

An Interview With Martin Johnson

Martin Johnson was recently appointed Professor of Parapsychology at the University of Utrecht, Holland. Last year he was elected President of the Parapsychological Association, the international, professional society in the field. This new distinction comes at an appropriate time: The P.A. will hold its 19th annual convention this year, from August 18 to August 21 at Utrecht.

What kind of a person is Johnson and what led him to parapsychology? The following interview by William Roll helps to fill in the picture.

Roll: Here we sit in Utrecht at the Parapsychology Laboratory and that's a long way for both of us and especially for you, Martin. I thought it would be interesting to look at the road that brought you into parapsychology, the questions or experiences that made this a meaningful exploration in a personal and scientific way.

Johnson: Well, my interest in parapsychological questions dates back a long time, to my childhood in Lappland. As a child I remember certain persons who claimed to be able to cross into the future. Among those, my grandmother on my father's side. Also, the Lapps were considered a bit psychic. My first idea about telepathy was that it was very practical. Because of the lack of telephone and telegraph it was something to be used in a practical way. And, of course, I had some personal experiences that I thought could be paranormal.

Roll: What were they?

Johnson: Always dreams. At the age of eighteen, I was laboratory assistant in Skelleftehamn, and I was living for the first time for a long period separated from my parents. We usually made telephone calls at least once a week. Everything seemed to be OK as far as I could judge. But very early on a Monday morning, I dreamt that I was sitting in the reception room of a physician in my home area. And he opened the door and was looking very seriously at me and said something like, "I have a bit of bad news, but don't feel too sorry about it. Your mother has to take an operation. But it's a very common one and she has a 99% probability to get through it and become

quite well again." The dream was very intense. And I felt very worried about what I had dreamt. And then the telephone was ringing and it was 7 o'clock in the morning.

Roll: This was Monday morning?

Johnson: Monday morning, yes. It was my mother. She told me, "Well, don't be too shocked but I have to tell you that I have to go to the hospital in Skelleftea." That's the nearest city hospital in the area large enough for operations. I told her, "Yes, I know." And then she asked, "Why?" And I told her my dream. Later on I called the doctor and he ended the conversation, "Well, you shouldn't worry because she has at least a 99% chance to get through the operation." And that made a very great impression on me and I was quite convinced for a period of time that this must really be a good case of thought transference.

Roll: Now, before that Monday morning when you had the dream, did you have any reason to believe that there was something the matter with your mother?

Johnson: Not as far as I could reconstruct. But later I became a bit more hesitant. I wondered whether the last time we talked perhaps she was talking in another voice or giving some other kind of clues. But not to the best of my knowledge. Also there was the coincidence of the doctor's way of expressing himself. What I really should have done was to try to find out if this was a kind of standard answer that I previously had heard from him. But I still look upon it as a case suggestive of paranormal communication.

Roll: You had a somewhat similar experience with your father, didn't you?

Johnson: Yes, that's true. That was approximately one year later. I went home for a vacation for a few days around Easter, 1949. He had been not quite well for a period of time. He was suffering from some symptoms, as far as he could see, of having a cold. He had a moderate rise of temperature. And the last day was a Sunday and I was staying at home. He stayed in bed all day, but we were making plans for my mother and father coming down and paying me a visit about a month ahead. But the last night I was sleeping under the same roof as my father, I had a very unpleasant dream. I dreamt he was going to die, suffering from something that had to do with his heart, or more precisely with his circulation. Later on he became very ill and was transported to the hospital. And staying there for a month, he died without the doctors being able to give a correct diagnosis. Later on it turned out that it was a kind of illness termed peri-arthritis. That means an inflammation in the veins that perhaps could have been cured by cortisone therapy. Well, I am not very convinced about this dream because I could very well have noticed the change and in daytime I could have repressed thinking of the probability that he should pass away. But nevertheless it raised a question and during his illness I always had a very pessimistic feeling about the outcome.

