

Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer

Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer (1947–2005) was an American psychoanalyst who became interested in parapsychology following a startling anomalous experience. Her posthumously published 2007 book *Extraordinary Knowing* describes her response to the intellectual and emotional challenge posed by the incident, along with an assessment of the scientific case for psi.

Life and Career

Elizabeth 'Lisby' Lloyd Mayer was born in New York City in 1947. She was educated at Radcliffe College, graduating in 1969, and attained her doctorate at Stanford University in 1974. She spent ten more years training at the San Francisco Psychoanalytic Institute, then became a supervising analyst there.¹ To this position she added those of clinical supervisor at the psychology clinic of the University of California at Berkeley, associate clinical professor in the psychiatry department at the University of California Medical Center in San Francisco,² and training/supervising analyst at the American Psychoanalytic Association.³ She also maintained a private clinical practice.

Mayer researched female development, revising Freud's model of psychosexual development to demonstrate that young girls value their bodies as much as do young boys. She published more than fifty major articles in journals, was a member of several editorial boards, and lectured regularly. She was awarded a Distinguished Analyst Award by the American Psychoanalytic Association.⁴

Mayer was well-known in her home state as artistic director of a performance arts organization, California Revels, an Oakland, California, theater group that 'put on a series of shows every year just before Christmas to celebrate the winter solstice with songs, skits and dances from traditions around the world'. Mayer also produced a video series on music education with children that won the Parent's Choice Gold Award, the Coalition for Quality Children's Video "Best of the Best" Award, and the National Association of Parenting Publications Award. She was named Alameda County's Woman of the Year for Arts and Culture in 1995.⁵

Mayer died in her sleep at her parents' home in Hanover, New Hampshire, on New Year's Day 2005, of complications from intestinal scleroderma, a rare disease she had for more than 15 years. She was survived by her two daughters.⁶

Harp Incident

Mayer's worldview was challenged by an incident that occurred in 1991. A precious hand-carved harp that belonged to her 11-year-old daughter was stolen from a theatre in the city of Oakland, California. Having failed after two months to find it by any means, including police investigation, Mayer followed a friend's suggestion that she hire a psychic and was put in touch with Harold McCoy, president of the

American Society of Dowrsers.⁷ When Mayer called McCoy, he paused, then declared that the harp was still in Oakland and that he could give more detail if she would send him a city map. Two days later, McCoy called her to identify the exact house where he believed the instrument was located. The police declined to search the property, so Mayer decided to post flyers in a two-block area offering a reward for its return. She was soon called by a man who said his next-door neighbour had it, and it was soon handed back to her.

Research

The incident made Mayer realise that ‘my notions of space, time, reality, and the nature of the human mind were stunningly inadequate.’⁸ She embarked on a journey of inquiry which she described in her 2007 book *Extraordinary Knowing*, published two years after her death. An early discovery was that colleagues she mentioned it to had also had anomalous experiences, both in the context of their own lives and in their clinical practice, which they had previously not shared. She started a discussion group, and this brought more examples. One psychoanalyst told of seeing in her mind the image of a little boy putting a plastic bag over his head, and two hours later hearing from a patient of distressing incident that had occurred days earlier involving his toddler son, who had narrowly escaped suffocation by trying to eat candy off the inside surface off a plastic bag. In another case, a therapist told of a patient he was treating, a four-year old girl, who suddenly looked up from her play and remarked, ‘Your brother is drowning, you have to save him’, which he immediately recognised as a reference to an event that occurred on this day many years before, the death of his brother by drowning aged 25, which the child could not have known anything about.

Mayer also describes the case of Robert J Stoller, a psychoanalyst, professor of psychiatry at UCLA Medical School and a widely published author of books and articles. Stoller, she now learned, had written an article on telepathic dreams which, on advice from a senior colleague, he decided not to publish. The article, obtained by Mayer, gives several examples of dream images described by Stoller’s patients during a Monday session that corresponded uncannily to things that had happened to him over the course of the previous weekend. In one dream a man walked into a glass window, which shattered; Stoller had earlier accidentally broken a glass panel on a sliding door while moving chairs.⁹ In another, the patient described a dream in which a man explained an innovative new architectural scheme, which precisely matched an idea that Stoller had discussed with a friend the day before.¹⁰ Mayer arranged for Stoller’s article to be published in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* in 2001, and this drew many letters and emails giving accounts of similar personal anomalous experiences that the writers had previously not revealed publicly.¹¹

Mayer now became open to the possibility of anomalous experiences emerging in her own clinical practice. She found that many clients had had them, and that many who had been negatively affected by dismissive reactions benefitted from her acceptance. She began contacting reputable clairvoyants to learn about their techniques and experiences. She also started to examine the scientific evidence in parapsychology, finding ‘mountains of research and a vast relevant literature I

hadn't known existed'. She writes: 'As astonished as I was by the sheer quantity, I was equally astonished by the high calibre. Much of the research not only met but far exceeded ordinary standards of rigorous mainstream science'.¹² Some of it, such as the experimental work of [JB Rhine](#) and the [Rhine Research Center](#), she had heard of previously but dismissed, respecting the sceptical consensus in her field, but now found to have been rigorous. The research she describes includes:

- the Star Gate [remote viewing](#) programme
- 1970s Maimonides [dream telepathy](#) experiments
- [ganzfeld](#) (sensory deprivation) research
- ganzfeld experiments with artists and musicians
- [presentiment research](#)
- [Daryl Bem](#)'s precognitive preference/aversion research ([Feeling the Future](#))
- research on mind-machine interaction and remote perception at Princeton (PEAR)
- experiments testing the effectiveness of [intercessory prayer](#)
- [Garret Yount](#)'s research on the effect on cancer cells treated by qi gong masters

Mayer discusses an apparent cultural fear of paranormal experiences in the West. She notes that Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, was well aware of telepathic interactions but consciously decided not to pursue the topic for fear of damaging his reputation, and he advised colleagues to do likewise, in Mayer's words 'betray[ing] their own quintessential empiricism'. She also acknowledges that the fear is real and visceral, recording her own reaction to scoring a hit in a ganzfeld experiment:

And at that moment the world turned weird. I felt the tiniest instant of overwhelming fear. It was gone in a flash but it was stunningly real. It was unlike any fear I've ever felt. My mind split ... This is what my patients meant when they said, 'My mind's not my own' ... My mind had slipped out from under me and the world felt out of control.¹³

Video

Mayer tells a version of the opening chapter of *Extraordinary Knowing*, including the harp incident and its implications, in [this video](#).

KM Wehrstein

Literature

Gallagher, N. (2005). [Psychoanalyst and clinical professor Elizabeth "Lisby" Mayer dies Jan. 1 at age 57](#). UC Berkeley News (6 January). [Web page press release.]

Mayer, E.L. (2007). *Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable Powers of the Human Mind*. New York: Random House.

Zamora, J.H. (2005). [Elizabeth L. Mayer – UC psychologist](#). San Francisco Chronicle (SFGate, 6 January). [Web page]

Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) Zamora (2005).
- [2.](#) Zamora (2005).
- [3.](#) Mayer (2007), 1.
- [4.](#) Gallagher (2005).
- [5.](#) Gallagher (2005).
- [6.](#) Gallagher (2005); Zamora (2005).
- [7.](#) Mayer (2007), Chapter 1. All information in this section is drawn from this source.
- [8.](#) Mayer (2007), 4.
- [9.](#) Mayer (2007), 18.
- [10.](#) Mayer (2007), 19.
- [11.](#) Mayer (2007), 20.
- [12.](#) Mayer (2007), 69.
- [13.](#) Mayer (2007), 206-7.