists in some form and that the spirits are able to "recycle" them. That is her explanation for why some EVP sound like radio broadcasts.

People have also linked EVP with alien transmissions and government mind-control conspiracies. They have attributed it to beings which exist in other dimensions—beings which have never been incarnated, but can somehow communicate at the level of the quantum with our devices such as computers. Some say EVP are caused by "superspectral" beings which exist at the "fringe regions of the electromagnetic spectrum" (Mizrach). Estep, one of the staunchest supporters of the theory that these voices are caused by the dead, believes that some of the voices she has recorded are those of aliens and beings from other dimensions (Estep 1988: 131).

As technology has developed, so has EVP research has done so right along with it. Magnetic tape is still being used as in the first experiments of Jürgenson, but other technologies are being used as well. Personal computers have opened up a whole new realm for EVP research. Voices are captured by either recording through the microphone

jack as you would with a tape recorder, or by creating random sound files using sound editing software. Once the sound clip is digitized, it can be run through all kinds of filters and sped up or slowed down until the voices are detected. Contacting the spirit world through computers is the next step in Spiritualism's use of man-made devices to contact the "unseen."

Interest in EVP is not limited to a specific country or location. There are EVP believers in San Francisco, Missouri, Great Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands, among other places. There are even societies devoted to the advancement of EVP technology (the Association for Voice Taping Research and the Research Association for Voice Taping in Germany and the American Association-Electronic Voice Phenomena in the US; Guiley 1992: 107). While these are considered "societies," most of the interaction between the members occurs through correspondence. They do not meet in person very often as their membership is small and widely dispersed.

That is why the internet is vital to the development of the particular community I studied. Without a public forum that is readily accessible to people all over the world, this group could not exist. If they had to communicate by letter or by phone, each individual could develop relationships with other individuals, but the group as a whole would not exist. Correspondence is strictly a one-to-one arrangement. With the internet, they can engage in many multi-party discussions at once and thus develop a group dynamic.

The internet is a very different medium than literature. It is a medium which encourages the do-it-yourself mentality. Because anyone with the proper software and

webpace can post his/her EVP samples where anyone can listen to them. Each listener can come up with his/her own meaning for the EVP. Though the EVP'ers have formed a community, it is a community of individuals. They all value and respect the right of each person to fulfill his/her own spiritual needs without the mediation of other people or institutions. Thus they emphasize the accuracy of each person's interpretation, whatever it may be. They believe that if a message is meant for a certain person, then he/she will understand the correct meaning.

Presently people all over the world are engaged in EVP research. It is still not a widely known phenomenon, however. It definitely exists on the periphery of dominant culture. While knowledge of and interest in EVP is widespread geographically, the concentration of believers in any one place is small enough to require them to meet via electronic communication.

The main thrust of the research into EVP has been in parapsychology. Emphasis is placed on the scientific validity of the experiments and great care is taken to make sure the process used to record the voices is controlled so the results will withstand scrutiny. The very nature of the experiments, however, makes them susceptible to ridicule from the scientific community. Communicating with the spirit world has been considered to be within the jurisdiction of religion, or at least outside the scope of science, so it is not surprising that the scientific exploration of it would run into resistance from the scientific community.

What is curious, however, is the leaders of the religious community do not seem to be threatened by EVP research. One would think that using profane objects such as

tape recorders to contact the spirit world which does not seem to be inhabited by God or Jesus or any other institutionalized icons, would be considered sacrilegious. This does not seem to be the case, however. According to *The Encyclopedia of the Unexplained*, in the early 1970's leaders of both the Catholic and Anglican churches in England made statements on their positions toward EVP: "while unable to comment on the electronic aspects of the phenomenon, neither church felt that the experiments or the results obtained contradicted their teachings, and the theory that these are the voices of the dead would simply confirm the theological belief in a life after death" (Cavendish 1974: 267). Jürgenson was made a Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great by Pope Paul VI (Cavendish 1974: 268), so his work cannot have been too far outside the parameters of Catholic teachings. There are even rumors that the Vatican has conducted its own voice phenomenon experiments (Smith 1974: 242). Sarah Estep also relates an exchange with a man of the cloth who, in reference to EVP research and the Church, stated "our aims are quite the same" (Estep 1988: 176).

CHAPTER IV

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

While EVP has been studied from both scientific and spiritual perspectives, it has not been studied as an extension of a tradition of belief or what spiritual needs the belief fulfills for the believers. By looking at the work of earlier scholars in related areas, we can perhaps gain a wider perspective on the subject at hand. D. Scott Rogo and Raymond Bayless examine a related topic—phone calls from the dead—from a parapsychological point of view, but they open up the possibility of looking at these phenomena in terms of how the witnesses respond to them. One of the most influential works on EVP itself is Sarah Estep's *Voices of Eternity*. She approaches the topic from a personal, experience-oriented perspective rather than a parascientific or analytical perspective. Bill Ellis looks at Ouija boards, again, a related subject, and the meanings their users get from their ritual use. His is a folkloric look at teens' descriptions of their experience with the supernatural.

Telephonic Communication with the Spirit World

A book which exemplifies the parapsychological tradition is D. Scott Rogo's *Phone Calls From the Dead*. His was one of the first books to systematically research people's experiences with receiving technological communication from the dead. Raudive and Jürgenson both wrote books about their own experiences, but Rogo and his co-author Raymond Bayless were the first to really look at it as a widespread

phenomenon. *Phone Calls From the Dead* opened up the possibility for discussion of this topic in a manner which is not degrading to the witnesses. Also, because he is so scrupulous about documenting the narratives and detail given by his informants, it is a good source book for supernatural narratives.

While Rogo's main focus is not on EVP, but on communication from beyond via the telephone, there are obviously some very similar aspects of the two fields of research. Both EVP and phone calls from the dead require an assumption that the essence of a human being survives after death. They are also both vocal, technological manifestations of the spirit world.

The largest distinction between phone calls and EVP is that the EVP'ers intentionally seek out the voices, whereas the mysterious phone calls are unsolicited. The EVP'ers consciously seek proof of survival after death while those who receive phone calls are either seeking unconsciously for that proof, or they use the mysterious call to support their already established belief.

Rogo states that he and Raymond Bayless had two goals when compiling the phone call cases. The first is to "amass as many firsthand accounts as possible" and the second goal is to answer these two questions: "1) What is the nature of the intelligence that lies behind these calls? and 2) How are they mechanically produced over the telephone system?" (Rogo 1979: 47). Clearly, they are concerned with the actual logistics of the phenomenon, not necessarily the content of the messages or the experience of them as Estep and the contributors to the EVP Internet Center are.

Phone Calls from the Dead is useful to me, though, for the first reason. It is a good source for firsthand accounts of people's encounters with the technological supernatural. The following is an example of one of the stories they relate. Rogo received this letter after publishing an article on the subject of paranormal phone calls. It was written by a woman about an experience she had four months after her 45 year old husband died of a heart attack:

‘Just before he left on his trip he crouched down in front of the refrigerator to pick up [our daughter] Lynn. He turned to me and said something he often repeated with a smile. “Darling, have I told you lately how I love you?” That was the last thing he ever said to me. One Sunday afternoon in March 1957 I was alone in the house. The phone rang and when I answered it, a voice—it was so faint I could not tell if [it was] a man’s or a woman’s—started reciting Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poem, “How Do I Love Thee, Let Me Count the Ways.” The voice became fainter and fainter till there was no more sound.’

Although the woman did not actually recognize the voice, she intuitively knew that her late husband had been responsible for the call. ‘No one else has ever come up with any other explanation,’ she told us. (Rogo 1979: 42-43)

This is a touching story, told in the words of the informant. This message enabled the informant to continue, if only for a brief moment, a relationship which was important to her after the other person had died. This theme is very prevalent in EVP as well.

Although Rogo looks at the phenomena in terms of the mechanics of their production, he also does look at some of the possible psychological meanings they could have. Rogo seems to take a psychoanalytical view on many of the calls, claiming that some phone calls are “psychically produced by the witnesses themselves in order to resolve personal conflicts” (Rogo 1979: 130). Somehow the subconscious manifests repressed conflicts and emotions through the phone. In this particular case, he is

speaking about people who have UFO sightings and then receive a phone call, presumably from the “Men in Black,” warning them not to tell anyone about what they saw. He views the phone call as a coping mechanism by which the witness has a “higher authority” determine his course of action for him and therefore “he no longer has to take further responsibility for his experience” (Rogo 1979: 130).

He also found that many of the calls were received on days which were important to the recipient. One woman reported getting a phone call from her daughter on Thanksgiving, three years after she died in a car wreck coming home from college. Her daughter always came home for Thanksgiving and would call before she left to ask for twenty dollars for the trip. The woman recognized the voice of her daughter and the voice asked her to send twenty dollars for luck. If a person has psychokinetic abilities and is grieving over the loss of a loved one, creating a “phone call” from that person “could be a psychic and symbolic way by which we attempt to prove immortality to ourselves” (Rogo 1979: 56). It could also be a way to assure ourselves that our loved ones are happy and content where they are.

Interestingly, Rogo also has had a couple of personal experiences with paranormal phone calls. On two occasions, friends of his have called his house when no one was at home and spoken with “someone”⁵ who promised to give Rogo a message for them. Rogo never received the messages and on both occasions it was provable that no one was at home at the time of the call. Rogo says that these experiences “certainly had an impact on Raymond and me, eventually prompting us to explore this aspect of the phantom phone call mystery in greater depth” (Rogo 1979: 134).

Yet, Rogo does not talk very personally about this experiences, especially when compared to Estep. His experience is clearly not nearly as involved or personal as Estep's many experiences. He is not the one who spoke with the paranormal voice, nor did the person who had called him know he was speaking with someone who could not possibly be in the house.

Rogo, for the most part, portrays the persona he acknowledges parapsychologists are supposed to put forward: "by nature, psychic investigators are supposed to be cold, critical, and dispassionate" (Rogo 1979: 42). In his next clause, though, he acknowledges the personal and emotional nature of his work: "but some of these accounts pack an emotional wallop that would melt even the iciest heart" (Rogo 1979: 42). His work is in the parascientific tradition which tries to negotiate these two approaches.

Voices of Eternity

Sarah Estep is the public figure who has influenced the EVP Internet Center probably more than any other. Several members mentioned that it was her book which inspired them to pursue EVP research. They were drawn to the personal way she related her experiences and the relationships she developed with her voices. She has not only influenced other EVP'ers, but is also a good representative of those who look for personal connection with the spirits. Hibrichan, the maintainer of the site, refers to her as "my friend . . . who started it all for me" (June 5). Estep is particularly interesting to me because she describes her process and ritual in much more detail than many of the EVP Internet Center members do.

Estep's method of relating her experiences is not what is generally considered "folk." It is written and individual, not oral and communal. However, I would like to consider it as a kind of vernacular literature. Like many of the paperbacks available at the supermarket checkout stand, *Voices of Eternity* deals with subjects that the more authoritative sources of "Culture" shun, but which are popular with the general American populace. Discussion of ghost and alien voices being recorded does not exactly fall into the "formal or institutional" realms.

As one of the major influences on many of the members of the group, her book portrays the personal relationship many of the members of the EVP Internet Center have with the search for EVP. Estep writes in the mode of the academic—the book—but her tone and content are clearly aimed at a lay audience, not an academic one. Her writing is accessible to anyone.

D. Scott Rogo's approach to a similar topic in *Phone Calls From the Dead* is to look at the evidence that he compiled and determine the nature of the phenomenon in question. Estep's approach is much more personal. She records her own personal experience with EVP and is more concerned with what the voices actually have to say than with proving whether or not the phenomenon is true. She begins her book with a description of how she got involved with EVP and then goes directly on to reporting what the voices have to say on topics such as death and dying, the next dimension, their lives, and reincarnation. She spends very little time on her own personal biography. In fact, we only find out via off-hand remarks that she has children and that she is a retired elementary school teacher. She treats the messages she gets from the voices as

authoritative statements of what the afterlife is like. One almost gets the feeling that she has had a revelation and her book is gospel.

Using Ellwood's model of the Great and Little Traditions (which I will discuss in detail later), Estep could fall under the label of a charismatic leader. These leaders are not usually sanctioned by an institution, but draw their authority from personal revelation and experience. Ellwood states that the Little Tradition is "transmitted through family and community and charismatic figures such as shamans, 'holy men,' and wise women" (Ellwood 1988: 119). Estep's knowledge is certainly revealed to her in an unconventional manner. She does not receive her authority from the texts or earthly institutions, but directly from the spirit world. Her revelations are mediated by her technology and are therefore more acceptable in her mind to her culture than other forms of paranormal experiences.

Many of the questions Estep asks her spirit contacts regarding the afterlife are about what might seem to be mundane topics. For instance, she asks about their occupations, whether or not there are animals and plants, and whether spirits get sick. She has found that life on the other side is much like life here. The personalities have similar psychologies, the spirits seem to have jobs, one of which is tour guide to Estep's office, and there are even hospitals in which recently deceased spirits recover from the shock of dying. Her vision of the afterlife is a sort of socialist heaven with "personal freedom, with each spirit carrying out those tasks for which he or she is best suited" (Estep 1988: 58). She suspects, "from what has come through on tape, that we will all have the job that suits us best, not only performance-wise, but psychologically" (Estep

1988: 54). This vision of the afterlife compliments the egalitarian nature of EVP belief. Not only is this knowledge available to anyone, the fruits of the afterlife are as well. She receives her authority directly from the spirit world. It is unmediated by any worldly institution or trained religious leader. The method for acquiring this knowledge is not restricted to the elite, but is available to all.

