

Introduction to the Final Report

(August 18, 1997)

The biographer's craft seems to be a mysterious combination of data, insight and just plain luck. We have been engaged in a kind of pre-biography task: to secure as much oral history as we can on a particular individual, Alex Tanous, to help frame, fill out, and correct what we already know about his life and profession. Alex was a public figure who engaged in a number of high profile activities. He also wrote (with the help of Harvey Ardman) a book about his own life and special powers. So we start with a profile created in some ways by the main figure in our work. But, like all public figures, Alex's visible persona is incomplete, both representing and obscuring some of what he was as a public and (in important ways) a very private individual. The material we are presenting here will suggest and enrich the image of a man who was much more complex than sometimes thought, even by those who professed to know him well.

One of the main themes in this inchoate work is that Alex was an individual who claimed unusual gifts. He was not just a member of one of the standard professions, and did not achieve success in conventional ways. He was a teacher and healer who moved to the edges of these fields by virtue of the psychic powers that he asserted and used. So we have conducted research on Alex's life within the very real frame of the paranormal and its cognate fields. Polly has concentrated more of her efforts on the views of family, friends and acquaintances, while Fred has talked more with those in the areas of paranormal research and practices. But we have both sought out a mixture of personal and professional views on Alex as a man who defined himself as a psychic.

The material presented here will help those who want to go further in the study of this unusual and interesting person. Among the gratifying results of this research has been the confirmation that Alex really was a good person, and that many people believe that his powers were genuine. These discoveries have made the effort here rewarding even when we were occasionally frustrated in trying to locate, or get agreement from, a few of the individuals we wanted to interview. The work has been a good experience for both of us, and we hope that the materials will contribute to a more complete record of the life of Alex Tanous.

The materials are being presented in two packages. The reasons are direct and benign. First, we are two people working in different parts of the country with different agendas in the research program. It would be unusual, and perhaps even miraculous, if we presented identical packages. Second, our working styles and temperaments are different, which is evident from the two presentations. But we think that this is a good and helpful thing that has expanded the breadth of the research. Third, and probably the controlling factor, the sheer number of pages of these materials would make it awkward to offer the research in a single package. But, having said that, be assured that this project has been a cooperative effort between the two researchers at every stage. We think that the complementary form and content of the research materials bear this observation out. Enjoy.

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Alex Tanous Life Research Project

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Final Report -- Frohock

*Part One: Life and Profession**

Alex Tanous was an unusual and complex individual. Like most of us he negotiated his life with a variety of shields and mediating devices. These included the familiar distinctions between professional and personal life, and the usual benign compartments that organize relationships among family, friends, acquaintances, professional colleagues, and others. These networks of privacy and access are common fare in any human life, and biographers often try to see through the shields in order to understand the complete person. The interview data we have secured in this project can help anyone choosing to take on such a task. But Alex, unlike most of us, also claimed to possess extraordinary psychic powers. These powers inevitably challenge materialist accounts of human experience and, as a consequence, illuminate Alex's life from a different and uncommon perspective. We are offered large opportunities to study the limits and possibilities of human experience by exploring Alex's professional life as a psychic. This prospect invites us to understand not just Alex's personal life, but his identity and standing in the fields of parapsychology and cognate inquiries. The insistent (though not the only) questions that guide this inquiry are whether Alex's psychic powers were genuine, and if they were, how he used them.

These questions are especially important today since current forms of Western life are apparently incomplete without experiences that exceed the boundaries of naturalism. Beliefs in the supernatural (in the simple sense of beyond nature) range widely across social and economic differences in American society, and in unexpected ways. A Gallup poll published in October 1988 revealed that 50 percent of the American public believes in angels, 46 percent

in extrasensory perception, and 37 percent in devils. The poll reported that college graduates believe in clairvoyance in greater numbers than those who do not go to college at all (by 27 to 15 percent). Another Gallup poll in 1991 expanded these findings. It found that 52 percent of Americans believe in astrology, 46 percent in extrasensory perception, and 42 percent in communication with the dead. The data go beyond beliefs. Opinion polls report that from one-half to three-quarters of the American population claim to have had a psychic experience.

