

Patience Worth (analysis)

This article looks in detail at statements and writings by the personality that called herself Patience Worth, and considers whether the case should be considered in terms of spirit communication or rather as one involving creative dissociation. For a biographical introduction see [Patience Worth \(Pearl Curran\)](#).

Introduction

In the summer of 1913, a St Louis housewife named Pearl Curran sat before a Ouija board with her mother and a friend. Pearl's attitude toward this activity wavered between indifference and antipathy, and nothing in the first year's messages changed her mind. The ostensible communications (purportedly from different persons) were banal and non-evidential.

But on 22 June the letters 'p-a-t' were spelled several times, and then the following statement came through the board. 'Oh, why let sorrow steel thy heart? Thy bosom is but its foster-mother, the world its cradle and the loving home its grave'. Recognizing that this was considerably more poetic and articulate than their usual fare, the three women decided to keep a written record of the event and of any further words from the Ouija board. Then on July 8, following several days of similarly florid messages, the board yielded 'Many moons ago I lived. Again I come, Patience Worth my name'.

These events launched a series of remarkable communications that lasted for nearly twenty-five years. By the time they ceased in 1937, twenty-nine volumes of recorded communications had been deposited in the Missouri Historical Society in St Louis (for a total of 4,375 single-spaced pages of material). These included novels, short stories, plays, thousands of poems, witty epigrams and pithy aphorisms, and many clever, penetrating, and often acerbic conversations. The quality of the literature ranged from decent to spectacular, and Patience's compositions were produced with astonishing fluency. With only a handful of exceptions, Patience's literary works emerged apparently without struggle and without undergoing the overt process of correcting and refining demanded even by the most prolific and articulate authors. In fact, Patience could improvise poems, without hesitation, on any topic suggested to her and without any deterioration in the overall quality of her work. She could also interrupt writing at any time (often in mid-sentence) and continue later (sometimes much later) exactly where she had left off.

Before long it became clear that Pearl's presence, but not that of her mother or friend, was necessary for the Patience Worth communications. And it is because the phenomena are, in some sense, productions of Pearl Curran that this case is so important. It presents the challenge of determining what, exactly, Pearl's role was—in particular, whether this was a case of genuine mediumistic communication, or whether the Patience Worth persona and literary productions can best be explained as a form of dissociative creativity (with possibly some ESP thrown in for good measure).

There are several reasons why that latter option must be taken seriously. First, although they present the usual trappings of a survival case, the communications aren't even remotely evidential. The personality 'Patience Worth' gave a few details about her alleged earthly life, but despite attempts to track down someone matching the descriptions Patience supplied about herself, there is no evidence that the communicating personality corresponded to any real person. Second, the writings of Patience Worth are unprecedented, both in style and in literary quality. Not only are they dramatically superior to anything Pearl Curran seemed able to produce herself; they also seem to be unique in literary history.

Pearl Curran's Background

Pearl was born in Illinois in 1883, the only child of George and Mary Pollard. Her father had been educated at military school, but afterwards he tried unsuccessfully to make a living as an artist. Then, after a series of jobs in Texas with railroads and newspapers, he finally found steady employment with a lead company in Missouri. Mary Pollard once had some ambition to write, but she made no effort to do so after her marriage at eighteen. At that point she focused instead on her musical abilities. Pearl claimed that her mother was talented as a singer, and she also described her as 'nervous, keen, ambitious'.¹

Pearl tells us about herself in a short autobiographical sketch, and also in answers to questions from Walter F Prince. Neither she nor her interlocutor takes us very deeply into her psyche, but the surface details are clear enough. Pearl never travelled beyond the Midwest until the Patience Worth communications were under way. She described herself as 'impudent' and already bored with school by the age of five or six,² and by her own admission she continued to be a mediocre student. She found her teachers either dull or detestable, and it appears that her mother pushed her in directions that didn't interest her. Perhaps most tellingly, Pearl writes that during high school she 'had become quite a 'show-off. I hated it but mother desired it'.³ Around that time, Pearl found the stresses in her life to be unbearable, and she writes that at age thirteen, she 'broke down' and was sent to a Catholic academy for a 'rest'. When she resumed her education the next year and was put back a grade, she became discouraged and simply dropped out of school. After that, Pearl lived with her parents or with other relatives in various locations in Missouri and Illinois. She earned a little money playing piano, teaching voice, and also addressing envelopes and selling music for some music publishers. And throughout this period she continued her vocal studies as well. When she was twenty-four she married John Curran, a respected land developer.