Roll: Now, didn't you also have a dream about your step-father?

Johnson: That's a rather recent experience—a dream I had about

my step-father. And I could give it in this connection also. He passed away in May 1974 at the age of 86. During the last two years, his health hadn't been very good. The summer of 1973 most people thought that he was going to pass away. He had repeated heart attacks and also a brain hemorrhage. But he was a man of very strong will and he also had a very strong faith. And he managed to become comparatively well again. In the spring of 1974 when my mother and my step-father were living in a flat for retired people, of course his health wasn't quite good, but nothing alarming had been reported. Quite the contrary. He insisted on going to visit his home village, ten kilometers from the place where my mother and he stayed. He went there and visited a number of neighbors. On the 3rd of May, I gave a lecture on parapsychology at Linköping. I was giving them a few personal experiences. And I said it was a long time since I'd experienced something subjectively convincing. And on the 2nd of May, my mother had just touched upon, "Well, next week he is going to see his son and he will be staying away for a couple of days." The night after, that means the night between the 3rd and 4th of May, I dreamt that he was suffering a heart attack and that he was dying. He was dying because of poor circulation and the accumulation of liquid in the lungs. Early next morning my mother called and said, "Well, this time I think it's rather serious. They have just transported him into the hospital. He has suffered a heart attack." I told her, "Well, I dreamt about it and I think you should prepare yourself, for perhaps he is going to pass away this time in a few days." Well, on the 10th of May he passed away. You could always think that the day before I went up to Linköping I heard the story of his longing to see his home village, and that that may have implied that he was going to say farewell to his old home. I may have repressed this idea. But, at least I think the dream raises a question. It was emotionally strong and personally highly relevant.

Roll: At some stage or another didn't he have an impression that he was going to have another year?

Johnson: When he was lying as a patient in the hospital in the summer of 1973, he was quite prepared to pass away. But one night he had an hallucination or experience that Christ came and touched him and told him, "I'll give you one more year." And against all expectations, he was able to get up and after another long period in bed he was able to relearn, more or less, how to walk. He had a very strong will.

Roll: That was the year before your dream?