Those who study psychic matters tell us that reports of psychic experiences are inevitably winnowed down to lower percentages when they are investigated. The acceptable range after explaining away the obvious (and sometimes the non-obvious) is more modest: ten to fifteen percent of the population have had a psychic experience for which there is no conventional explanation. Anyone familiar with the size of the American population knows that these lower percentages still cover large numbers of people. The supernatural seems to be a generalizable commodity in American life, suggesting that a recent president's attractions to biblical predictions and astrological readings were yet more proof that he truly did represent the settled convictions of the people he served. The data are also caution lights in assessing claims for psychic powers and experiences. Any phenomenon so clearly embedded in the belief systems of a culture must be examined carefully in order to avoid automatic subscriptions to its authenticity.

One way to begin an exploration of the psychic side of Alex Tanous is to place him in the general contexts of research into psychic phenomena. Those who study psychic experiences today in the United States often approach the phenomena with a scientific temperament, which is one way to honor the caution

lights and the way that Alex preferred to explain psychic phenomena. The scientific temperament is inclined to categorize, and does so in the fields of paranormal studies by recognizing two main types of psychic ability (psi): extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK). ESP is the general term for clairvoyance (discerning objective states), telepathy (discerning the thoughts of others), and precognition (seeing the future). PK is mental influence on objects, or thought affecting the external world. These abilities are testable in parapsychology laboratories. Parapsychologists also recognize (but cannot easily test in controlled conditions) claims for ghosts, poltergeists, and other spirit happenings. There are also the less formal (and unsettling) phenomena of out-of-body (OBE) and near-death experiences, for which there are reliable data but disagreement over what these data mean.

These distinctions, like so many others, overlap in both theory and practice. Precognition, for example, may simply be telepathy extended to the future (reading the thoughts of future persons -- a common explanation among psychics for pre-seeing), and clairvoyance may be a reading of the thoughts of those with access to the objective state that is the target of ESP. Any remote viewing may be an out-of-body experience, with the astral body of the subject traveling to the viewing area. These curious overlaps can wreak havoc on controlled experiments by chronically obscuring causal variables, for example the indeterminacy of cause-and-effect resulting from simply not knowing whether the subject of an experiment is engaged in remote viewing or telepathy. But these problems have not yet led to a dismissal of the distinctions. They seem to function as a kind of pragmatic bookkeeping device for researchers to classify psychic powers.

Research on psychic phenomena is predictably controversial, with the

expected divisions between skeptics and believers. But acrimonious disputes are found even among believers in parapsychology. These disputes include the expected methodological differences on research agendas, the concepts and causal chains in psychic events, and the rules of evidence, inference and argument appropriate for research. For example, the exact roles and effects of ESP and PK, and even whether they can be distinct from each other, are topics of considerable disagreement. Also dividing research efforts are the importance and reliability of two contrasting types of evidence. Some researchers use only formal data secured through laboratory experiments. Others urge the use of informal evidence drawn from spontaneous psychic experiences. Unfriendly comments on the competence and common sense of rivals seem to reinforce the divisions among fields of research.

Two striking features of Alex Tanous's standing in these fields appear in the research interviews and literatures. One is that he was utterly indifferent toward the divisions and disputes among practitioners. Patrice Kean (in an informal discussion on August 5, 1997, in the American Society for Psychical Research - ASPR - Library) described Alex as a man of exceeding goodwill, completely outside the petty critiques of rivals. The other is that his gifts seemed to extend across the natural divisions in the field. Not to put the point too finely, but Alex was a psychic who claimed to undergo what we might call robust psychic experiences, meaning those that normally occur, or occur most vividly and fully, outside the strict limits of controlled experiments. He was an individual who claimed the ability to foresee the future on occasion (often spontaneously), read the minds of others, affect the material world through his mental powers, heal organic diseases through psychic intervention, and (one of Alex's main powers) leave his body at will.