Pearl's primary interest seemed to be music. She played piano reasonably well and aspired to be a singer. But her interests in literature were minimal, and apparently she had little exposure to poetry, fiction, or general history—much less relatively arcane studies in philology. For example, Pearl thought Dickens wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* (which she said she had heard of but never read), she thought Henry VIII had been beheaded, and she didn't know who Andrew Jackson was. In response to Prince's question about her early exposure to poetry, Pearl remarked, 'When Mr Curran was engaged to me he gave me "Thanatopsis" and it was away over my head and he laughed at me and I was ashamed'.⁴

Pearl also had little interest in religion or biblical literature or history. In fact, Pearl claimed that she had never even read a complete Bible chapter. Nor were her parents 'of a religious turn'.⁵ According to Pearl, if she asked her father 'Is there a God?' he would answer, 'My dear, I don't know'.⁶ Moreover, Pearl claimed that she 'was raised to think spiritualist séances taboo'.⁷ Interestingly, Pearl had an uncle who was a spiritualist medium, and at age eighteen she played piano for a month and a half at his Chicago church. But Pearl remarked, 'I didn't like the crowd that came, and the whole thing was repulsive to me'.⁸ From that time until the Patience Worth communications began, Pearl claimed to have no contacts with the world of spiritualism.

Prince collected testimony from people who knew Pearl and her husband well. They support Pearl's contention that she was neither interested in nor exposed to the sort of literature that most would consider necessary for producing the Patience Worth communications.⁹ Not only did he personally solicit testimony from many who had known Pearl and her family; he also wrote an article entitled 'The Riddle of Patience Worth' in the July 1926 issue of *Scientific American*, in which he made a direct appeal for information that might shed light on the case. Prince said later that the object of this appeal

was to provoke some of the half million readers scattered throughout the United States to write to me in some such terms as these: 'You credulous chump, you are grossly deceived. I knew Mrs. Curran – years ago, and used to see her grubbing in the reading room of – Library, where she was probably reading up on history or philology'. Or, 'She used to write poetry, to my knowledge'. Or, 'She boarded with a professor of English literature who had a fad for using archaic words'. Or, 'She used to say, "O that I could be a famous writer!"'¹⁰

Prince noted that he did receive responses from some readers, but 'all who wrote added weight to [Pearl's] own testimony'.¹¹ He continued,

It cannot be, in a world so full of people ready to expose imposture and to correct mistaken claims, that everybody is under a spell as regards the case of Mrs. Curran, so that, there being persons who remember adverse facts, not one is willing to report them, even anonymously.¹²

History, Style, and Personality of Patience Worth

The Patience persona seemed reluctant to share details about her alleged corporeal life. In fact, Patience frequently remarked that the only thing about her that really mattered was contained in her writings and other utterances. On one occasion, she commented, 'Behold, my wares; herein am I'. Nevertheless, Patience occasionally supplied nuggets of information about herself, and in casual conversation she sometimes made remarks about her life. Patience claimed that she was born in England in the seventeenth century, lived and worked there (apparently in Dorset in southern England) until she was an adult, and then migrated to America; shortly after that, she was killed in some sort of battle with Indians.

The Patience Worth communications reveal a consistent and robust personality, different in many respects from that of Pearl. In fact, from the very beginning the personality of Patience Worth emerged clearly and displayed a distinctive set of traits, opinions, and interests. Patience had a sharp tongue, quick wit, a deep love of nature, a reverence for infancy, and even at her most humorous and acerbic, an underlying moral seriousness and (as Prince put it) a 'lofty spirituality'. And although she demonstrated a love of both God and wisdom, Patience was highly suspicious and critical of organized religion and formal education. She was contemptuous of the various forms of academic and religious posturing, and she taught (again, as Prince puts it) that 'wisdom is derived from sincere contemplation of the things which are simplest and nearest at hand'.¹³

But while Patience's personality remained consistent and distinctive, her style of writing varied considerably, ranging from an extremely quaint and simple language—even simpler English than in Chaucer—to one appropriate to the nineteenth century. As the examples given earlier indicate, the language of Patience's first communications wasn't particularly archaic or obscure. According to Patience, that was because she wanted to ensure that her audience understood her. Then, she said, in order to assert her individuality and distinguish her personality from that of Pearl, she adopted a strikingly antiquated linguistic style, liberally sprinkled with words of Anglo-Saxon origin (but from no locale in particular). At those times, Patience could make long speeches in words of one or two syllables (not an easy thing to do). Eventually, Patience relied less frequently on her most obsolete vocabulary, apparently convinced that she had achieved her goal. The following comments from Patience explain her communication strategy and also provide a handy sample of her idiosyncratic English.