This direct knowledge is precisely why Estep researches EVP. One of her main goals in speaking with the spirits is to determine what life after death is like. When explaining why she does not use the spirits to capitalize on knowing the future, she writes,

they are more important than that. The spirits are well aware that the reason I communicate with them is to find out what the spirit world and the life there are like, for my personal knowledge as well as to share it with others. They approve of this, and I am sure this is why they frequently tell me, "*We will help you.*" I doubt they would cooperate the way they have if I tried to use them as my private pocket wizards. (Estep 1988: 87)

She takes her relationships with her voices very seriously.

Like the women discussed in Gillian Bennett's study of supernatural beliefs, Estep sees communication with the spirit world as a way to continue "loving, close relationships that existed on the earth plane. . . . [and] where the relationship was less than ideal, you need have nothing further to do with that person in the afterlife" (Estep 1988: 51). Many of her interpretations of the voices express a sense of home-coming after death. In fact, some have described the earth plane as "Death" (Estep 1988: 54), implying that the afterlife is "life."

In some ways, her book is very audience specific. In order for her conclusions to be taken seriously, her reader must be open to believing in at least the basics of survival after death. One of the most striking things about *Voices of Eternity* is Estep's complete conviction that these voices are real and they are spirits and other-dimensional beings attempting to contact her. She writes with the assumption that the conclusions she draws from the evidence are completely acceptable to her audience.

This tone is appealing to those who already believe in the phenomenon because they feel like they have found an ally—someone who is also on the outside of the norm. I imagine that her tone contributes to the conversion of many people who had not yet decided whether or not they believe. Her complete confidence in her beliefs is infectious. She writes about speaking with spirits as if it is the most normal thing in the world. Her tone certainly contributes to her popularity on the EVP Internet Center.

Ouija Board Rituals and Traditions

Ouija board traditions, unlike EVP, have been studied by folklorists. The primary work with Ouija boards and the teens who use them has been done by Bill Ellis. He has studied the Ouija board as it is used in teen culture in America. He does place it within the historical context of Spiritualism, but his conclusions and theories are drawn, not from the historical uses of the Ouija board, but from the specific teen subculture. Similarly, I am looking at EVP as an updating of former traditions as they are applied by a specific group.

EVP'ers are spread thinly over the industrialized world. Because of this, they do not regularly meet in large groups. EVP'ers have only become able to form communities with the advent of widespread access to the internet. The group is a fairly recent development.⁶ Perhaps this is why they have thus far been overlooked by folklorists. The group, as such, is a new development, but their beliefs are an updating of traditions which have been around for ages.

Human beings have always used devices to try to contact the dead. Until about a century and a half ago, however, the state of the technology used had not advanced much beyond runes, reading tea leaves, and human mediums. With the rise in popularity in the nineteenth century of Spiritualism, other devices were introduced to enable “spirit rapping” and “automatic writing,” eventually leading up to the invention of the Ouija board (Ellis 1994: 63-65).

Although the Ouija board is not any more complicated a device than runes, it is accessible to the layman. In order to read tea leaves or runes, a person has to be “sensitive” and schooled in their meanings. Uninitiated people can not do it for themselves with any certainty. In order to use a Ouija board, however, one only needs to be able to spell. This direct, unmediated access to the spirit world can be threatening to professionals. In fact, serious psychics and occultists warn against amateurs using them, ostensibly because it is dangerous to meddle in realms in which they have no expertise or training (Ellis 1994: 61).

Although Ouija boards are more popular than EVP, they have many similarities. First, and most obviously, they are both viewed by their practitioners as a means of

communication with the spirit world. Second, their acceptance is on the margins of dominant culture. Third, they use technology accessible to anyone. Ouija boards can be purchased just as easily as tape recorders. Fourth, they both involve ritual. It is this last similarity which I would like to discuss in depth.

In his analysis of teens' experimentation with Ouija boards, Bill Ellis makes a rather unconventional claim. He refutes the opinion of many religious leaders, parents, and even psychics that playing with Ouija boards is "dangerous, since it invites evil to take over the participants" (Ellis 1994: page 62). He sees the Ouija board as a ritual which "allows a two-way dialogue with the devil: Satan can threaten adolescents; but they can talk back to him." It also "enacts teens' beliefs about the devil and allows them to participate directly in myth" (Ellis 1994: 62). The myth which plays out is the traditional Christian one their parents and religious leaders taught them. By taunting the devil they are 1) proving his existence and 2) proving his impotence in the face of good.

The ritual involving the Ouija board is what enables their participation in the myth. Ellis describes the Ouija ritual with the following pattern:

1. The users invoke a spirit.
2. They then name the spirit and determine its background.
3. Participants test the spirit by asking it questions with known or knowable answers.
4. Through the messages or the indicator's behavior, they characterize the spirit, usually as good or evil.
5. The spirit threatens or warns the users of future events.
6. The users challenge the spirit's reality, and the spirit responds with a sign.
7. The users terminate contact. (Ellis 1994: 68)

A striking point about this ritual pattern is that the teens are in control. Children and adolescents often feel like they are not in control of their own lives. Teens especially feel

this since they are at a point in their development when they will soon be asked to assume more adult responsibilities, yet they are not given many of the rights that adults have. By being in control of the Ouija ritual, they not only defy the adult world by engaging in taboo, but they are able to control it, unlike their lives in general.

According to Ellis's theory, the ritual of calling upon spirits via the Ouija board is a way for teens to "participate directly in myth" (Ellis 1994: 62) which their parents and the older generation control. When they use the Ouija board, they are confirming the existence of a spirit world and are assuming control of it. Often, at some point in the ritual, the spirit will attempt to insult the teens who have called upon it. At this point, the teens rebuff the insults and put the spirit in its place. Because they are the ones who called him and the only way he can speak is through their facilitation, they are principal actors in the ritual.

Like Ouija board participants, EVP'ers also have rituals when they attempt to invoke spirits and record their voices.

1. They record in the same place at a regular time whenever possible, usually alone.
2. They then welcome the voices, inform them that they are well-intentioned and eager for them to speak.
3. They ask questions and keep the recordings short so they can play them back instantly. This way they can detect any voices and engage in a two-way conversation.
4. They take scrupulous notes. When using a tape recorder, they mark down the counter number when anything unusual appears. They also take note of any sound that they hear which could be erroneously interpreted as EVP (i.e., a cat jumping off the table or a car driving by).
5. At the end of the recording, they thank the voices for coming, even if they got no apparent results.

The EVP ritual, like the Ouija board's, gives its practitioners a sense of control. They impose order on a realm which has always been outside of human comprehension and therefore chaotic. The repetitive and ritualistic form of the recording sessions also reinforces traditional social behavior. The EVP'ers are always careful to be polite to the spirits. They always say hello and goodbye, please and thank you. They are rewarded for their courtesy with relationships with the spirit world.

Unlike Ouija board users, EVP'ers do not attempt to control the spirits themselves. They control the process by which they can communicate. Even when dealing with the friendly, "good dead," EVP'ers still feel a certain awe and fear of the spirit world. By using a method which is controlled and scientific, they can reduce their fear of the unknown. As one EVP'er put it, "there IS more out there and we can contact it, safely [sic] and rationally using science" (Ross, June 20). They use science, which in the popular imagination at least, is reliable and predictable to protect them from the chaos of the unknown universe, while still being able to explore and participate in it.

The most important part of both rituals, however, is the direct access they allow the practitioners to the spirit realm. They are able to confirm its existence through their own experience. Although their visions of the afterlife are quite different, its mere existence is enough to give them hope that there is a meaning to life.

CHAPTER V

EVP'S PLACE WITHIN THE FIELD OF FOLKLORE

Before I begin my discussion of the EVP Internet Center itself, I believe a short history of the study of folklore and how my research fits into it is in order. Elliott Oring nicely lays out the evolution of the term “folklore” along with the accompanying history of its study in his essay “On the Concepts of Folklore” (1986). He begins by addressing the controversy which currently exists in defining the term “folklore.” Although he wrote this essay almost 15 years ago, much of this debate is still waging. While many people could give examples of the types of things that folklorists study (i.e., myths, legends, jokes, folk dance, folk medicine, folk art, folk songs, practical jokes, nursery rhymes) (Oring 1986: 2), it is difficult to pin down a set of criteria which “is peculiar to the items on this list and which does not require the admission of glaring omissions or oversights” (Oring 1986: 3). Alan Dundes had attempted to define “lore” with just such an itemized list of over 250 genres. His definition of “folk” is just as imprecise: “Dundes argues that ‘folk’ can refer to *any* group based on *any* factor (rather than a specific group formed on the basis of select factors)” (Oring 1986: 1).

How then, can we talk about folklore if we do not have a common understanding of the term, or even of its component roots? Oring postulates that “to approach a solution at all, we must attempt to gain a sense of the development of the concept of folklore over time” (Oring 1986: 4). He traces folklore from its romantic and nationalistic roots which saw it as purely a throwback or “survival” from peasant culture, through the cultural

evolutionists of the 19th century, to the folklorists of today who study, among other things, urban legends, quilt making, and tattoos.

While Oring's essays provide a good frame of reference for how folklore has been studied in the past and how it is currently viewed, he does not provide a precise definition of "folklore." Perhaps *any* definition of the term would prove "partial, idiosyncratic, or inconsistent" (Oring 1986: 17). Instead of attempting to define the term, he provides an orientation to the field of folklore:

folklorists seem to pursue reflections of the *communal* (a group or collective), the *common* (the everyday rather than extraordinary), the *informal* (in relation to the formal and institutional), the *marginal* (in relation to the centers of power and privilege), the *personal* (communication face-to-face), the *traditional* (stable over time), the *aesthetic* (artistic expressions), and the *ideological* (expressions of belief and systems of knowledge). (Oring 1986: 17-18)

Every folklorist does not apply each of these concepts to every topic he/she studies, but this list is a good place to start when getting a bearing on the field of folklore studies.

The British folklorist Gillian Bennett also plays with the idea of defining "folklore" in her book *Traditions of Belief* (1987). She prefers to define folklore as a process:

Folklore is usually seen as a body of beliefs, activities, ways of doing things, saying things and making things that are acquired 'through the 'skin', as it were, by talking to, watching, socializing and communicating with other people. Folklore is a form of culture—an informal, almost spontaneous, culture that can be distinguished from popular culture because nobody makes money out of it, and from 'high' culture because it is never taught in schools. (Bennett 1987: 9)

I am not going to attempt a global definition here, either, but I will draw on several of the points Oring and Bennett make to describe the research I have done on the EVP Internet Center and to place it within the field of folklore study.

An historical bias which Oring relates that I would like to address is the assumption that “lore” is necessarily non-written, as William Wells Newell, the first editor of the *Journal of American Folklore* defined it a century ago (Oring 1986: 8). This restriction has pretty much been discarded, but it still exists as a bias. Folklore, or expression of vernacular belief and culture, does not necessarily have to be oral, but it is almost guaranteed to be considered “folklore” if it is..

Nevertheless, I would argue that the manner in which the members of the EVP Internet Center communicate is comparable to oral communication. The tone of the banter is informal and highly colloquial. They use argot specific to cyber-space. For instance, they use characters and acronyms to express facial expressions and body language which is obviously invisible when communicating by text only. A colon followed by a right parenthesis— :) —signifies a basic smile. There are also many variations on this theme: a semi-colon followed by a right parenthesis— ;) —signifies a smiling wink, a colon followed by a capital P— :P —is a person sticking his tongue out. More of these “emoticons” (emotional icons) are being invented every day. Also used in emails and posts are acronyms and shorthand. For instance, *lol* stands for “laughing out loud” and *rotflmao* stands for “rolling on the floor laughing my ass off.” This argot is specific to the medium of the internet and not part of the accepted, formal manner of communication, particularly written communication. They also often

disregard spelling and grammatical conventions. Cyber-space has appropriated the traditional, formal mode of communication—writing—and made it vernacular.

Nearly all of the correspondence between the members of the EVP Internet Center is written. Each story they tell of their encounters with the voices is written down and stored where, theoretically, anyone could go back and read it at any time. In that respect, the stories are not in the same category as oral tradition. However, I have found that in practice, very few people will actually go back to look at old posts. The internet is a medium which caters to the impulse for instant gratification which so many of us want fulfilled. It does supply the means to go back and look over old posts, an ability I found very useful in my research, but the people who tend to use the internet are not usually interested in looking at things in which they are not presently involved. The group on the EVP Internet Center is no exception. This is demonstrated by the number of times that certain discussions are rehashed. Many times the same technical advice is given to different people. If they had only scrolled back a few weeks or months, they could have read a whole conversation about the very problem they are having, but they are either unaware of this data or perhaps too impatient to do this kind of research. It is much easier to ask the question and have the others answer you *now*. This can become tiresome for the regulars who repeat the same conversations over and over.

Oring goes on to say that “for something to be folklore in an urban society, it must be touched and transformed by common experience—ordinary humans living their everyday lives. . . . In other words, folklore is often regarded as a mode of expression which emphasizes the human and personal as opposed to the formal and institutional”

(Oring 1986: 16). This is certainly the case of the EVP Internet Center. For the people who contribute to the site, this involvement is a part of their everyday life. For example, one participant, Hibrichan, does not contribute every day, but she says she tries to read the message board at least once per day. While the search for spirit voices may not be the everyday experience of most people, it is carried out using common technology that most people in the developed world are familiar with, or at least would not be surprised to see. The search for EVP is not limited to a particular time or space, nor is its practice limited to certain people.

As far as emphasizing the human and personal, one would have to really stretch to claim the EVP Internet Center emphasizes the formal and institutional. The entire site is composed of contributions made by amateurs who pursue the paranormal in order to fulfill their personal spiritual needs. The interpretations of the voices they hear and the narratives they tell relating their experiences with EVP all express their personal spirituality.