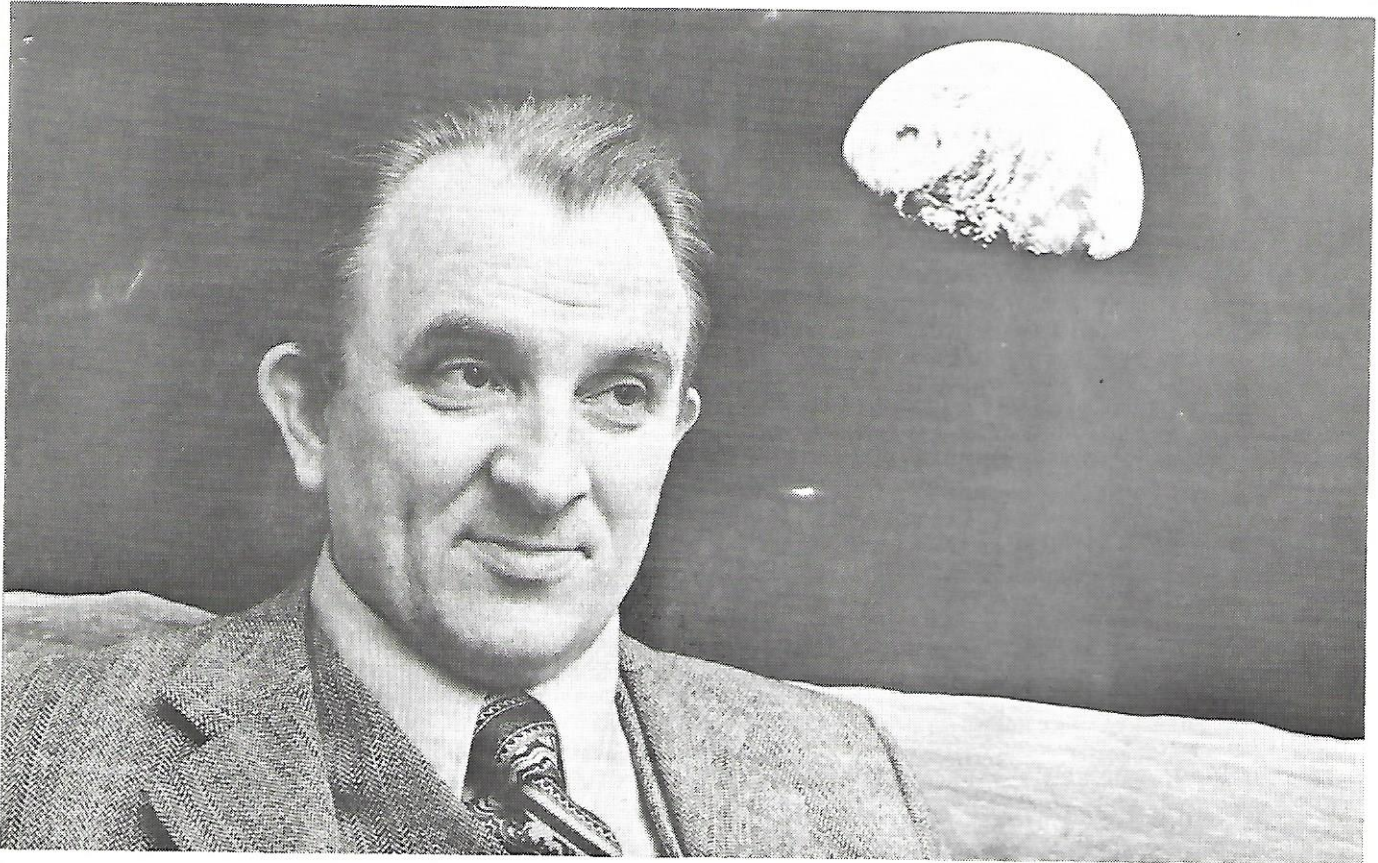
Johnson: Yes, it was. That was in July, 1973. He was quite convinced afterwards that it was not only because of a dream that he recovered but because the experience was a real one.

Roll: You spoke about his strength. He was the person who fell in the lake?

Johnson: That's right. At that time he was skiing over a lake. He must have been eighty, at least seventy-nine or eighty. And my mother is the worrying kind to a certain extent. She always told him to be very careful. Then the ice broke up and he was sinking into the lake and he told me later he was thinking, "Well, now I'm going to die by a heart attack from the shock of the temperature." Suddenly he started to think, "I'm very surprised that it's possible to see so very much light down here and it isn't so terribly cold. I think I'll be able to manage it." And then he managed to get himself out of the water. He even stayed at the lake and fished out his skis and then continued for a few hundred yards to look at the place where he had some fishing nets. Then he skied back perhaps half a mile and of course my mother had a shock when she saw what he was like and when he told her, smilingly, that he had been on the bottom of the lake. And it was below freezing, minus ten degrees centigrade. Well, he didn't even get a cold from this experience.

I had an experience which I thought in some ways was a bit more complex than the dreams I mentioned before. That took place