When I first singed, I stripped the burr frae my tongue, 'nough for to sing, that I might be known in the tongue o' them that I singed unto. I taked me this and that, and created o' it a petticoat o' words—mine ain—not the tongue o' him o' this day or that. Sirrah, I had na' flesh, and made me flesh-cunnin' 'nough for to stand the blade o' inquiry. For na' man may create such an one, and he who kens it may ne'er be tricked.

Look ye into the words o' me. Ye shall find whits o' this and that ta'en from here and there—yet foundationed upon the salt which flavors it o' my ain land.¹⁴

The reliance on Anglo-Saxon root words characterized even her more up-to-date utterances, imparting to all of them an unusual, and to many a quite beautiful, rhythmic, and musical character.

William Marion Reedy, a distinguished and influential literary critic, made a careful study of the Patience Worth scripts, and he spent a great deal of time with Pearl at the Ouija board. And since he was also intrigued by Patience's distinctive lexicon, he consulted an authority on the English language, who studied the case thoroughly, and who confirmed that

the words are not of any given period, nor are they all from one early English locality. They are from almost all the counties and shires and many of them

peculiar locutions to those subdivisions of England. They are always used in their exact original sense. The language, as a whole, is of such a consistency of word-texture as no mere student could use through hundreds and hundreds of thousands of words without an occasional break into the speech of today ... not the most practiced writer of the speech of any special period, except one's very own period, can keep out of his writings the words in which he does his ordinary thinking.[15](#)

Eventually, Pearl Curran was able to abandon the Ouija board and continue to transmit Patience's words through a kind of automatic speech. At first, she uttered Patience's communications letter by letter, but after a few years she saw the complete words in her mind's eye. Moreover, in many or most cases, Patience's communications were apparently accompanied by vivid inner imagery.

If Pearl was in trance during the Patience Worth communications, it was very light. It would probably be more accurate to say that she experienced a state of 'abstraction', as Cory put it, or perhaps distraction.[16](#) Pearl claimed that while she was spelling, she was keenly (and perhaps unusually) aware of her bodily sensations and the reactions of those around her, and she could think about such things as what she would be eating later in the day. Moreover, Pearl noted that 'while I am writing there seems to be no definite place where my consciousness ceases, and that of Patience comes in'.[17](#)

Writing Samples

The literature produced by Patience Worth received very favourable, and sometimes lavishly complimentary, reviews. But apparently because of the works' unusual origin, they were dismissed by many and eventually forgotten altogether. To help the reader appreciate the import of this case, consider the following selections from Patience's oeuvre. They illustrate the diversity and peculiarity of her linguistic styles, and also the beauty, humour, and depth of her expression.

First, however, we should keep in mind that Ouija boards have no provisions for indicating capitalization, punctuation, or parsing into lines, stanzas, and paragraphs. Therefore, all the published and unpublished versions of Patience's communications represent a joint creative venture, involving the source (whatever or whoever it was) of the words and the editor who parses and punctuates them.[18](#)

From a conversation:

Nay, 'tis not the put o' me, the word hereon. 'Tis the put o' me at see o' her. I put athin the see o' her, aye and 'tis the see o' ye that be afulled o' the put o' me, and yet a put thou knowest not.

In part, at least, this seems to mean that when Patience spells out words on the Ouija board, it's not by controlling Pearl's hands. Rather, she communicates directly with Pearl's mind or inner vision,[19](#) and then Pearl spells out what she has 'seen'.

Chapter 4 of *Telka* opens:

A-drip, and drops a-slide 'pon stone walls to pool aneath. A-chill the moon air and mist doth hang 'bout hill like white smock 'bout the shoulders of a wench. Smudge-scant upon the air, and brown fat reeking from crack o' door. A grunt, a shuffle, and door doth ope, and Telka wriggletth bare toes in pool-drip.