A related question arises when studying folklore: is there a place for *individual* experiences and expressions when talking about folk *groups*? If we want to look at collective values and expressions of these values, can we waste time studying idiosyncratic individuals? My answer would be that the individual is inseparable from her culture and therefore her expression is necessarily indicative of some aspect of it. To address this issue, we must first discuss four various forms folklore can take: myth, legend, tale, and memorate.

Elliot Oring describes the difference between the first three in his essay “Folk Narratives.” A myth is a story which is “generally regarded by the community in which it is told as both sacred and true” and is “frequently performed in a ritual or ceremonial context” (Oring 1986: 124). Myths deal with the creation of the world and other “ultimate realities,” are set outside of historical time, and involve the actions of divine or semi-divine characters. The Adam and Eve story is an example of a myth.

Legends are narratives which exist within historical time and are generally told as true. Oring makes the argument that a legend focuses on a single episode “presented as miraculous, uncanny, bizarre, or sometimes embarrassing,” the narration of which is “the negotiation of the truth of these episodes” (Oring 1986: 125). By examining the believability and message of the legend, the audience examines its own “sense of the normal, the boundaries of the natural, their conceptions of fate, destiny, and coincidence” (Oring 1986: 126). Legends tend to reflect the shared concerns and values of the group.

For instance, an urban legend which circulated through the University of Oregon dorms a couple of years ago goes something like this:

There was this homeless hippie on 13th Ave. who decided to get his act together and get a job. He goes to the barber to get his long, nappy dreads cut so he can go for a job interview, but when the barber turns on the electric razor and touches it to the hippie’s head, he stands up, turns green, and drops over dead. It turns out he had a nest of poisonous spiders living in his hair and when they felt the vibrations of the razor, bit him all at once, which overloaded his nervous system and killed him.

In one interpretation of this legend, the character is punished because he is a hippie and does not subscribe to the American ideal of materialism and strong work ethic. The legend is complicated, however, by the fact that he dies just when he tries to conform to

that ideal. By negotiating the truth of this legend, the listener can evaluate where he/she stands on issues of cleanliness and work ethic.

Folktales, on the other hand are told as fantasy. The characters are two-dimensional and extreme contrasts. The action is stereotyped, repetitive, and often contrived. In our modern culture, folktales have been relegated to children's books, but they often deal with such sophisticated themes as "violence, hatred, cruelty, racism, prejudice, sexuality, and obscenity" (Oring 1986: 133). The most famous collection of folktales is still that compiled by the Brothers Grimm in the nineteenth century, and even though they edited out some of the sex and violence from the versions they recorded, the tales are often shockingly violent.

A memorate is a recounting of a personal experience, usually an encounter with the supernatural, and it often reflects the teller's personal concerns and values, whereas a legend reflects the group's. The stories which are related on the EVP Internet Center message board are largely memorates.

For a discussion of memorates, I turn to Gillian Bennett. Bennett raises a good question regarding this type of material in her book *Traditions of Belief*: "how far can we be sure that reminiscences are not purely idiosyncratic?" (Bennett 1987: 17). She addresses this question from two points. She first challenges the idea that not everything passed along orally is idiosyncratic. She postulates that a story cannot be told the same way twice. It had been an assumption of early folklore studies that traditions are unchanging over generations. It has been shown, however, that each time a story, or even a legend is told, the main plot may remain unchanged, but the details shift with the

interests and needs of the teller and the audience. She cites the example of Robert Hunt who in 1865 tried to collect the same legends he had heard as a boy in the West of England. When he went back to his boyhood town, he did not recognize any of the stories he collected. In typical romantic fashion, he blamed their disappearance on the disintegration of the peasant class, but it was the nature of the transmission of the stories which caused them to evolve into something he did not recognize. Bennett states, “legends, in their written form, merely catch and suspend one moment in the eternal flux of tradition: they endure because they are written down, not because they are in some way more real, more rounded, or more ‘traditional’ than memorates” (Bennett 1987: 19). Bennett then refutes the notion that an individual’s explanation of an experience does not also reflect cultural values and attitudes. Personal memorates are just as much an expression of culture as legends are; they are “the embodiments of received attitudes and beliefs—tradition in action” and that by studying them, we see how they are “giving meaning to meaningless perceptions, shaping private experience into cultural forms, showing how ancient concepts are adapted to the modern world and individual needs” (Bennett 1987: 19). The memorates told on the EVP Internet Center message board are excellent examples of how individuals recount their experiences through cultural forms. Memorates, like legends, are told as true and express the anxieties and concerns of the teller as well as the culture in general.

Myths, legends, folktales, and memorates, although they are disparate, are all ways of expressing the culture and beliefs of a group of people. The personal narratives are no less important or expressive than the “collective” narratives. The way we

categorize the narratives largely depends on the “perceptions and attitudes of the people who tell them” (Oring 1986: 134). If the teller of a story believes it is both true and sacred, then it is a myth. If it is told as (probably) true, but exists in historical times, it is a legend. Calling a story a memorate does not in any way imply that it did not happen. That judgement is left completely out of the picture. What we study when we study memorates are the ways people describe their experiences, what kinds of traditions they tap in to, what aspects they emphasize, and what values they express. For the folklorist, the truth of the experience is not the focus. Rather, it is the cultural and personal meanings of traditions and experiences which are expressed in the form and content of narratives.

The tendency to want to view folklore as either true or false becomes even more pronounced when talking about the supernatural. Bennett describes three vicious circles which folklorists have gotten themselves into regarding supernatural folklore:

Firstly, no one will tackle the subject because it is disreputable, and it remains disreputable because no one will tackle it. Secondly, because no one does any research into present-day supernatural beliefs, occult traditions are generally represented by old legends about fairies, bogeys, and grey ladies. . . . Thirdly, because no one will talk about their experiences of the supernatural there is no evidence for it, and because there is no evidence for it no one talks about their experiences of it. (Bennett 1987: 13)

She subscribes to the idea that people really do have some kind of numinous experiences and whether or not they are supernatural, we can learn a lot about the people who experience them by looking at the narratives they use to explain them. While in the decade since Bennett published her book, these biases have started to crumble and more

work has been done in the folklore of the supernatural, they still inform the attitudes of many scholars, as well as the general public.

There are legends as well as memorates posted to the EVP Internet Center message board. It is not surprising that myths and folktales were not found. As Oring observes, myths and folktales do not “occupy a central place in the oral traditions of western urbanized society” (Oring 1986: 130). Myths and folktales are usually associated with religion and children. It therefore makes sense that the EVP Internet Center members would not engage in those kinds of narrative as the image they wish to promote is one of scientific maturity.

Many of the legends involve capturing EVP generated by deceased people who were known to have been interested in communication with the dead when they were alive. Two of the most popular guest voices are those of Thomas Edison and Konstantin Raudive. Though he was not the first person to experiment with capturing spirit voices on tape, Raudive was the first to gain any real publicity. As noted earlier, Edison was very interested in developing a technological means of speaking with the dead. At the time of his own death, he was working on plans for a machine which would do just that. When the voices of Edison, Raudive, and other similar people are heard, they often provide technical advice to the person who is recording.⁷ Occasionally other famous voices are heard. For example, Sarah Estep claims to have recorded, not only Beethoven’s voice, but also music that he has composed since his death. She has also spoken with William James, a psychologist of the 19th century who was interested in psychical research (Estep 1988: 118).

These types of narratives are often prefaced with a disclaimer. The person telling such a story usually acknowledges that claiming to talk with a famous person could be a sensationalist tactic used to spark interest in the phenomenon. One of the things that draws a person to visit psychics is the possibility of a brush with greatness. It could be the hope of finding out that she was Cleopatra in a past life, or talking to Elvis through the medium. It is a way for the person visiting the psychic to escape his/her humdrum life and become associated with someone famous. However, the psychics who invoke too many famous people are often the ones who are revealed to be frauds, thereby making the practice of invoking famous people suspect.

The EVP'ers who claim to have heard from famous spirits are aware of the incredulity that claim will spark. They do not want to associate themselves with fraudulent practices. They are also aware that telling stories about people no one has heard of can get boring. Therefore, they do tell of speaking with a famous person, but indicate their own initial disbelief as a way to identify with the listeners, get them interested in the story, and distance themselves from association with fraud.

The EVP Internet Center is a ripe candidate for folklore studies because 1) it can be considered to have an oral tradition, 2) it has a distinct argot, 3) its participants relate meaningful narratives regarding their spiritual belief, and 4) it is a technological innovation of past folk traditions.

CHAPTER VI

GREAT AND LITTLE TRADITIONS: THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF EVP

Elliott Oring identifies four contexts through which we can study folklore: cultural, social, individual, and comparative. He talks about these contexts in terms of folk narrative, but they are also useful lenses through which to look at an entire belief system and way of life. It is nearly impossible to talk about one context without considering the others; all of these contexts are central to the expression of belief. However, it often becomes too difficult and involved to try to evaluate one belief system in terms of all four, which is why it is useful to divide them.

The cultural context which informs any action is complex, to say the least. It “encapsulates the system of ideas, symbols, and behaviors of the group in which particular folk narratives are found” (Oring 1986: 135). Identifying all of the many influences culture can have on any action, especially a creative one is impossible. Culture is inextricably intertwined with the society and individual. However, it is possible, for the purposes of analysis, to identify and isolate one cultural factor.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the dominant characteristics of our culture is its popular faith in science and scientific discourse. While it takes years of training to learn enough to become an initiate into the world of science—a scientist—parts of it are accessible to anyone. Everyone learns about the “scientific method” in ninth grade general science, though not everyone makes it through Quantum Physics. The discourse of science has been appropriated by mass culture; it has infiltrated our systems of belief.

A model which will help describe the relationship between EVP and science is Robert Redfield's concept of the Great and Little Traditions. Robert Ellwood applies this model to contemporary religion in his article "Contemporary Religion as Folk Religion" (1988). He says, "briefly, the Little Tradition refers to the way of life of ordinary people; the Great Tradition to the ideas, values, and practice of the elite" (Ellwood 1988: 118). He sets the charismatic religious leader against the priest; the Church against the personal experience of the spiritual, such as visions; and institutional doctrines against the local traditions of communities.

The framework of the Great and Little Traditions is useful to work within, but it requires a little revision to fit my research into EVP. The Great Tradition shifts from religion to science and the cultural authority that scientific discourse claims. The Little Tradition is that of the EVP'ers. They use popular science to gain access to the authority of scientific discourse while still maintaining personal agency and control.

In his discussion of the Great and Little Traditions, Ellwood characterizes the Little Tradition as illiterate. However, in order to apply this model to contemporary American society which is highly literate, he modifies the meaning of literacy. He claims that the books which exemplify folk religion are "books that though widely read are considered to inhabit a religious ghetto and never appear in national book review columns or best-seller lists" (Ellwood 1988: 125). Sarah Estep's book *Voices of Eternity* (1988) fits nicely into this model.

Estep wants to use technology to facilitate her spirituality. She is not concerned with technology for its own sake or with proving that EVP is real by scientific standards.

Although she uses the discourse of science, her connection with EVP is much more personal and emotional. She does address some objections skeptics have made about the validity of EVP, but she spends very little time on them and considers her own personal experience to be proof enough.

EVP'ers use the terminology and methods of science in ways that the Great Tradition would not necessarily approve of. For instance, they refer to their work as empirical, repeatable, and controlled, all aspects of the scientific method. What the scientific ethos rejects is that the types of variables they “control” are things like attitude, frame of mind, and receptiveness of the observer. These are factors which are not measurable and could be used to explain why the EVP experiments work only sporadically.

Within the Little Tradition there are two factions: those who value the personal experience of coming into contact with the spirits, and those who look to science for validation of belief. As Melissa phrased it in one of her posts to the message board, these two factions include “one who can see the validity of this as not JUST a clinical experiment but as something that DOES entail emotion and personal feelings - and the other that sees this as a “test” only, with no feelings allowed and in a very sanitized and scientific aura” (February 6).

In his opening chapter of *Miracles: A Parascientific Inquiry into Wondrous Phenomena*, D. Scott Rogo acknowledges the scientific community's discomfort with exploration into realms of inquiry which tend “to upset the fragile view of the world that old-fashioned Newtonian physics prescribes for us” (Rogo 1982: 2). He sees the biases

of the scientific community as the largest obstacle to parascience gaining validity in the mainstream imagination.

Sarah Estep expresses the tension between the personal and parascientific levels of tradition, stating that the parapsychological establishment has “striven for such a long time to be accepted as a science by other scientists, many of whom still look upon them as unloved stepchildren, that they bend over backward to prove to their more ‘worthy’ colleagues just how scientific they are” (Estep 1988: 40). She scorns this toadying to the Great Tradition and blames this impulse for the lack of investigation into “the personality’s survival after death” (Estep 1988: 40). She claims that parapsychologists will not engage in postmortem research because it is associated with the occult. The distinction she makes between what parapsychologists study and what she studies is not very clear, but what is clear is her disdain for those researchers for whom the voices are “too unscientific, too emotionally laden” (Estep 1988: 38).

As noted, the religious establishment does not generally seem to be opposed to the idea that spirits can talk via tape recorders, since it reinforces the idea of survival of the soul after death. Often the voices that are recorded are benevolent and the idea of EVP does not directly contradict traditional Christian teachings. In all of my research I have not found one example of organized religion expressing disapproval of EVP. Estep also states that “the Church has nothing to fear from the paranormal, for, properly used, it can be a powerful ally” (Estep 1988: 47). She does not elaborate on precisely how the paranormal could be used by the Church, but she, as a representative of the Little

Tradition, takes a much less acrid tone toward religion than she does toward what she perceives to be the snobbery of science.