in June of 1952. At that time, I was a student at college in Lund preparing to take my student-examen. As one of the last assignments that semester, my biology teacher asked me to give a speech on ESP, because he knew I was very interested in it. I gave the talk, demonstrating the ESP cards and so on. And then I left Lund and had a stay at the place where my wife was a teacher at that time. We had just met and a few months later we became engaged. Shortly afterwards I went to my hometown of Skelleftea and then to Skelleftehamn, to make arrangements for a summer job and also to raise money for the next semester. In the taxi cab from the railway station to the house where I was to stay for the night, I noticed a headline telling about a DC-3 that had been lost in one way or another. Since I was interested in aviation, I intended to ask about it when I saw my friends. When we met I forgot and we had a very gay evening, drinking whiskey and getting drunk I expect. I went to bed about 2 o'clock and I guess it took about half an hour before I fell asleep. And then I woke up about four o'clock, exactly six minutes after four, according to my watch, after a terrible nightmare. The first part of the dream was that I was standing very close to the Cathedral of Lund and on my right side I could see my biology teacher. When I looked up I could see two Russian fighters flying past Lund which I identified as MIG 15's. They were rather new and had been used in the Korean War. I felt very threatened and turned to my biology teacher and asked, "What is happening?" "Well, something terrible is taking place over the Baltic Sea." Then, I was sitting in some kind of gondola on a rough sea and this gondola was transformed into an airplane. Five people constituted the crew and suddenly I could see the same two MIG 15's appearing. And I got a feeling that all reacted strongly, emotionally strongly. And then the MIG 15's reappeared and opened fire with three tracers. And I could see the pilot sitting in the left chair being hit in his right hand. Then I experienced that we were diving and it ended in an inferno of burning oil and water. And then I drowned and it was a



Martin Johnson, Professor of Parapsychology, University of Utrecht, Holland, is also an avocational astronomer. Here he is photographed with a friend.

terrible experience. I think it's the worst nightmare I've ever experienced. For several years I had made notations of my dreams, actually since I read John Dunne's *Experiment with Time* in 1949. After I woke up I made a detailed notation about the dream. I had difficulties in falling asleep again, but I guess I succeeded around 5:30. And then the alarm woke me up at a quarter to eight. I saw on the table the sheets of papers with my dream. I took them and went over to the next room and asked the person to take care of them because I had had a dream that I thought was veridical and paranormal. I had no radio in my room, but at eight o'clock he turned on his radio. Now I got the explanation of the headline about the DC-3. The DC-3, belonging to the Swedish Airforce and equipped with a lot of electronics, had been on mission to trace and pinpoint Russian radar stations. But because of a leakage of information, the Russians knew about it and shot the plane down. This disappearance of the DC-3 had taken place a

couple of days before. I guess on Friday, but I'm not quite sure. But a couple of days before Monday morning.

Roll: Your dream was on Monday morning?

Johnson: Yes, Monday morning at four a.m. In the middle of that night a Catalina reconnaissance aircraft had left to search for the lost DC-3. The last time they had had radio connection, as I recall, was at 3:50 in the morning. And later they could report that around 4:00 o'clock in the morning two Russian MIG 15's appeared and then disappeared and reappeared a few minutes later and opened fire with tracer bullets, hitting the Catalina and wounding the pilot. A few minutes after four they carried out a successful forced landing on the water. It was the coincidence in time that struck me. I guess most people would be convinced that this must be a case of ESP.

Roll: Did you know the pilots or have any other associations that

might explain why you homed in on this situation?

Johnson: I never met the persons. It could be their agitated state as target persons that I was able to receive. And I also have thought that the notice about the DC-3 and the strong motive to get information about what had happened to it may have been a vehicle for bringing about this communication. As an alternative explanation, one could say that I dramatized the DC-3 incident. My imagination was filling in that something had happened and I was sophisticated enough to know what sort of reconnaissance aircraft the Royal Swedish Airforce was equipped with at that time. And as a matter of fact, at least to the best of my recollection, a Catalina aircraft had a crew of four persons. I'm not quite sure whether or not the pilot was hit in his right hand but he was hit somewhere but not seriously.

Roll: When did the DC-3 disappear?

Johnson: A couple of days before

this incident with the Catalina reconnaissance aircraft. The DC-3 we had been told was shot down by the Russians and probably the crew was also killed. But this time all survived.

Roll: Now if the DC-3 went out a couple of days before, isn't it rather surprising that the reconnaissance flight was so late in looking after them?