From *The Sorry Tale*:

The morn spread forth, the golden tresses of the sun, and lo, a star still rested upon a cloud bar. And Jerusalem slept. The temples stood whited, and the market's place shewed emptied. Upon the temple's pool the morn-sky shewed, and doves bathed within the waters at its edge.

Beside the market's way the camels lay, sunk upon their folded legs, and chewed, their mouths slipping o'er the straw, and tongues thrust forth to pluck up more for chewing. The hides shewed like unto a beggar's skull, hair fallen o'er sores.

The day had waked the tribes, and narrowed streets shewed bearded men, and asses, packed. The temple priests stood forth upon the stoned steps and blew upon the shell that tribesmen come. From out the pillared place the smoke of incense curled, and within the stone made echo of the chants and sandals-fall of foot.

From *Hope Trueblood*

'The man should be held up before the people. He is clothed in the garb of the hypocrite.' I sucked the plum stone and wondered what a hypocrite was and if they were upon the road at night. 'Sally Trueblood's brat!' I looked to the sampler and read slowly, 'God is Love.' And I wondered what a brat was.

Mr. Passwater seemed not to relish his port, and Miss Patricia sipped hers gingerly. I sneezed and Miss Patricia seemed not to hear me, but continued, 'Tis shameful.'

I got from off the hassock and tiptoed over to the castle beneath the glass and stood wrapt. Beside it lay a book of prayer. It was thin and flat and black, and I knew it was Miss Patricia's. From this I went up to the what-all, and the lights played o'er it and I stood before it filled with wonder. Upon the third shelf was a china dog, with a babe upon its back. Oh, to touch this! I turned stealthily and looked to Miss Patricia. She did not see. I reached forth one hand and tiptoed and it was mine. I hugged it close to make sure and the what-all shook and rattled. Miss Patricia was upon her feet in an instant and pounced upon me, taking me within her grasp so suddenly that I let fall the china dog. Miss Patricia gasped:

'A thief! My dear brother William's pet! Oh, that the earth should be so sinful! Rueben Passwater, take this brat out of this house! Shut her out!'

(*Hope Trueblood* is particularly interesting, in that it's clearly intended to be a Victorian novel, the style of which Patience captured quite successfully. But of course, Patience claimed to live in the seventeenth century. Interestingly, the

publisher of this work had a sense of humour, noting on the book's dust jacket that it is 'A Mid-Victorian Novel by a Pre-Victorian Writer'.)

Poems

The Sounds Unheard By Man

I have heard the moon's beams sweeping the waters,
Making a sound like threads of silver, wept upon.
I have heard the scratch of the pulsing stars,
And the purring sound of the slow moon as she rolled across the night.
I have heard the shadows slapping the waters,
And the licking sound of the wave's edge as it sinks into the sand upon the shore.

>I have heard the sunlight as it pierced the gloom with a golden bar
Which whirred in a voice of myriad colors.
I have heard the sound which lay between the atoms which danced in the golden bar.
I have heard the sound of the leaves reclining upon their cushions of air,
And the swish of the willow-tassels as the wind whistled upon them,
And the sharp sound which the crawling mites proclaim upon the grasses' blades,
And the multitudes of sounds which lie at the root of things.
Oh, I have heard the song of resurrection which each seed makes as it spurts.
I have heard the sound of the night's first shadow when it intermingles with the day,
And the rushing sound of Morning's wings as she flies o'er the Eastern gateway.

All of these have I heard.
Yet man hath not an ear for them.
Behold, the miracle He hath writ within me,
Letting the chord of Imagination strum!

The Sounds of Men

I have heard the music men make,
Which is discord proclaimed through egotry.
I have heard the churning of water by man's cunning,
And the shrieking of throttles which man addeth unto the day's symphony.
I have heard the pound of implements and the clatter of blades.
I have heard the crushing blasts of destruction.
I have heard old men laugh,
And their laughs were rusted as old vessels in which brine were kept.
I have heard women chatter like crows o'er carrion
And laugh as a magpie o'er a worm.

I have beheld all of these and heard them.
Men have ears for such.
And the mystery of man is that he should present them and cry,
'Sing! Sing, poet! Sing!'

Patience Worth

A phantom? Weel enough,
Prove thyself to me!
I say, behold, here I be,
Buskins, kirtle, cap and pettyskirts,
And much tongue!
Weel, what hast thou to prove thee?