In our culture which privileges the authority of scientific discourse, EVP is a manifestation of the Little Tradition which exists apart from and alongside the Great Tradition of Science. By appropriating the language of the Great Tradition, EVP'ers can legitimize their personal spiritual beliefs and experience by accessing science's cultural authority.

CHAPTER VII

THE EVP INTERNET CENTER

The particular group I used for my fieldwork research is the group which meets via The EVP Internet Center. It is made up of EVP believers from all over the world and they use the internet as a medium to exchange ideas, information, and experiences. The Center provides a structure of support for a belief which is on the fringe of, or perhaps beyond, the mainstream. As one of the contributors to the message board put it, “doing EVP is a lonely job, with no one to compare your results with” (Chacal, February 20). The actual behavior which they practice in conjunction with their belief does not necessitate interaction with other (living) humans and as the number of believers is quite small and widespread, it is difficult to meet in person. They have used the internet—technology which was unthinkable just a couple of decades ago—to create their cyber-community.

I chose to study a cyber-community which meets on the internet rather than a group which meets in physical space because, in this case, the medium is the message. Since they use technology to express and validate their spiritual beliefs through EVP, it is only fitting that they would use technology to talk about it with each other. Besides, I do not believe there are many EVP societies in the Eugene area.

I chose to study this particular group because, of the many EVP websites I visited, the EVP Internet Center website is the most extensive. It is also clearly devoted to two-way communication between its authors and visitors. It is designed as a forum rather than

a one-way dissemination point for information. Most of the other EVP sites I visited were concerned with reporting the history of the study of EVP and the technical details of conducting it. They were helpful in that respect, but they all had essentially the same information and they did not include personal stories.

The EVP Internet Center, on the other hand, includes actual sound files submitted by members, often along with their stories and interpretations. The narratives and the beliefs they construct from them, of course, are what are of interest to folklore studies. The page is maintained by one person, but the group as a whole really creates the environment. Just as with recording EVP, anyone can post to the message board. A definite do-it-yourself ethos pervades the website.

Description of the EVP Internet Center

Before I get into the specifics of the group, I will describe the website. The main EVP page opens with a particularly clear (and apropos) sample of EVP: “Anna, I can look at humans... ha ha ha ha.” The purpose of this front page is to get visitors interested so they will continue reading and listening and learning more about EVP. The tone of the text is very inviting. The two most attractive qualities which come across on this main page are its egalitarianism and its supportiveness.

Right from the beginning, it is made clear that “virtually anyone can succeed at receiving voices through EVP.” Visitors are invited to conduct their own experiments and send their results to Hibrichan⁸ so she can post them on the site. They are assured any help “we” (the community) can supply. It is easy to tell from this opening page that

this is a space, albeit virtual, which will be supportive of EVP belief and believers. Unlike most public forums where they would be ridiculed for speaking about their beliefs, at the EVP Internet Center, they are free to express their marginal, but shared beliefs.

Also included on the main page are samples of EVP provided by Sarah Estep. According to the interpretations of what the voices are saying and the accompanying context, it is clear that the qualities of EVP the page is trying to promote are the personal connections between those in the physical world and those “spiritside.” Estep and the spirits are on a first-name basis with each other. One of the “unseen” even “affectionately speak[s] to Sarah directly,” saying “You’re my girl.” The sound clips emphasize direct communication. The spirits seem to directly answer Estep’s questions. It is not necessary to read her book in order to deduce that her interest in EVP lies in the personal connections it allows one to maintain after death.

The site is not exploitative at all. Of the sixteen pages within the website, only three mention money, and only one of those is directly related to EVP. Two of the three pages are a music and a book store, which consist of lists of the books and music the author of the site likes, with links to on-line stores which sell them. The third is the American Association - Electronic Voice Phenomena page which asks for a \$20.00 yearly fee if you want to become a member.⁹

The Center itself does not get any money from any of these pages. It merely serves as a central point where people with similar interests can gain access to further related information and services. This demonstrates the cyber-community of the group.

While they are all individuals who create their own personal belief systems, they hold similar values which attract them to similar areas of interest.

The “More EVP Files” page also emphasizes the direct connection between the observer and the spirit world. The message of the voice, as determined by the observer, usually corresponds with a question posed by the observer or the circumstances under which the voice was recorded. This demonstrates that the spirit is aware of the observer’s situation and environment. Unlike the spirits in Estep’s samples who seem to regularly identify themselves, however, only one of the voices listed here did so.

Several of the sound clips posted do not have any accompanying interpretations. Hibrichan has invited anyone to listen to them and post their own interpretations to the message board. Sometimes these interpretations are close to each other, and sometimes they are completely disparate. For instance, one was interpreted by three different members as “Are you listening?” while another one was interpreted by those same three people as “I want to put a towel on you...I you.. (woman’s voice),” “Come on, kiss your mom, you’ll (...) to say,” and “Oh it’s small it’s safe to say.” They interpreted another clip as “You missed school.....plenty of homework (woman’s voice),” “In is scald (that is vague), turn the oven (or iron) off,” and “We’re screw-up’s in here, I know” (June 20, June 2, June 4). Posting and trying to interpret unidentified EVP clips is one of their favorite activities. Like Ellwood’s legends, the believability of these clips must be negotiated by the listener. The interpretations depend upon the cultural, social, and individual needs of the interpreter.

Many of the EVP websites I visited included directions on how to capture EVP, but the directions page of the EVP Internet Center was much more personal. Hibrichan describes the technical methods for recording and playing back voices using both conventional magnetic tape and also computer software, but she also included bits of her belief system. Here, as well as elsewhere in the site, she articulates her belief that “mindset is thought to have a great deal to do with the results you obtain.” She cautions, “it isn’t wise to joke or make derogatory remarks as to the validity of the phenomenon.” Although EVP investigation uses the terminology of the scientific method, some of the variables in the experiment, such as the mindset of the experimenter, are hardly measurable.

The EVP Internet Center also offers a chat room, open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10:00 PM - Midnight EST. I tried visiting a couple of times, but each time I went, I was the only one there. I got the impression that it was launched a while ago and that nobody really goes there anymore. The message board seems to be a sufficient forum for the group because they can engage in a dialog without having to coordinate schedules, which is difficult enough without having to try to do it over time zones and international date lines.

The Community of the Message Board: Social Context

The most interesting page of the website for my purposes, was the message board. This is a forum where anyone can post anything they like and the rest of the group can read it and respond. From what I have been able to gather by monitoring the message

board, it has been in existence for several years. Hibrichan and/or Wayne have maintained it for that time. There are a few, probably 4 or 5 people, who have contributed to it regularly pretty much since its inception and who still do so regularly. There are also many “newbies” who have recently found the site and who are beginning their own EVP experiments.

This is where the community is really formed. They have created this social context for themselves. Oring defines the social context as being “constituted by a specific group of people, by a specific set of principles governing their interrelationship, by a specific set of behaviors and conversations in which the narrative is embedded, and by a specific physical and symbolic environment present at the time of narration” (Oring 1986: 136). Questions of belief and practice are raised here. Because the parapsychological tradition emphasizes the scientific, clinical aspects of EVP investigation, there is little room in that discourse for discussion of aspects of the research which are subjective. This message board provides a medium for the believers to express how EVP fits into their belief systems and their lives as they live them.

That is not to say, however, that there are no technical or scientific discussions there also. In fact, a large number of the posts deal with the problems that complicated technology brings with it. The other members of the group relate their own experiences and what they have learned about this particular software or that particular microphone. They tell each other where to pick up free demos of sound editing software such as CoolEdit on the net and they relate the success they have had speeding up or slowing down or filtering the sound clips.

There are also a couple of members of the group who would prefer that the board keep to a strict discussion of the scientific aspects of EVP and not wander into other controversial areas of psi research because, as Doc67 expressed, “things like telepathy-games going on at the same time can really hurt the image of EVP-researchers/believers. ‘See these are just some people with their heads in the clouds who will believe anything’ is what people might conclude” (June 4). Recently, when one contributor proposed playing a psi game, she and the board in general came under fire from Doc67. The response from Hibrichan was swift and sure. She made it clear that the message board was for whatever she and the other members wanted to post. If certain individuals did not want to participate in those discussions, they did not have to.

Doc67’s main objection to getting off the topic of EVP was that its study would lose credibility if it were associated with other more controversial areas of the paranormal. He felt that EVP was the only “paranormal phenomenon which everyone can prove scientifically (at least for themselves)” (June 5). Many of the other members countered this by saying EVP is intricately connected with other psi research. As Wayne posted, “very little respect for the work in those other ‘weird’ fields = very little progress in any of them” (June 5).

In response to Doc67’s criticism, Hibrichan even went so far as to state “This isn’t a group owned site . . . you do not run it, injure the feelings of my guests or decide how it’s to be run . . . I rule this board and this site and will do as I please” (June 5). This seems a bit possessive and individualistic and even seems to contradict my earlier assertion that this is an egalitarian site created by the group. I think, however, that we can

look at it as a response to an attack from the scientific “Great Tradition.” Doc67 was attempting to depersonalize their experiences and reduce them to the sterility of a laboratory. Hibrichan was responding to this attack. Even though she was posturing as the sole ruler of the board, she knew she had the support of the community. The support she got from the rest of the group shows that she is not the sole voice of authority on the message board. Doc67’s concern for EVP’s reputation apparently was seen by Hibrichan and the others as kowtowing to the dominant authority at the expense of the validity of personal experience.

While he was appealing to “science” and empirical proof, the type of science Doc67 talks about is more of the type popular discourse creates. He says that “everyone can prove [EVP] scientifically,” but then he qualifies that statement: “at least for themselves.” If EVP were provable in terms of institutional science, it could be repeated by anyone so that other people would be convinced, not just the experimenter.

Like any other group, this group has its strong leaders as well as its weaker personalities. Although, due to the faceless nature of the medium, the people who fill those roles are not necessarily the same ones who would fill them in real space, the roles exist. For instance ZySysHelp was intimidated by one of the stronger personalities into abandoning his experiments with Melissa. When he refused to continue helping Melissa, there was a great deal of tension within the community. Earlier, Hibrichan had posted a short aside about the helpfulness of the community: “Isn’t it nice Melissa, how many come running when you ask for help? People involved in EVP have such big hearts!” (January 23). Now it seems that sense of community was being threatened. The rest of

the contributors to the message board worked to relieve the tension between the two parties by appealing to their common interest. Everyone in the group wants EVP technology to improve so communication with the unseen can occur more reliably and frequently. When the rest of the group related their differences to this common goal, the two parties were able to take the graceful way out and agree on something which was not directly related to their argument in order to restore harmony to the group.

The way the group generally achieves harmony is by bolstering the faith of those who are doubting or frustrated with the results of their experiments. Before she developed a method with which she was satisfied, Melissa used the EVP Internet Center message board as a support network. She was frustrated and depressed that she was getting results with which she was not happy. In this instance, as well as others, Melissa drew upon the strength of the others' convictions in order to maintain her faith.

In her duty to maintain the integrity of the site, Hibrichan has the power to delete any of the messages posted. While it is rare that she does delete someone's message, there was one instance recently in which she did.¹⁰ Someone started "flaming"¹¹ EVP, saying it was "unscientific" and the people who researched it were blind to reality and were too eager to believe in the reality of EVP to look at it critically and see it for what it was: a sham. This sparked a huge shouting match, so to speak, between this individual and the regulars. When Hibrichan found time to check on the site, she saw the huge string of insults they had traded and deleted it all. She posted a message stating in no uncertain terms that that kind of rudeness on the part of an outsider would not be tolerated:

I dislike you intensely not only for your professional place in the 'establishment hell hole' but also for your stinking attitude toward my guests. . . . I take serious offense to your accusations to me and my delightful [sic] friends who use this forum. . . . you serve no purpose in our company other than to piss people off, so your [sic] outa here friend.
(April 4)

Her role, which she embraces, is that of protector and guardian. In this message she also expresses the anti-establishment attitude of many of the believers. Their beliefs are rejected by the establishment, therefore, they in turn reject it.

It was fascinating to see how the entire group rallied to defend its beliefs against this outside threat. Often the members will argue among themselves over techniques or interpretations, but when their core common belief is attacked, they all band together and push an outsider back outside the safe space they have created for themselves.

EVP'ers also gain a measure of protection from the community. Because their beliefs are on the margins of what is acceptable in the dominant culture, they could potentially be more susceptible to exploitation from outside con artists. Instead of allowing themselves to fall prey to swindlers who would sell them paraphernalia which may or may not be authentic, they use the EVP Internet Center as a sounding board before they try anything new. They all keep each other updated on new deals as well as new swindles.

Individual Profiles

Also of great import to the understanding of the meaning of narratives and the beliefs they express is the individual context. Especially in such a small case-study, it is

important to understand what motivates each individual. Bennett says she prefers this type of small-scale, individual-centered studies over large-scale surveys because what this approach “loses in universal significance, . . . it gains in understanding” (Bennett 1987: 11). By looking closely at the members of the group who share common beliefs, we can begin to understand what roles those beliefs and the methods of their expression play in the lives of the believers.

I tried several times to elicit stories, narratives, lore, anything I could from the contributors to the EVP Internet Center, but my solicitations were not very fruitful. I have not had very good luck when trying to solicit responses from the contributors to the message board. For the most part, they seem to ignore me. I think this has to do with the fact that I am not “one of them” and I am seen as an outsider. I have never lied and said I was trying to capture EVP nor have I tried to give an impression other than the truth: that I am interested in their stories and beliefs about EVP. The group is more concerned with the study of EVP than the study of themselves. Rogo also ran into this problem. He says that “many of them, we have found, will not discuss these cases unless they are first assured that *other* people have had similar experiences” (Rogo 1979: 15). I could not lie and say I have tried to record EVP before, but I also could not be an initiate into their group without having done so.