He also found lost children, helped the police in solving crimes, tracked ghosts, tried to heal the ill, conducted instructional seminars on psychic skills -- in general, Alex did what psychics do when they exercise their skills in those larger arenas of ordinary life that do not comfortably fit the strict limits of laboratory controls. Yet he was also a willing and frequent participant in some of the more important controlled experiments in recent history.

One of the classic experiments in contemporary psi research involved Alex. [The experiment described here is presented in Karlis Osis and Donna McCormick, "Kinetic Effects at the Ostensible Location of an Out-of-Body Projection During Perceptual Testing," The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research Vol 74 (July 1980).] The experiment tested the kinetic effects of an astral (spiritual or psychic) body. Alex was placed in an isolated room at the ASPR. He was then asked to leave his body and enter a separate sealed chamber to identify visual targets. Strain-gauge sensors placed in front of the viewing window of the optical image device registered any mechanical effect in the area of the targets. In 197 trials extending over 20 sessions the data show that the strain-gauge sensors were significantly more active when hits (correct identifications) were recorded than when there were misses. Something or someone could be said to have been present when the subject (Alex) was presumably "looking" at the targets. These results were introduced as conforming to a hypothesis that during the experiment the subject was out of his body and somehow in the sealed chamber viewing the targets.

Researchers who use controlled experiments do not like to use psychics as subjects. (This observation was made by a number of the individuals I

interviewed.) There are several explanations for this reluctance. One is that psychics are "wild-cards." They bring too many resources to the table, with the risk that both negative and positive results from experiments are likely to be skewed away from almost any imaginable norm. These distortions are less likely with a random selection of subjects from the general population. A second explanation is that the use of psychics violates a norm endorsed in the early Rhine laboratory: psychic powers are attributes found in the general population, and the most productive ways to study these attributes require test subjects who are ordinary members of human communities, not individuals who are part of the distinguished traditions of shamans, wizards, or - in Alex's case - psychics. Third, the psychic by definition possesses abilities that exceed the range of laboratory testing. For example, if the paranormal cannot succeed in the laboratory, the evidence gathered in informal or uncontrolled situations where psychic events are reported might be taken more seriously. This is an assertion that might not be available to an ordinary test subject. But it is a reasonable claim for a psychic to make, especially if the psychic has demonstrated abilities in non-formal conditions. Fourth, the psychic is harder to control since s/he is deeper within a range of powers that can in principle affect the controls that the researcher places on the experiment. Many claims for psychic experiences require a radical revision of ordinary reality. Once one allows that the laws of physics can be circumvented all bets are off on experimental controls. Finally, note that the negative attitude of laboratory scientists toward psychics is complemented by the reluctance of psychics to undertake controlled experiments. (They do not like to be proved wrong, one respondent told me.)

This tension between psychics and researchers makes it all the more

remarkable that Alex went into experimental conditions with such high energy and enthusiasm. He was (on all reports) eager to participate in any and all controlled experiments, and believed that the best studies of psychic experiences had to be eminently scientific. (Alan Vaughan told me in his interview that Alex was always ready to take on any experiment. Rhea White remembers Alex's professionalism in concentrating on the research. Ingo Swann pays tribute to Alex's dedication to the experiments.) No other psychic may have believed so strongly in science as Alex did. One result of his enthusiasms was the classic experiment at the ASPR (Osis/McCormick, 1980) that many students of psychic phenomena (Michael Grosso, for example) regard as the most palpable and persuasive evidence we have in a controlled setting for an OBE.