Who Said That Love Was Fire?

Who said that love was fire?
I know that love is ash.
It is the thing which remains
When the fire is spent,
The holy essence of experience.

Father, Is This Thy Will?

Father, is this Thy will?
God, the din!
Blood, thick-crust'd, still living, I saw it fall unto the dust.
Hunger, gnawing like a wolf
Whose teeth do whet upon my vitals,
Crouching before me—
A hideous thing, whose hands show dripping,
And whose tongue doth feed upon the new-sprung streams,
Licking life from living things!

Father, is this Thy will?
Damn the discord garrulously belched forth from burning throats!
Hell is within the eyes that look across the wastes!
Hell crawls upon the earth, dragging her robe of fire,
Sprinkled of scarlet, its hem;
And the sound it makes upon its trailing way
Is like the shriek of womankind in labor!

Aphorisms

No man is wearied sorer than he who is weary of himself.

Resolve is a lazy workman.

No man whose belly is soured thinketh sweet.

When a fool becomes wise he falls silent.

Jealousy is the blade that slays love.

Stunts of Composition

Part of the mystery of the Patience Worth case stems from the intellectual and literary merit of Patience's productions. We need to explain how outstanding literature and penetrating, scintillating conversation could emerge spontaneously in a person apparently lacking the requisite training, interest, and general background, and in the absence of prior indications of even similar creative abilities. The mystery deepens, however, when we examine the virtuosic and possibly unprecedented compositional feats Patience was able to perform on demand. These go beyond the already impressive ability to improvise poems on whatever topics her sitters proposed, and they may reveal a level or type of creativity never before recorded. They also go beyond the astonishing mnemonic ability to continue work on a novel or long poem which Patience had interrupted several days before, sometimes in mid-sentence.

Some of the challenges presented to Pearl/Patience resemble others noted in the literature on automatic writing—in particular, the simultaneous carrying out of more than one task.²⁰ However, it's probable that the tasks requested of Pearl/Patience demand a higher level of creativity than those traditionally performed by even the best automatists.

For example, on 6 May 1920, Walter Prince asked Patience to dictate a poem to John Curran while Pearl simultaneously wrote a letter to a friend. On several occasions, Patience accepted the challenge of composing, and alternating passages between, works in different styles. For example, on 19 May 1919, Patience produced a literary stew in which she wrote about 200 words of the novel *Merry Tale*, then wrote a portion of another story, *Samuel Wheaton*, and then began a poem which she interrupted with passages from the *Merry Tale*. And on 18 February 1926, she accepted a challenge from Prince to switch between two literary tasks. First, Patience was to produce a dialogue, in her characteristic archaic dialect, between a lout and a wench at a fair. Then she was to intersperse passages of the dialogue with the lines of a poem, to be written on *The Folly of Atheism*. About eight seconds passed before dictation began, and it continued without interruption as quickly as it could be written down.

The day before, Prince had challenged Patience with an even more daunting task. He asked Patience to write lines beginning with each of the letters of the alphabet, except X, in order. This, too, was produced as quickly as it could be taken down in shorthand.

The Theoretical Challenge

It is important to remember that that the Patience Worth scripts offer no real evidence for the existence of a person corresponding to the Patience Worth persona. Since the case began, investigators have tried unsuccessfully to locate a real Patience. And today, despite the availability of extensive computerized records and careful searches conducted both in the US and the UK, the evidential value of the case remains the same.²¹

Keeping that in mind, the Patience Worth case is remarkable and important to this inquiry for several related reasons.

(1) The phenomena began suddenly in a thirty-one year-old woman, and the evidence is overwhelming that Pearl's previous behaviour never suggested that she possessed the intellectual, mnemonic, and creative powers of Patience Worth. Nor had she ever expressed an interest in literature, the Bible, or arcane areas of linguistic and historical research. Nor had she associated with scholars or others particularly interested in those subjects.

(2) Naturally, it takes time for the complex patterns, dispositions, and idiosyncracies of a personality to manifest in behaviour. But whereas personalities typically develop gradually over extended periods of time, the robust and talented persona of Patience Worth apparently emerged fully formed from the beginning. Patience's humour, rich imagination, characteristic wisdom, and perspectives on life were apparent from the outset, and even more important, so were her creative abilities. Furthermore, Patience's ability to write in different literary forms and styles underwent no detectable period of development. From the start, she seemed able to write whatever she wanted, in any style she chose (and on any subject suggested), as soon as she attempted it.