Another reason Rogo gives for people’s reluctance to speak of their “weird” experiences is that “these people somehow view their experiences as something very personal, private, and not open for discussion—almost sacred” (Rogo 1979:15). I certainly found this to be the case, particularly for Melissa. In her response to my email

in which I asked her for her story and interpretation of it, she responded, “almost all of our [hers and her lover’s] messages I will keep totally private, due to the fact that they are on the level of personal phone calls, etc... But I can say that EVP is a real and miraculous thing- a godsend for us!!” From this and subsequent messages that she’s posted, it is clear that the messages she receives from this man are very meaningful to her.

The minimal response I got to the inquiries I made on the message board did not contribute to my knowledge of the precise demographics of the group. However, assuming that their posts to the message board were honest,¹² some conclusions about them may be drawn. The group consists of both men and women from all over the world. The countries represented include America, England, Germany, and possibly Australia. No one identified his/her age, but most of those whose ages were hinted at were middle-aged or better, although there was one young man who just graduated from high school. It can be assumed that all of them make a fairly comfortable living because they all have personal computers and some use expensive software to analyze the voices. At least three of the members said they got into EVP in the hopes of hearing from a specific person “spiritside,” and while many of them have explored various areas of the paranormal for years, none of them is a professional parapsychologist.

Because I have gathered the information I have on them from various posts made to the message board and not in response to direct questions, I cannot guarantee that what I say about them is completely accurate. However, as I only draw safe, logical conclusions from their posts, assuming they tell the truth in their messages, my analysis should be accurate.

Of the group, Melissa is the one who is most concerned with the spiritual, emotional aspects of EVP research. She says she “turned to this as a last resort, to try to contact a loved one” (February 2). When the person who had been helping her do so (ZySysHelp) decided to stop helping her because of pressure put on by another member of the group to be objective and scientific, Melissa despaired. She writes, “it may only have been an experiment to some - but to me it was hope” (February 2). She does not see EVP investigation as only clinical and scientific, but as “something that DOES entail emotion and personal feelings” (February 6).

Melissa got involved in EVP in order to contact her lover who died several years ago. She obviously had a very hard time coping with his loss. Through EVP, however, she can continue the relationship into which she had invested so much time, energy, and emotion. She writes the following about her motivation for pursuing EVP:

The whole point and purpose for me to do all this EVP work is to be able to speak with someone I love- who is “out there” but stays very near me- and we have been so desperate for better and better contact. I don’t really feel interested in doing this for any other reason- at all- it is purely out of love for this person and the need to be able to talk to him alone- BUT- if we can learn anything that may help others- or further this idea!- I will always share that! (June 24)

She believes she has received over 3,000 messages from this man. Unfortunately for my work, she will not share the content of the messages because she considers them to be private, like telephone conversations. This, however, attests to their sacredness. She is also always eager to tell everyone her exact method of capturing EVP so that they may capture their own. Just about every message she posts contains some kind of technical advice.

Ross is fairly new to the EVP Internet Center, having been posting for only about three weeks. He seems to have done a lot of research, particularly into Edison's attempts to contact the dead, and is well-versed in technology, New Age type spirituality, and history. He is clearly interested in the technical aspects of establishing contact with the other side, although this sometimes leads him to become enmeshed in the jargon of his various areas of interest.

Ross is also very open to the personal experience of the experimenter. He has been posting regular narratives outlining the experiments he's been conducting, describing the experiment as well as his feelings and impressions. He is also very interested in other peoples' stories.

His main goal is to establish contact with beings from beyond death. He has even proposed creating a "consortium" of people who would be trained in the technical aspects of communication, such as "Morse Code, the meter system of the electromagnetic spectrum, the assigned frequencies, and the construction of stone age radio technology like spark gaps, tuning coils, etc." Each of the members would theoretically retain that information when each "must, in his/her own time, die" (June 21) and could establish contact from the other side. Although he wants to establish contact with the dead, he is not as concerned with establishing personal relationships with them as his female colleagues such as Melissa and Hibrichan are.

Ross and Melissa have recently been working on an experiment to not only establish contact with the dead, but to verify the validity of that communication by having a particular spirit serve as a messenger between the two earthly parties. So far, the

experiments have not been fruitful, but according to Ross, “this experiment in no way is a failure” (June 22). They are attempting to continue with the experiment. He explains the lack of results by blaming his technique: “I am still refining my sound capture technique, and learning a lot about working with difficult acoustic situations . . . I also am still trying to find that perfect white noise source for optimum reproduction” (June 5). The very technology they use to validate their spiritual beliefs also becomes the scapegoat for their inability to prove their theories. Technology is, after all, fallible. Even if it were not fallible, human application of it is.

Hibrichan is the one who maintains the site and pays for the web space, and she is also one of the most interesting and verbose. She is viewed by the other members as the “mom” of the website. This is a role she embraces. She is often the one who facilitates conflict resolution, she protects her friends from attacks by outsiders, and she nurtures the beliefs and aims of those who contribute to the EVP Internet Center. Because she provides a nurturing environment, many of the EVP’ers look to her for guidance.

Hibrichan is also a source of stability. She helps to keep the group aware of what is going on in other times and places in order to help them feel like they are part of a tradition. In response to Ross and Melissa’s posts about their experiment, she said,

while these aren’t new ideas or experiments by any means they are important to your process of understanding EVP and sorting it all out. . . . I also believe that just because it’s been done before, doesn’t make it less important. . . . It’s interesting to note that in the process of trying to unlock the secrets of EVP we all touch upon the same ideas and experiments at one point or another in our process of illumination [sic]. (June 24)

This testifies to the vernacular nature of this group's pursuit of EVP. They do not obtain prescribed experiments from an authoritative text. Rather they improvise based on what they hear in forums such as these and develop and innovate on traditions. The experiments themselves are a kind of folklore which springs up spontaneously in multiple times and locations.

Doc67 is one of the members who would prefer that the message board discussion stick strictly to the "scientifically credible" aspects of EVP. Every chance he gets he steers the discussion towards the technical and away from the personal.

Hibrichan once made a comment to Doc67 which was rather intriguing. During the exchange mentioned above about keeping the discussion on topic, she posted to Doc, "someone of your stature would help bring credibility to this, but you'll never have the opportunity to do so hiding behind an alias" (June 5). She had just mentioned that he had once told her he didn't want his real name associated with EVP. It possibly would be very interesting to discover who this person is and what his "stature" is. He clearly has quite a lot of anxiety about his reputation and the reputation of those pursuits with which he is associated.

The contributors to the EVP Internet Center use it as a safe haven where they can express their beliefs without fear of ridicule. They have created a support system for themselves using the internet. As they do with EVP, they use technology to extend personal relationships beyond temporal and spatial bounds. They have formed a cyber-community which allows them to explore their marginal beliefs while maintaining a level

of anonymity. In a world which, as they would say, is not ready to accept proof of the afterlife, their beliefs are marginal. In the virtual world of the EVP Internet Center, however, their beliefs are mainstream and accepted wholeheartedly.

CHAPTER VIII

THEMES EXPRESSED THROUGH EVP

It became apparent after reading the EVP Internet Center message board discussions for several months, that the members had particular issues in their lives which they kept revisiting and which EVP and the EVP Internet Center helped them to address. Primarily, they are looking for a way to maintain the relationships with people on whom they have come to depend, even after being separated by death. Gillian Bennett found the same to be true of the group of British women whose supernatural beliefs she studied. She postulates that “belief in the supernatural allows the continuation of relationships of mutual love . . . even when one of the partners is separated by distance or death” (Bennett 1987: 32).

This desire to maintain relationships is right in line with other technological means of spirit communication as well. Daniel Wojcik, in his unpublished article on spirit photos, posits that for those who believed in the authenticity of such spirit photographs as were popular in the early 1900’s, the photos were a means of extending family ties beyond death.

One of the largest corollaries in Bennett’s study to women’s belief in the supernatural was a strong “reliance on, and love for, family” (Bennett 1987: 32). This seems to hold true for EVP’ers as well. One of the members expressed great distress upon his mother’s death. He said his life “has been in such a turmoil since [she] passed

away” and that he is trying to establish contact with her. He hoped that doing so would reinstate some order into his life.

Estep also has a particular deceased family member with whom she has maintained contact. She was very close to her Aunt Jane while she was alive and is delighted to still be able to contact her. The following passage demonstrates Estep’s method of recording, as well as her assigning of meaning to her experience. She had just found the will of her Aunt Jane for which she had been frantically searching. Her aunt, with whom she had been very close, had recently died and there was a question about her will.

Several days later I asked one morning if I had spirit friends with me. A clear Class A¹³ voice answered, “*Auntie Esther.*” The use of the name Esther is interesting. Although my aunt’s name was Esther Jane, all her friends called her Jane. I, however, always referred to her as Auntie Esther. This has continued on the other side. When her associates speak to me about her, they usually say “*Jane.*” When she comes through personally, it may be as Jane or Esther. In any case, on this particular morning, I was told that “*Auntie Esther*” was with me. During this same recording . . . a loud, clear Class A female voice said, “*I want to speak to her. The legacy.*” . . . I asked [my aunt] what she wanted to say about the legacy.

The male voice heard in the first recording said, “*She’s here.*” One counter later my aunt said in a Class A voice, “*Find it!*”

These messages are interesting for several reasons. First, because of the nature of the messages, I feel we have good proof that my aunt was with me. Second, she exhibited an awareness that for a brief time I had thought the will to be lost and had frantically searched for it. At the same time she also showed she didn’t know I had found it.

This can perhaps be explained by the emotional turmoil I went through as I began my search, not knowing whether I would be able to locate the will. My distress must have communicated itself to my aunt in her dimension. Even though I was relieved when it was found, this feeling was not as intense as the first feeling of anxiousness. In fact, I felt somewhat disgusted with myself at having mislaid it in the first place.

The episode is further evidence that our loved ones remain aware of us and of the experiences we are undergoing. It could be that the greater the joy,

or distress, associated with the experience, the more easily this can be transmitted to the world beyond. (Estep 1988: 83-84)

This is a rather lengthy passage, but I believe it is important that Estep be allowed to speak for herself. It demonstrates how she interprets the messages as relevant to her situation and how she devises meaning from what she hears. She classifies the voices so as to make her results seem quantifiable. She also refers to “the nature of the voices and “evidence,” but does so in a very vague way. She is using the discourse of science in order to make her conclusions about the spiritual world valid.

The key to this passage, though, is the last paragraph. She clearly views EVP as a way of maintaining the meaningful relationships after death that she has developed during life. It is comforting to many people to think that our loved ones are watching over us, and of course, this is an aspect of many religions which believe in the post-death survival of the soul.

Estep takes her relationship with her voices even further. She also believes that she can look out for and help those in the spirit world. Many of those who believe in survival after death look to the spirits for help with their lives in the “earth plane.” This desire for assistance is what supports most of the professional mediums and fortune tellers around the world. While Estep does certainly explore this facet of her relationship with the spirits, she also stresses the reciprocity of that relationship.

Many times Estep describes how she has given solace to a spirit who is having trouble “crossing over.” In her own words, she feels “a special responsibility for those [spirits] who take the time to come and try to learn more about spirit-human

communication” (Estep 1988: 57). When she hears calls of “help,” as she often does, she attempts to help them move on. She relates one such experience with a spirit who had identified himself as “Paul White”:

As gently as I could, I told Paul what had happened to him. I told him the light he saw was there to guide him, that he should move toward it and at the same time look for a friend or loved one who had passed on earlier and would help him into the next dimension. (Estep 1988: 19).

She is often rewarded for helping with a “‘thank you’ or ‘I love you’” (Estep 1988: 21).

One spirit Estep feels particularly close to is “Stythe.” She believes he acts as her spirit guide, helping to facilitate the recordings. He lends a tone of seriousness and importance to her work. She writes, “I have learned that Stythe will respond only if he thinks there is good reason to do so. He will instruct me when I am seeking knowledge about life in the spirit world and, more specifically, the spirit world itself. He will not, however, answer questions he feels are only curiosity on my part” (Estep 1988: 30-31). This emphasis on control by the spirit world over the content of the messages she receives asserts that the messages she records are not superfluous or silly, but provide serious insight into the spirit world. The narratives she includes help to support the recorded proof of the tapes. If the accompanying narrative is particularly poignant, it can add to the believability of the experience.

Many of the EVP’ers I studied ask questions of their spirit contacts regarding the fate of the soul after death, the nature of the universe, the nature of God, reincarnation, areas which are traditionally within the realm of institutionalized religion. For example, Sarah Estep asked her spirit contacts, “In your world or space, do you have the concept of

time?’ and they replied, “Our theory is, we came here. It is the same” (EVP Internet Center Main Page). Like most EVP, this is rather cryptic. By interpreting it as a description of the order of the universe, Estep is accessing sacred knowledge.

Messages such as “I’m so cold” and “I am sad” (www.ghostweb.com) are interpreted as spirits describing the afterlife. These melancholy messages are usually recorded around cemeteries which are believed to be places where spirits stay when they are stuck in between levels of being; they have not yet moved on and are too attached to the world to be happy. Voices which sound happy are considered to be at peace with themselves and to have accepted the fact that they are dead.

This belief that the spirit must accept its state of existence before being at rest is a belief which pervades many religions. With the use of technology, however, this knowledge is directly imparted to the believers without the mediation of a sacred text or priest. This is another example of how they express traditional beliefs through the new medium of technology.

