

OBITUARY: WILLIAM DEWI REES
1929–2018



Dewi Rees (as he was best known – Dewi being the Welsh equivalent of David) passed away in May 2018, following a brief illness and time in hospital, surrounded by family. Although not directly involved with psychical research and parapsychology, his contributions to research on anomalous experiences within the bereavement process are well noted within most literature which has dealt with the impact of personal loss.

Rees spent most of his life working as a General Practitioner (Rees, 2012). His professional life took him from his initial medical studies in London (1957-58), then moving with his family to Labrador, Canada (caring for Inuit and Innu people, 1958-59), and later returning to Cardiff taking up work in a psychiatric hospital (1959 onwards). He spent a lot of his early time in medical practice conducting research, particularly on topics such as ‘agricultural tractors accidents’ (Rees, 1965) and various topics of bereavement (e.g. Rees, 1972). It was his Medical Doctoral thesis that made him most noted in research surrounding bereavement and parapsychological phenomena (Rees, 1971a).

During his MD studies at King’s College, London, which began in 1967, Rees intended to conduct a number of interviews with the bereaved to assess the various negative symptoms of grief. His work within this area had already led to some significant contributions (Rees & Lutkins, 1967). During the end of his data collection, some of the interviewed participants explained to Rees that following a loss they had ‘sensed the presence’ of the deceased. This intrigued Rees and caused him to return to his participant pool and ask them all about this phenomenon, which caused a revelation in his MD research. From interviewing 293 widows and widowers, he discovered some of the dynamics of what are known as After-Death Communications (ADCs). For example, approximately 50% of the participants reported ongoing experiences, with 39.2% reporting a ‘sense of presence’, 14% seeing apparitions of the deceased, and 13.3% hearing the deceased. Care was taken to make

sure of the deceased's certainty in the reality of their experience, and not to include anyone with any obvious mental health issues. The key outcomes of this study were that it showed how natural and common it is to have these experiences. The majority of bereaved individuals found the experiences to be helpful in their coping and recovery. For those who wish to know more about these findings, the thesis was summarised and published in a now widely cited paper of the *British Medical Journal* (Rees, 1971b).

What followed is now a lasting, impactful and ongoing legacy within the domain of what is often termed 'clinical parapsychology' where we are concerned with the effect of anomalous experiences on health and wellbeing, rather than the ontology of the phenomenon reported. Rees' work quickly led to researchers following up the work for themselves, through research papers and over a dozen doctoral theses extending this work – including my own (see Cooper, 2017). Many popular books have also been written regarding ADCs which have become best sellers, including work by authors/researchers such as Louis LaGrand, Raymond Moody, Dianne Arcangel and Erlendur Haraldsson, all acknowledging Rees and his contribution. Rees continued to publish his thoughts on ADCs (Rees, 2000), and on beliefs and experiences regarding survival of death (Rees, 2010). He also wrote a book on healing which explored alternative medicine, counselling and spiritual healing (Rees, 2003) and a popular book on the psychology of death and loss which reached its second edition (Rees, 2001).

I began corresponding with Rees in 2014. Throughout that time I learned more about his interest in parapsychological phenomena and how ADCs at times can offer potential evidence for survival. It was clear from his original work that some cases do not appear to offer conventional explanations for their occurrence within the context of personal loss. Writing to me a couple of years ago, he discussed how he had met parapsychologist D. Scott Rogo on two occasions, whom had taken a great interest in Rees' work, citing it in a number of his own publications relating to ADCs (e.g. Rogo, 1990; Rogo & Bayless, 1979). Rees stated:

I met him twice, once at the Royal College of Physicians, when I had to give a talk on my MD work to an international conference of psychiatrists; the other occasion was at Lampeter University where a small group of parapsychologists had arranged a meet. I was not invited but I did go, and was not allowed to speak. Scott was there and an American lawyer, and the editor of the *Christian Parapsychologist*... Scott was very knowledgeable about me and supportive of my work.

From the discussions I had with Rees, he was highly supportive of how clinical practice and parapsychology are beginning to merge more and more. It emphasises the multidisciplinary aspects of parapsychology, but also how parapsychology can help people in their own mental health and recovery from grief by speaking with those who have researched ADCs at length and are aware of their phenomenology. Rees' work made a valuable stepping stone for parapsychology down the clinical path – beyond the early work of the SPR (e.g. Gurney with Myers, 1889).

I would like to end by expressing my thanks to the medical research of Dr Dewi Rees, and his insistence on openly discussing such findings. He encouraged other researchers and the bereaved to also be open about exploring and dealing with

personal loss, continued bonds with the dead, and their impact on our mental and physical health.

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