Yet, having allowed for science and controlled experimentation, I think that Alex's main contributions to psychic studies must also contain an impressive range of non-experimental events. He always provided spirited arguments and persuasive demonstrations that psychic powers *must* occur also in more comprehensive settings. One of the keys to unlocking Alex's psyche may be in the tension between psychic techniques and scientific methods, for Alex was always trying to merge the two without complete success.

The thought informing all beliefs in psychic or supernatural realities has a metaphorical expression. Human reality occupies a small stage in a theater filled with dramas that can be only partially glimpsed by our powers of sensing and knowing. Scientific inquiry aims to describe and explain a set of visible realities that yield their features to testable statements. The knowable is the natural foundation of scientific inquiry, not realities that are beyond human comprehension. Psychic orientations, by contrast, assume a

larger, and to some degree, invisible reality, and accept the limiting condition that it cannot be fully explained. The assumption in all psychic beliefs and practices is that such alternative realities are the sources for psychic powers. This assumption suggests that the origin and proprietary domain of psychic powers are outside of the dimensions of ordinary reality, and, by definition, beyond the parameters of any controlled experiment.

The expansive nature of psychic events, their tendency to exceed formal parameters, is part of the logic of such experiences. Even more restricted versions of ESP and PK, effective only in micro settings, may not be capable of expression in formal conditions. Like any of a number of human traits, talents and virtues, psychic powers may be organic capacities, products of evolutionary development that contributed to human survival. But like many of these traits their natural homes may be outside the artificial environments of experimental laboratories. The capacity to love, for example, is a genuine human power, widely acknowledged by lay and professional people. Imagine, however, an experiment which introduces two individuals in a laboratory or controlled setting and gives them a certain number of hours (or days) to "fall in love" to test the validity of the experience. It may work. But the failure of such an experiment does not falsify the capacity. Controlled experiments may be unable to examine those variables that occur only or primarily in the non-laboratory settings of ordinary (read: real) life. Psychic powers may be as genuine as the capacity to love, and as unsuitable to formal testing.

Cases of precognition serve as the first examples in Alex's life illustrating these assumptions and observations. One of the claims offered by Alex is that he saw the murder of John Lennon six months before he was killed

spontaneously (the precognition case), or b) in emergency conditions (the plane-crash-avoidance case). Whether true accounts or not, the validity of these events cannot be tested in controlled experiments. Alex, even with his commitment to science, recognized the limitations of formal testing. He claimed that he could summon something deep within himself to "read" people and foresee events. He maintained that these powers were always there when he needed them, except in test conditions where the need is artificial. Karlis

at the Dakota Hotel entrance. In the story, Alex was being interviewed by a reporter from NBC Radio on the general subject of predicting the future. After some questions on how prophecy works, the interviewer offered Alex the opportunity to make a prediction on anything then and there. Alex declined, pointing out that he did not make predictions. He claimed to see the future, not predict it, and -- note the words here -- the experience for him was always spontaneous, not producible on demand. At that moment, Alex got up from his chair, thinking that the tape recorder was off, and moved over to the window. He gazed at the Dakota Hotel (visible directly across the street from the ASPR library) and the thought of John Lennon being killed just occurred to him. The thought was a burst or "spill" in his mental state, and included the understanding that the murder would be particularly untimely and affect the whole earth.

The second examples are in the area of psychokinesis. In one well-known story Alex claimed to have used his powers to prevent a plane crash. The plane was a commuter flight departing from Bangor, Maine. Alex reported that a voice warned him that an accident was going to occur, but also urged him to board the plane to save the other passengers. On takeoff the plane did not ascend normally and the pilot banked to return to the airport. The plane then started falling slowly and was headed for a crevice in the earth just short of the runway. Alex thought, "let's move this plane," and felt his will keep the plane aloft until it was over the runway where it simply fell straight down. No one was hurt in the accident except Alex, who suffered a mild shoulder injury and some whiplash effects. But Alex believed that had the plane hit the crevice, everyone could have perished.

Notice that these two examples are claims for powers exhibited a)