Some interpretations of EVP clips have a millennial spin. The spirit of William Brandon purportedly gave the following warning through a telepathic medium in 1935: “You are within a short distance of two extremes: annihilation or illumination. If you will spend the time and money in seeking to reach us that you now spend in developing some military devices, you will soon give us a device for communicating with you” (Mizrach). While this message is not an EVP, it does express the attitudes of believers regarding the potential value of technology for spiritual enlightenment. It is similar to the Marian messages reported by Veronica Lueken of Bayside, NY, and indicates society at a

fork in the road (Wojcik 1997: 69), where one path leads to destruction, and the other to enlightenment or salvation. Interestingly, Brandon's statement was made before the Manhattan Project and the invention of the ultimate military device for annihilation, the atomic bomb.

Sarah Estep also witnessed a voice message given by "Technician," a spirit who speaks to Jules and Maggie Harsch-Fishback of Luxembourg, which expressed millennial themes. When asked if EVP could "contribute to world peace," he replied,

It is the most important instrument to awaken human consciousness out of early dawn's sleep. To do this takes bridges and bridge builders between your world and the world of spirit. You are a bridge builder. (Estep 1988: 68).

This message is much longer and much more coherent than most EVP clips. It answers the need to believe that it is possible for the world to improve and that there is meaning beyond the human level of comprehension. The elevated and metaphorical speech also lends the message a sense of authority and import.

Estep is not the only one who feels a responsibility to help those who seem to be having trouble "passing over." Janet and Colin Bord discuss two Maryland women, Lori Mellott and Lynda Andrus, who use EVP to "'aid spirits stuck between here and the hereafter'" (Bord 1989: 193).

EVP provides an outlet for women to exercise their traditional role of caregiver. For the most part, this distinction is made along gender lines. The female EVP'ers are more interested in establishing reciprocal relationships with the spirits, whereas the male EVP'ers are generally content to record the voices in order to prove their existence. I do

not think it is a coincidence that all three of the above examples of spirit helpers are women.

Another example of this split down gender lines can be seen in the incident when the members of the EVP Internet Center attempted a “psi experiment.” One of the female contributors, Lu, arranged for an acquaintance of hers to “send out” an image at several designated times over the course of a week. Other members of the group would “tune in” at those times and write down any images they picked up. At the end of the week, they all exchanged their results and Lu revealed the image that the sender had been concentrating on.

As I noted earlier, the major resistance to this experiment came from Doc67. He was concerned that associating a “provable” phenomenon like EVP with something as disreputable as telepathy would discredit EVP research. The women, on the other hand, viewed the provability of EVP as a reason to believe in other aspects of the supernatural which may not be provable through technology. They were willing to apply conclusions they drew from their use of technology to other related areas, but which could not supply the same kind of “empirical” proof.

Technician’s message also demonstrates the ability of the interpretation of EVP to empower the witnesses. They achieve agency, whether by building bridges which will help save the world, or by helping spirits cross over to the next stage of being. Their ability to directly access the supernatural realm enables them to feel like they have an effect on the world. The millennial messages are not necessarily apocalyptic, however.

They express a gradual and progressive reshaping of the world, rather than a catastrophic one.

EVP plays a very big part in the lives of many of the contributors to the EVP Internet Center. Hibrichan is no exception. I will leave you with the following passage. It is a testimonial explaining her relationship to EVP and the Internet Center which articulates many of the themes I have been discussing in relation to EVP believers:

I do love this site, you could say it's my shrine to my personal experience and belief system. EVP is something very dear to me, through it I was able to make a lot of things that were once scattered within my mind make total sense. I've had clairvoyant [sic] and non-EVP communicative experiences all my life and never understood them (or liked them) very much until I investigated EVP. Learning about it, talking to those on the other end and utilizing it has enhanced my abilities way beyond my expectations and enabled me to understand my "gift" (haha) and utilize it to a higher and more productive level. (May 13)

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSION

Searching for Electronic Voice Phenomena is an integral part of the spiritual lives of the EVP Internet Center message board contributors. It is an expression of their vernacular beliefs which exist apart from and alongside any formal institutions. By looking at their internet discussions regarding this pursuit, I have shown that they do constitute a folk group with shared beliefs, that they have their own traditions, and that they have used technology to innovate upon old traditions.

Technology allows EVP'ers egalitarian access to the sacred. Not only is access to the sacred and knowledge received about the afterlife unmediated, but because both are acquired through technology and because the believers use popular scientific discourse to explain them, they acquire some of the cultural authority which the Great Tradition bears.

Gender does not determine belief, but there does seem to be a correlation between the dependence on technology for belief and the gender of the believer. The male EVP'ers I studied tend to use technology to prove that the soul survives after death. They are not generally interested in developing personal relationships with the entities they contact and strongly resist extending the conclusions they reach based on the technology to areas not directly associated with the technology used. Women EVP'ers in this study are more likely to invest time, energy, and emotion into reciprocal relationships with the entities as well as apply the conclusions they draw from their experiments to other non-technological areas of the supernatural.

I think it is important to emphasize that simply because these people hold beliefs that the mainstream culture tends to ridicule and stigmatize, they are not unrepresentative of that mainstream on some level. After all, according to a 1990 Gallup poll, as much as 25% of Americans believe that “ghosts or . . . spirits of dead people can come back” and the higher their level of education, the greater the percentage of people who believe (Hufford 1995: 17). Therefore, we cannot say that they are a completely idiosyncratic, small, isolated group. They have simply syncretized their belief in ghosts with scientific discourse, faith in which is another cultural norm.

The group I studied is aware of other traditions and beliefs which are similar to their own. They are not ignorant of the fact that they are not the first people to attempt contact with the dead. Naturally, in the spirit of continual progress, they do think that their research supersedes any previous attempts to contact the dead, but they do not reject the beliefs or believers of the other methods. In fact, they are quite inclusive of other systems of belief.

They are also sophisticated enough to recognize that a person’s cultural and individual biases will affect how he/she interprets experience. When two people come up with two different interpretations for an EVP clip, they are not thrown into a crisis of belief. They usually acknowledge the validity of both interpretations. They explain the discrepancy through cultural and individual terms—people who are looking for different meanings will find different meanings—and usually defer to the person who captured the clip as the expert, as it was presumably sent for him/her to discover and interpret. This explanation based on subjective experiences instead of empirical data would be

unacceptable to the scientific method. However, it does further support my point that EVP belief is a Little Tradition. EVP'ers appropriate the language of scientific discourse, but the fulfillment of personal spiritual and psychological needs is their main goal.

Looking for affirmation of supernatural forces seems to be an unquenchable and universal human desire. The expression of this desire varies depending on the cultural, social, and individual contexts of the person expressing it. EVP'ers look for this affirmation using technology and scientific discourse because these methods are privileged by the culture in which they live. We only need to look to Hibrichan to see this. She was not at all comfortable with her other numinous experiences until she could understand them in terms of technology. By believing in EVP, she is able to couch beliefs which may not be culturally acceptable in scientific terms which appear more valid and thus feel more at ease within that culture.

The beliefs and manners of expression of the EVP'ers are one possible answer to a problem which faces all of us today. As our world becomes increasingly overpopulated, it becomes harder to escape anonymity, and easier to disappear into the crowd. Anyone who has sat through an Introduction to the English Major lecture can attest to that. By using technology, the EVP'ers assert their individuality and uniqueness. They are singled out by the entire spirit world as worthy of contact.

At the same time, they use the anonymity the internet enables to explore their marginal areas of belief. They are perhaps more willing to engage in discussions about "far out" topics with people they will in all likelihood never meet than they would with

someone like a co-worker whose opinion of their beliefs directly affects other aspects of their lives.

Although the internet provides anonymity to these marginal believers, it also offers the opportunity to create a community so they do not have to explore these beliefs alone. They are able to feel like part of a community while holding and expressing beliefs which, in most face-to-face encounters, would isolate them. Without the technology of the internet, the group, as such, would not be possible.

Of course, more research needs to be done to further understand the implications of using technology and scientific discourse to express and define spirituality. My study has not exhausted this topic, by any means. The increasing popularity of marginal areas of spirituality indicate that the field is ripe for further exploration. In what other forms does belief in spirit beings manifest itself? Aliens, angels, and spirit photos are just a few. Whatever other forms they might take, though, it seems that the loving dead and the attempt to establish and maintain relationships with them will always have a prominent place in vernacular religion.

CHAPTER X

NOTES

¹ Eschatology is the study of the “last things,” i. e., the fate of the soul, after death (Wojcik 1997: 14-15).

² See the Oct. 1920 *Scientific American*.

³ Several websites give detailed instructions on how to capture your own EVP. See the EVP Internet Center for directions on how to record on traditional magnetic tape, as well as on a computer. Also included is advice on how to increase the clarity of EVP recordings.

⁴ See the EVP Internet Center to listen to examples of two-way dialog between Sarah Estep and the spirit world.

⁵ In the first case, the voice identified himself as “Bob,” a friend of Rogo’s, and in the second case, the caller recognized the voice as belonging to Rogo’s roommate.

⁶ The EVP Internet Center has been operating for about three years (Hibrichan, May 27).

⁷ See Appendix B for a short story written by a member which draws upon these types of legends for its plot.

⁸ Hibrichan is the “handle” of Stacey, the woman who maintains the website. One of the characteristics of correspondence over the Internet is anonymity. When you logon, and post messages to the message board you can literally create a new name for yourself. Therefore, one’s virtual life can be kept separate from one’s physical life.

⁹ I was surprised that the AA-EVP page did not have a more extensive website. A website would be an excellent forum for discussion, as has been proven by the EVP Internet Center. Perhaps it serves as a kind of proxy AA-EVP site.

¹⁰ Before this point, I was not aware that messages could be deleted. I did read the string sparked by the flamer, but I did not copy it at the time because I assumed it would be there later for me to come back to. Unfortunately, the next time I returned to the message board, Hibrichan had deleted the entire string and I therefore cannot reproduce it.

¹¹ “Flaming” is when someone enters an on-line discussion and makes comments which are intentionally incendiary, striking at the heart of the values of the group in order to

provoke a reaction. Flamers are usually not invested in the topics they discuss; they simply enjoy promoting chaos.

¹² One thing which makes fieldwork research on the internet problematic is there is really no way to verify the information people give you about themselves. You may think you are talking to 30 year old film producer from Hollywood, when in fact you're talking to a 50 year old accountant from St. Louis. The impression I got from the people who post regularly to the message board, however, is that they are honest believers who use the site to discuss EVP and how it affects their lives.

¹³ Estep divides the voices she gets into three classes. Class A voices are loud and clear enough to be recorded onto other tapes and can be heard without headphones. Class B voices can often be heard without headphones. Most of her voice clips are Class C which are faint and whispery and require headphones in order to be heard (Estep 1988: 5).

APPENDIX A

NARRATIVES OF EVP ATTEMPTS

The following are narratives posted to the message board which relate the writers' first experiences with what they believe to be EVP. Some of the narratives recount the first attempts, some recount the first successful attempts.

These narratives also demonstrate the contributors' interest in contacting deceased scientists, such as Thomas Edison, who had explored this kind of field while they were living. They express an awe for the pillars of the Great Tradition of science which seems to go beyond respect for their prowess in that field, and almost crosses into worship, or at least hero-worship. Edison has become a figure, particularly for Ross, who is associated with salvation.

The members seem to view these experiences as proof that spirits from the other side wish to help those of us on this side improve the technology and develop a reliable means of communication. They also express the hope that EVP gives them for the future. They see communication with the spirit world via technology as a feasible means of uniting humanity and fostering peace in the world.

Some of the narratives express an anxiety about conspiracies. Authorities of the Great Tradition tell them to get rid of their tapes, government agencies don't return their phone calls, etc.

The last posting I have included here is nurturing advice given by Hibrichan to a young man who was starting to get discouraged after not receiving any detectable EVP. She relates the difficulty of her own initial experiments and advises him on how to continue. She emphasizes the tenuous connection between this world and the afterworld and encourages him to continue, even if he does not obtain any results.

The narratives posted by women tend to emphasize the relationships with the spirits and the content of the messages, while the narratives posted by men tend to focus more on the technical aspects of the recordings. This becomes apparent when we compare Ross' technically detailed narrative of his first time with Jilly's story which emphasizes the personal details of the spirits with whom she has had contact.

I have preserved all spelling and grammar as it was originally posted.

Ross Halevy
 My first EVP session
 Sun Jun 20 11:55:41 1999

Last night I performed my first EVP attempt, at home, alone.

I suspended a high quality omni mic from the ceiling of my studio, which is not part of my house (like the ouija board I take the precaution of conducting spirit contact in a place other than where I dwell). The recording apparatus was a Tascam 4-track recorder, using only one mono track. The recorder is advantageous in that it has level controls, so that when I ask a question, I can decrease the sensitivity to low and then boot it up with a switch as soon as I pause. Upon playback I can turn the volume up all the way to search the white noise and not worry about my questions literally piercing the silence. I didn't actually control the gain in this fashion on my first attempt and got quite a scary jolt when my voice came booming through the headphones!

White noise was generated by a blank tape playing in a cassette player at full volume. A clean, even 'shshshshsh' was produced in this fashion. I conducted a ten minute session asking questions similar to those posted on this site.

Upon playback, I got 'something'. My tape was freshly unwrapped, so there was no bleeding. When I would ask a question, I would receive for the duration of my pause a background din of many voices, like the sound of a busy cafeteria where many conversations melt into one. The gain was jacked up so high that I could hear the groin of the tape motor, which was a good ten feet away (next time I will soundproof it).