Johnson: They had been flying for several days and trying to trace if there were oil stains on the water and also looking for survivors.

Roll: I see. So the coincidence of these being shot down—this coincidence with the dream—as you say was rather interesting.

Johnson: Yes. And I had a very strong personal conviction. It reminds me of what Eva Hellström writes about her cases of precognition. She claims that she has had a very convincing, subjectively convincing veridical feeling. But then I have also experienced very detailed dreams having the same strong subjective conviction as a paranormal dream and nothing happened, no coincidence. So I would like to warn against overstating the validity of strong subjective feeling as a criterion of the paranormal character of a dream.

Roll: You mentioned your home in Lapland and the beliefs up there, that there was a lot of belief in ESP apparently and also apparently some practice of it as a means of communication. Are there any kind of deliberate attempts or is it that certain people have these abilities?

Johnson: I recall a Lapp living a few kilometers away. He was at least claiming that he could foresee things. And he had a good reputation for that but of course it was also an area in which you find a lot of superstition. Sometimes it would be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy when he told people something such as: "You will become ill before you are going to bed." It was an evil kind of fortune telling, you see. But my grandmother—I never met her because I was only one year old when she passed away—had

a reputation as a person who always could solve problems. And she was also known to be psychic. According to the rumors, she was always hallucinating the death of persons she knew; and the same day the person passed away. She was a midwife—well, not by profession and training but practice. There was at that time, at least while she was young, no doctor up in that area. Perhaps it was 300 kilometers to a doctor. Then people had to solve their problems in their own ways. She was a person very skilled in improvisations. And she also took care of terminal patients. My father said that she almost always had premonitions or waking state hallucinations of the person who passed away. At any rate, it made me listen; it made me interested. Later on I thought there was a mixture of perhaps genuine paranormal phenomena, and misinterpretations, because of superstition and insecurity. Perhaps some of it, hallucinations, were due to sensory deprivation because it was such a monotonous situation—people living so extremely isolated.

Roll: And the winters were long and dark.

Johnson: Yes. At any rate it made me terribly curious from the start.

Roll: What is the belief about life after death and the phenomena suggestive of that? Are there any of those kind of occurrences?

Johnson: Well, if we had lived in the beginning of the 19th century, we could have learned a bit more from the Lapp's beliefs. But, in my childhood and even in my parents' childhood, the beliefs in life after death were just the ones you meet in the New Testament and in the Lutheran Church—nothing very original; but of course there was the idea that people who have been killed or who have taken their own lives would come back to haunt. Especially women who had abortions—those children would haunt. The very widely spread opinion was that they were always crying and if you were sleeping in the house where such an act had taken place you usually would be able to hear it. Furthermore, there was a widespread idea of some light-phenomena foretelling the deaths of a person. I found the same idea mentioned in Donald Menzel's book on flying saucers. He refers, if I recall correctly, to folklore in Canada that the imminence of the death of a person manifests itself by the appearance of a kind of light over the place where that person is living.

Roll: What about the possibility in your opinion of exploring these beliefs, of exploring the question scientifically whether there is any continuity after death?

Johnson: At the present level of parapsychology and other branches of sciences, I think it's not very promising. From the philosophical point of view, there is a multitude of possibilities that we can't even dream about but which may in a sensible way be expressed in science fiction stories or in religious beliefs. But one should never say never and when it comes to suggesting what kinds of approaches could be followed, of course it's a temptation to think of enhancing our knowledge of human potentialities by means of altered states of consciousness. It may become easier to carry out studies in this area, meaningful studies, if a paradigm shift takes place. In other words, we may come to look upon man and the universe in a new way, not so much based on Newtonian physics and the like. This is of course speculative but I have to confess that I had always been fascinated by this possibility. I prefer this to the classical method of attempting mediumistic communications, and so on. I hope to analyze in a systematic way different possibilities of survival—what survival could mean.