Then again, perhaps my 'voices' were just the fluctuations of the white noise. My mother used to say that her washing machine 'said things', because each centrifugal anomaly caused by uneven loading caused it to spin differently each time. This is probably what I was hearing in the noise.

Don't get me wrong, I am NOT a skeptic. This was my first EVP and I made valuable mistakes from which I will learn. (1 percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration is what Edison said).

One thing is for sure, a good, scientifically valid EVP will require finely tuned equipment and competent operation.

Despite my 'failure' I must say I'm hooked, there IS more out there and we can contact it, safely and rationally using science. I'm looking into some filtering software for resolving recordings and I need to locate a 'haunted' site for better environment. I hope to get good at this, fortunate is he whose pursuits also enlighten!

Hibrichan
 Most interesting! Thanks Ross.... More more more
 Sun Jun 20 18:48:39 1999

Hi Ross,

I'm thoroughly enjoying the EVP journey accounts you've posted on this board. Sounds like you have a solid grasp of the concept and obstacles, it's only going to be a matter of time before you get your first contact. I agree with you on Edison, you express it so much better than I could though. I'm afraid I'm electronically illiterate, but my intentions and experience are on my side I think. I have no clue as to how to alter a B & W tv for evp use, but I have used a tv as a means to make contact many times. My color tv was almost destroyed in the process of doing so. Long story....

I have also tried unsuccessfully for years to get Edison to talk to me. He probably refuses to knowing I'm so electronically dumb, I wouldn't understand if he did converse with me. In your next several attempts why not ask for him yourself? Tell them you want to speak with Edison, see what they say or if he comes along. May take awhile but it can't happen if you don't ask. I have had others come to my request, so I know requests are taken.

From my experience they are anxious to converse with us and make this work better than it is now.

Please continue to post your feelings and activities for me to read here, I'm enjoying it....

Thanks..... Hib

Ross Halevy
Edisons voice
Sun Jun 20 21:52:17 1999

Edison has been away for about seventy years now. I would'nt be suprised if he has reincarnated. If he is in human form again, the 21st century better watch out! This may explain why you have been unable to contact him.

I live about 50 miles from MetaScience, and sometime soon I am going to give them a call, maybe if I am lucky I can go there and see thier wares. From the various literature I have read here, they are on the forefront of actual real time transcommunication.

Speaking of transcommunication...

Before I came to EVP I had long held the belief that the human race is on the border of a conscious awakening, via the medium of radio communication with the dead. The secret of course was the established frequencies, and the Edison story began to shine the light of hope in this direction. I feel that the skepticism today towards EVP is like the persecution of the Astronomers who used thier telescopes to literally look through time at creation itself. When TransCom is perfected, and it will be, there will be a new age of human

development where the fear and anger about dying disappears, and relationships can be continued, long distance, throughout a persons life. I honestly believe that if we can keep from vaporising ourselves it will get better, and easier to be human. In the meantime, let the research continue!

Robin Springer

I have 3 versions of one EVP ready

Tue Apr 13 01:26:40 1999

Hello to all...

About 5 years ago, I had tried experiments by recording "silence", trying to capture unknown voices. This was my very first try; I'm not sure how others do it, but it involved a small metal plug going into the mic of a tape recorder & simply recording.. To my amazement I listened to what sounded to be nothing on this tape after recording... then heard slight underlying murmurs of something. I had help finding where it actually began & ended; and after regular filtering this is what I came up with something on my first try. I have listened to this hundreds of times & still brings chills.... this was sent to Shaman Society in Berkeley California & there is "no electronic explanation", "unexplainable" and they encouraged me to get rid of the original tape (which I did... not sure if I should have; I know better now; I got unnerved & got rid of it.). It is a woman's voice (an older Southern woman)... it does sound vaguely familiar to me and she is saying a very clear phrase I believe which may be directed toward me. If anyone is interested, please let me know. They are as follows:

pastest: (before any filtering at all)

pastclean: (after hiss filtering)

pastmusic: (this happened after it had been filtered one more time, it's quite pretty, really. Not sure how or why this occurred, the voice is barely present here.)

I am presently working on the second tape I did (after calming down) but it's proving to be more difficult to filter. The voice is younger, more subdued & speaking in Spanish which is NOT EASY for me :-). So far I hear she's quite chatty; and the only words I can make out are "Para con tu (or su)... more talk hard to hear yet... then "Mercado". If ya'll would like that one when it finally gets finished, I'll be here.

I'm looking forward to hearing from you if interested! Best wishes & sweet spirits....
Robin

jilly
 new evp voice to listen to..
 Mon Mar 15 01:30:19 1999

Hi Karen & Jill,

I was recording directly to .wav on my computer, just doing stuff for my radio show, and I noticed upon playback, an EVP segment. I didn't try to decode it at that time, I just marked, copied, and pasted to a separate file (evp0.wav) and continued doing the show. Then later tonight, I started filtering it (all the other EVP*.wav files) and came up with the word "prison". I got a call from the wife of one of my friends since High School on Sunday. My friend, Leeroy, has been in prison for a number of years on a vehicular homicide charge (12 years). He is a devout catholic, and believes in ghosts and he and I had talked about this stuff years ago (mid 80's). Anyway his wife called me to tell me he was killed in prison! It is the last EVP file on the site where I hear the word prison. It was created by noise filtering the whole audio file, clipping the EVP out of the silent portion, and amplifying. I can't make out what the ones above are saying, so I need you guys to help me out. Here it is!

<http://members.xoom.com/basic52/evp/>

Please spread this around to all your lists and message boards. It seems that when ever someone I know really well dies, they come and leave me an EVP message shortly thereafter. I'm going to attempt a 2-way communication tomorrow night, only because I'm too tired right now.

--

----- ((|)) Amendment I Congress shall make
 =====> /_ no law abridging the freedom
 Pirate Shortwave Broadcasting-/ ^_/ of speech, or of the press.

Hibrichan
 Well....
 Sun Apr 11 02:03:19 1999

Hi King,

I'm sorry to hear you haven't gotten any results in your experiments. How long have you been trying? Have you tried being consistant and working on a diligent schedule every

day at the same time of day? Or if you can only work a few times a week sticking to certain days and time of day?

Often new folks overlook voices, it's possible you're getting them but not yet able to hear them. It's funny how a tweak of the ear can bring in a voice that was previously undistinguishable maybe a few minutes before. Another problem is having the white noise turned up too loud, that can drown out voices and is a common mistake among first timers. Don't change your white noise source too often either, that can cause a lack of voices coming through. I would suggest using the same source for say a week at a time, if after no results are obtained you can switch to another and try that for a week. Do this for time of day in which you tape as well. Sometimes a particular time of day will work better than others, I couldn't tell you why this is though.

I worked every day, sometimes multiple times per day for several months without hearing a peep, I was about to give up when I got my first voice. I don't think I was ever so dedicated to a cause in all my life nor was I ever so surprised as I was when those first words were spoken. I wanted to tape 24/7 after that! Part of my problem I believe is that I was actually afraid in a way of getting a voice, funny as it seems to me now, and that in itself set a tone of mood around me that may have blocked my ability to either obtain or hear them. By the time I did get my first voice, I was so laxidaisical in my sessions, after the passing of so much time I was no longer even expecting a voice and there it was!

I find that the more consistantly I work the more voices I get, the less frequently I work the fewer I get and the longer it takes to obtain them once I get back on to a schedule, they don't just boom right out the minute I start taping. I know very few accomplished "EVPers" who get voices every time they tape, I sure don't, or if I do they are so hard to hear they aren't worth slaving over, I just move on until I get one loud and clear enough to understand. Try also asking them nicely before you begin to please come and speak, sometimes a simple request is what is needed, talk to them as you would anyone here that you wanted to ask a favor of. Be sincere in your intent, having no motives other than the desire to communicate and share with them, In my experience any self serving motives behind ones desire to do this hamper the success, why this is I don't know. Do you know anyone on that side? If so you might try asking for them by name, however please don't pester, if you ask once per session for a particular person that is sufficient. You need not badger them to speak, lest you upset their routine where they are which would be rude. I see it as similar to us calling continuously someone here on the phone and persisting to ask them to please visit, how irritating that would be, borderline harrassment actually and we can do the same with EVP by constantly calling on one entity.

I strongly encourage you to continue if it's at all important to you to be successful at this. It can take a all long time but the end results are certainly worth the wait! If it were me, I'd give it a year of consistant attempts before I gave up.

Smiles to you....Hib

APPENDIX B

“TRANSCONFERENCE”: AN EVP SHORT FICTION

The following is a short story written by Ross Halevy, one of the newer members of the EVP Internet Center. This story expresses in fictional narrative form many of the themes which are also expressed in the quest for EVP. It includes maintaining personal relationships beyond death, reliance on the jargon of scientific discourse to validate spiritual belief, use of technology to enable direct communication with the dead, and assistance of a dead scientist to perfect that technology among others.

He has posted it in installments. I have included others' responses to his story as they posted them. I have also preserved all spelling and grammar as it was originally posted. Unfortunately, he has left the story unfinished.

Ross Halevy
The first installment of my ITC fiction.
Sat Jul 3 16:51:03 1999

TransConference, By R. Halevy c.1999

The flight down to the TransConference Office took hardly fifteen minutes. Renee disengaged the autoflight computer and took the controls of her car. There was a lot of traffic over Manhattan on the Eastbound airway, and she was relieved to exit the congestion.

The office itself was on 5th Avenue, hardly the side of town for a respectable, ground breaking industry. There were much nicer areas of the city to operate such an office, but they all had strict EPA requirements and the nuclear material used in the dimensional accelerators would be too costly to license and operate there.

Renee descended to just above street level, and landed her car on an elevated deck next to the TransConferencing office. She was quite nervous. She had only spoken to her father once since his death, and that was in a hurried two minute Transphone conversation. Today would be the first time she had actually seen him, and the propose for the call-his ex-business partners proposal of marriage-would not make him happy.

The hydraulic landing gear of her car made contact with the polycrete deck. Renee removed her flight codes and exited the vehicle. There was a small glass kiosk on the deck, and inside was a smiling representative, tightly clutching his noteboard. He was eager to see her. He was also eager to begin.

"Ms. Barrow, yes?" He asked as she entered the glass capsule. "I am Henri, Dr. Varley's assistant."

"I hope I'm not too early." Renee asked.

"Oh no, we can begin immediately." He replied.

The capsule began to slowly descend and Renee watched as her new Mercedes Kestrel disappeared from sight. It suddenly grew quite dim, and Renee became aware of a faint humming noise, slowly growing louder. Renee's eyes darted around, looking for the source.

"The magnetic capacitor coils." Henri offered.

"What?" She asked, surprised at this answer to an unasked question.

"That sound. It takes forty minutes to energize them. They are used to establish the initial contact." He explained.

"You mean the 'Dimensional Rip'?" she asked.

"Yes." He began. "We don't like that term, it sounds impulsive. We prefer TransDimensional Energy Link."

"Oh." She replied. They continued to descend.

"We have to keep things well underground to meet code. We will arrive there shortly." Henri said. "Tell me, what do you understand about this technology?"

"I have read articles in ITC Journal. I also have a degree in Particle physics." She said, nervously.

"Good." He said. "Then I don't have to candy coat anything."

"Please don't." She replied.

The capsule came to rest twelve floors beneath street level. The tinted glass doors opened to reveal a vast circular laboratory, with a smaller chamber isolated in the middle. In the center of that chamber was the ITC Accelerator. It was bright orange and had radiation decals on it. Two red hazard light slowly revolved.

"There it is." Henri said with a proud sigh.

They stepped out of the capsule and caught the attention of Dr. Varley. He hurriedly approached from the direction of some other lab assistants.

"Ms. Barrow, welcome!" He said excitedly, shaking her hand.

"We have almost completed our preparations. This way, please."

The Doctor led her to a large, oversized chair. She sat down in it, and immediately Dr. Varley and Henri began attaching sensors to her ankles, wrists, and temples.

"Biofeedback?" She asked.

"Yes, very good." The Doctor said. "This greatly helps to maintain psychic stability." He said. "How do you feel right now, Ms. Barrow?"

"Very nervous, almost sick." She admitted.

"That's fine, but it won't do. Do you have any allergies to Hypnotrol?" He asked.

"No."

"Very good then. Henri, half ounce of Blue Dream, please."

Henri quickly produced a small plastic cup of blue liquid. He handed it to doctor Varley, and the lights automatically dimmed.

"Now listen to me carefully, Renee." He began. "I am now going to give this to you to drink. You will become very relaxed, and open to suggestion. The lights will grow dark

and through the glass panel behind me, above the accelerator, you will see an image of your father projected upon a screen. Concentrate on this image. When your biofeedback sensors indicate a stable hypnogogic state we will activate the reactor. You will then call out to your father as you did in life. There is no danger of radiation, you are protected by six air spaced panes of Nucleoglass. Do not let any physical or emotional worries break your relaxed concentration. When the reactor reaches the proper temperature the accelerator will be released and we will open the gate to the astral world.

"This gate will appear transparent directly before the image of your father. You may see many unknown entities through this gate. Pay them no attention: keep your mind trasfixed on the image of your father.Do you understand?"

"Yes, just keep calling for my Dad no matter what right?"

"Yes. Excellent.Here." She sipped the Hypnotrol, and as the light grew dimmer, she stared at the image of her father. A few minutes passed when she heard a faint voice whisper:

"She's gone hypno..."

"Alright, Renee, we are going to activate the reactor. Begin calling to your father." The machine began to emit a bright white glow from its ventilation holes.

"Daddy, it's Reenie. Can you hear me?"

"Okay Henri" Dr. Varley commanded "Activate the accelerator..."

Anybody like this? I will continue the story if you let me know.

Melissa

I like it!!

Sun Jul 4 00:00:45 1999

Hi Ross!

Yes...I like it...really well written!! ;-)

I would like to see more..please keep writing...its intriguing..~!

BTW- I got the 9 unit today!! Still testing it out- I have very high hopes for this new diode as well!

Melissa

Ross Halevy

TransConference part II

Sun Jul 4 01:48:37 1999

Henri keyed in the command for the discharge of the capacitor. It took .002 milliseconds for the energy burst to enter the heated reactor and, as they say, rip a dimensional hole. Renee quite hypnotically continued to call out to her father, Emile Barrow, and as she did so, a column of iridescent blue vapor shot out of the top of the reactor.

"Everything is fine" Dr. Varley assured Renee. Henri activated the overhead parabolic, which slowly descended from the ceiling over the reactor, containing the energy stream and focussing it into a portal. Renee was quite transfixed by all this, the Hypnotrol worked quickly.

"Daddy, It's Reenie. Can you see me?" She continued.

As the parabolic neared the reactor, the glowing plasma began to compress, and soon formed a swirling energy sphere. The nuclear materials maintained their stability as the lens focused the energy into the center of the atomic maelstrom. Then it happened. Within the center of the sphere a small, black disc emerged, and rapidly grew to overtake the sphere. Now before the projected image of Emile Barrow was the ominous 'black hole', the precursor of the rip.

"You're doing fine Renee." Dr. Varley assured.

"Daddy, can you hear me?" she continued. The swirling black nothing seemed disheartening, but it was all physics. Renee knew that. They were seconds away from visual astral contact.

The white light broke through like a magnesium flash. It ejected from the sphere, and appeared almost as a silent explosion. Then it stabilized and formed a bright ring, the portal. Within this grand sight was seen a plane, a flat level sea of energy, purple and blue. It was kinetic and vibrant, and there were souls, only a few at first but they began to gather, drawn by the hole.

"Renee, we have the portal. Just keep it up, you're doing fine." Dr. Varley said. He switched on the speakers inside the reactor chamber, and amplified Renee's voice. Her booming voice was heard through the portal, and the spirits began to give way. These were not negative entities, and they knew this window was not for them. As the spirits dissipated, one did not.

It grew closer to the portal from a distance of perhaps 200 feet. As it neared, Renee's heart rate and breathing became rapid, and Henri warned Dr. Varley of a possible biofeedback redline. If she got too excited, the psychic link would be broken and the portal would collapse.

"Steady, now Renee." Dr. Varley cautioned.

"It's him...I can see his shape. Daddy, please come to me."

The figure arrived at the edge of the portal and his form began to solidify. The face was unmistakable, it was Emile Barrow, inventor of the universal data interface and father to Renee Barrow.

Even after five years, Dr. Varley was flabbergasted when this actually worked. He tried to maintain his duties.

"H-Henri." he began "Activate the two way."

The command was followed and the intercom link between the two chambers was established.

"Hi Reenie." Emile said. He was beautiful, and glowing.

"Oh Daddy!" Renee said through a stream of tears. This was no longer scientific. "I miss you so much."

"I know. We will be together in time. Why did you open the gate to speak with me?" His words echoed, as if spoken long ago.

"I'm getting married, and I need your blessing." She said

"Who is the lucky person?" He asked with a kind smile.

"It...it is Ted Ghari." She bashfully said.

Suddenly Emile's aura began to crackle violently, and he quickly receded into the infinity of the portal. With his rapid departure, the unstable gate began to collapse. It quickly reverted to the dark orb and Henri and the other technicians quickly scrambled to raise the parabolic lens and allow the antimatter to safely dissipate. The reaction was a surprise to all, except Renee. She quietly wept with her hands over her face.

The quick actions of the staff saved the integrity of the reactor core and the countless minimicroprocessors that were easily cooked by the sudden actions of restless spirits. Renee was taken by a nurse to a rejuvenation room, where the consequences of the incident could be explored. Dr. Varley and Henri talked amongst themselves, still catching their breath.

"That was almost as bad as the Edison incident." Henri said.

"Yes," Dr. Varley said with a sigh. "I'm always so eager to believe that the dead don't have problems."

"They don't, not until we go reminding them of this world."

Henri replied. "Perhaps we can design a ground wire to siphon off unexpected spiritual discharges."

Dr. Varley's eyes widened. "That's good thinking, Henri. I just wish we had one in place when that insufferable Edison got so hot under the collar."

"I'll go check on Ms. Barrow." Henri said, walking off.

Dr. Varley stood there for a few minutes thinking about the ground wire to siphon off the discharges from rowdy spirits.

Then he got an even better idea.....

Melissa

Keep writing...

Sun Jul 4 11:12:50 1999

Ross-

This is very cool and I am enjoying it...I would like to see more...keep writing!

Melissa

PS The 9 unit germanium works great!!!! It brings in an even louder voice- I still have to fiddle with it on GOLDWAVE to lessen the echo- but that may be par for the course...

Ross Halevy
TransConference part III
Sun Jul 4 12:52:25 1999

Renee Barrow was sent home as soon as the Hypnotrol fully wore off. Dr. Varley and Henri stood on the landing deck and watched as her Mercedes slowly ascended into the airway above. Soon she was a small, oblong speck, moving in a stream of other specks, at rapid speed.

"Do you think she will be back?" Henri asked.

"Yes, in fact. She has much to resolve, I expect." Dr. Varley replied.

"You liked my ideas then about the ground wire?" Henri inquired.

"Much so, although it seems like a tremendous amount of energy just to send into the ground." He replied.

"Well then," Henri began. "What did you have in mind?"

The capacitor room, where the great magnets and coils existed, was a massive series of shafts and corridors, hardly a proper room at all. One had to wear a special copper wound EMF suit, similar to a radiation suit, just to enter. Henri and Dr. Varley waddled around in these cumbersome outfits as they inspected the massive components.

"Our recycling time is forty minutes." Dr. Varley began "During which time we consume millions of watts of energy and have only one instant to use it.

"I propose, based on your idea, Henri, that a ground wire be installed in the vicinity of the reactor as you suggested, but that excess energy be siphoned here, to these capacitors. Not only will we augment the expensive electricity being sold to us, if the discharge is great enough we can instantly preserve the gate, and keep it from deteriorating.

"You mean" Henri began "That you want to turn a disadvantage to our favor, and use those angry spirit surges to be reinfused into the gate?"

"Yes." Said Dr. Varley. "No more forty minute lag."

"We need hard data on those surges before we try channeling them. we have to find out if its pure DC, what the peak is, whether its constant or variable-it could all take time.

"We can't do that until we have another incident." Henri said.

"Nonsense, we have had four such occurrences now and the computer has monitored the environmental effects of all of them. I am content that a simulation is all we need to predict the variables you have suggested." Dr. Varley noted.

"But Doctor," Henri nervously began. "The computer monitors routine energy fluctuations. It is not programmed to look for more subtle variations. This could be very dangerous."

"Henri, you are a fine and talented technician, and you will make a damn good scientist," He began, "But you have to know when to let your fears go and your logic dictate your actions. We are dealing with an immaterial dimension. There are no dangers here."

Ross Halevy

Part IV

Sun Jul 4 18:39:32 1999

When Melvin Varley says that there is no danger in something he feels as if he should know what he is talking about. After all, it was he that pioneered Transcommunication into the science it was today. He was ridiculed when he was in college, sampling for his professors his digitally filtered EVP clips. Things didn't get any better after he got his degree in nuclear physics, and then declared Transcommunication the 'undiscovered country' to which he would devote his life.

Everyone he worked with distanced themselves from Dr. Varley. While his peers were making extraordinary advances in nuclear energy, Dr. Varley continued to fritter away public and private grants doing little more than melting down expensive atomic cores. Then in 2023 it happened, and the science of Transconferencing was established.

Dr. Varley was about to extinguish his last grant, and knew that after nearly two decades of research he had failed to produce anything of scientific value. At the time he was trying to maximise thermonuclear output without endangering the core. He was again dangerously close to another meltdown when he learned that a burst from a magnetic capacitor would put him 'over the top'.

This breakthrough didn't come from just anywhere, in fact it came from a reputable source. EVP had proved useful throughout his research but never as greatly as the night Thomas Edison came to call. It was Edison who dictated the possibility of the magnetic capacitor, but it was Dr. Varley who built it and took all the credit.

That set the stage for the unpleasant meeting with Edison that came later. Dr. Varley had contacted a number of prominent scientists by name, but never asked for Edison. Regardless, The Old Gent found his way through the portal during a conversation with Tesla, another one of Edison's nemesis.

The prototype reactor was almost completely burned out by the incident, and Dr. Varley began to contemplate methods for 'screening calls', and keeping out unwanted entities. Nothing much came of the research, so the 'Edison factor' became an acceptable risk. Besides, Edison seemed to release all of his anger when he called Dr. Varley a 'two-bit fraud'.

Despite his documented success with the technology there were no more public funds to receive, so Dr. Varley had to establish his practice and perform his service for the paying public. The session with Renee Barrow had cost her thirty thousand units, enough to float the operation for about another week.

That was why the siphon to the capacitors was so crucial. It was possible to cut operating costs and increase the integrity of the portal, all by tapping the free astral energy encountered in every contact. Henri had no concept of the importance of the discovery, even though it was technically his. Dr. Varley would use the computer data to create the proper circuit, then he just might call on Edison to test the system...

Melissa
I'm hooked...
Mon Jul 5 13:29:09 1999

Ross-

***OK I'm hooked...gotta see the next installment..! ;-)

I used to love writing fiction...but I never wrote anything this good I'm afraid...

BTW- the germanium is still working very well- did you receive the \$ for the 20 unit in the mail yet...?

Melissa

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, Barbara. "The 'Image of Glass': Technology, Tradition, and the Emergence of Folklore." *Western Folklore* 41(1):85-103, 1982
- Bander, Peter. *Carry On Talking: How Dead Are the Voices?* Gerrards Cross, England: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1972.
- , *Voices From the Tapes: Recording from the Other World*. New York: Drake Publishers, 1973.
- Bennett, Gillian. "Patterns of Belief." In *Traditions of Belief*, pp. 23-35. London: Penguin, 1987.
- Bord, Janet and Colin. *Unexplained Mysteries of the 20th Century*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, Inc., 1989.
- Cavendish, Richard, ed. *Encyclopedia of the Unexplained: Magic, Occultism and Parapsychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974.
- Ellis, Bill. "Speak to the Devil: Ouija Board Rituals Among American Adolescents." *Contemporary Legend* 4:61-90, 1994.
- Ellis, D. J. "Listening to the 'Raudive Voices.'" *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research, London* 48(763):31-42, 1975.
- Ellis, D. J. *The Mediumship of the Tape Recorder*. Pulborough England: Self-published, 1978.
- Ellwood. "Contemporary Religion as Folk Religion." In *The History and Future of Faith: Religion Past, Present, and to Come*, pp. 118-130, 175-6. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1988.
- Estep, Sarah. *Voices of Eternity*. New York: Fawcett Gold Medal, 1988.
- Fuller, John G. *The Ghost of 29 Megacycles*. New York: Signet/New American Library, 1981.
- Guiley, Rosemary Ellen. *The Encyclopedia of Ghosts and Spirits*. New York: Facts on File, 1992.
- Hufford, David J. "Beings Without Bodies: An Experience-Centered Theory of the Belief in Spirits." *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*. Ed. Barbara Walker. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1995.
- Keel, John. *The Mothman Prophecies*. New York: Saturday Review Press, 1975.
- Noble, David F. *The Religion of Technology*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1997.
- Oring, Elliott, ed. *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1986.

- Ostrander, Sheila, and Lynn Schroeder. *Handbook of Psi Discoveries*. New York: Berkley, 1974.
- Randles, Jenny. *The Paranormal Source Book: The Comprehensive Guide to Strange Phenomena Worldwide*. London: Piatkus Publishers, Ltd., 1996.
- Raudive, Konstantin. *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead*. New York: Taplinger, 1971.
- Rogo, D. Scott. "Science, Psi, and the Miraculous." In *Miracles: A Parascientific Inquiry into Wondrous Phenomena*. pp. 1-9. New York: The Dial Press, 1982.
- Rogo, D. Scott. *Phone Calls from the Dead*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1979.
- Ronell, Avital. *The Telephone Book: Technology-Schizophrenia-Electric Speech*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.
- Smith, Susy. "Voice Phenomena." In *Life is Forever: Evidence for Survival After Death*. pp. 235-248. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974.
- Webster, Kenneth. *The Vertical Plane*. London: Rare Publishers Ltd, 1989.
- Wojcik, Daniel. "Spirit Photos and Supernatural Proofs: Folk Beliefs about Photographs of Otherworldly Phenomena." Unpublished paper, 1999.
- . *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- "Paranormal Voices Manifesting in Space or Registered on Tape."
<http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/dirvoic3.html>. Accessed March 8, 1999. Includes information on direct voice, poltergeist voices, and electronic voice phenomenon.
- "Rev. Jarvis' Electronic Voice Phenomena Page."
<http://webhost.avint.net/hardtucket/evp.htm>. Accessed February 3, 1999. Basic definition of EVP with some good links to other EVP sites.
- "The EVP Internet Center." <http://www.hibrichan.com/evpfiles/evp.html>. Last accessed July 12, 1999. This is the main page of the website. There are links here to all of the other pages I refer to in my paper.
- "Voices From Cyberspace." by Steve Mizrach.
<http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/seeker1/fortpages/voices-from-cspace.html>. Accessed February 3, 1999.