(3) The Patience Worth scripts reveal an extensive knowledge of obsolete, archaic, and dialectical locutions, some probably never used in the United States. Thouless claimed that some of those words 'have only been tracked down by scholars after they had appeared in the Patience Worth scripts'.²² But it's unclear what his evidence is for that claim. Prince (and others) claimed only that Patience used some very rare words that display a philological expertise greatly incommensurate with Pearl's background. We also know that experts in English dialects were occasionally consulted for their opinions regarding the scripts. So it seems clear that many of Patience's locutions were unfamiliar even to well-educated readers. But there seems to be no evidence that Patience used words known to no scholars at the time the scripts were written, and only then tracked down (which is what Thouless seems to say). Still, it's probably fair to say that Patience used words which, at best, were known only to relatively few, and that it took a fair amount of digging to confirm correspondences between Patience's dialect and what was probably spoken in the area of Dorset around the time Patience claimed to live.

Moreover, Patience's writing revealed enough historical and geographical knowledge to provide convincing background to her works. For example, it was sufficient to persuade English readers that the Victorian novel *Hope Trueblood* was written by a native and to make *The Sorry Tale* a historically credible (although not infallible) depiction of biblical times. Ordinarily, the knowledge needed to accomplish this requires years of study, and there's no reason to think that Pearl Curran ever had either the interest in or the requisite exposure to the subjects.

(4) The Patience Worth scripts illustrate special, and possibly unprecedented, creative and intellectual capacities. As Prince described it, Pearl/Patience had the ability to

compose poetry, or long and complex narratives, with perfect continuity and ordered development, (a) by a stream of letters issuing with lightning rapidity from the lips, (b) in the presence of groups of people, (c) paying attention at the same time to a vivid visual accompaniment, (d) stopping with ease to describe the imagery, to converse on relevant or irrelevant matters, or to answer the telephone or the doorbell, and to resume without breaking the connection, (e) and thus to compose, on one occasion, about 5,000 words, within three hours, on a difficult and dramatic part of the narrative, (f) laying the story aside and sometimes lending it out of the house, and resuming without difficulty, whether two days or two weeks later. All this involves phenomenal memory, phenomenal speed, and phenomenal complexity of mental operations. Also ability to pass at will from a style which is ninety per cent Anglo-Saxon ... to a style as different and as modern as that of *Lorna Doone* or *Jane Eyre*. Also the ability to compose in the presence of an audience in almost instant response to subjects given her, with no declension in average quality, and also, in response to chance remarks to fling off aphorisms of unsurpassed quality, sounding as though derived from the lore of ages. And also ability to perform a variety of intellectual stunts impossible to at least most people, such as the intermingling of two compositions on two widely different subjects given her, and in widely different styles.²³

Non-Survivalist Conjectures

Some might think that *Patience* represents an improvisational ability that many people possess, but which ordinarily requires a certain amount of courage, and also the support of an accepting and nurturing environment, in order to emerge and develop. Walter Prince considered that suggestion. He noted that many people may have largely undeveloped improvisational ability. He also granted the possibility that at one time people often extemporized verse for informal gatherings, and that because this is no longer a common activity, we're now less accustomed to exercising that skill and less comfortable attempting it. Nevertheless (he noted), it is one thing to improvise free verse, and another to do it to a degree that would attract the attention and praise of literary experts. Even if we grant that many can do the former, it's unlikely that more than a few have ever been able to do the latter. So even if *Patience Worth* is a creative *tour de force* of Pearl Curran, it is unlikely that *Patience* was produced by nothing more extraordinary than our relatively mundane and widespread improvisational capacities. Moreover, to ad-lib poetry and compose fiction without the need of revision, and to perform the virtuosic stunts of composition *Patience* accomplished so frequently and so readily, is (arguably) an ability of a higher—or at least a different—order still.

Prince also considered whether *Patience's* literary ability was a (possibly latent) type of facility which many people might possess, but which might only be fostered or revealed in dissociative or other altered or highly unusual states. He wrote,

I have seen hundreds of automatic, dreamed and 'inspirational' compositions, and some of them seem to indicate sporadic transcendence of normal and conscious ability. But the rule is that such compositions, whether of unliterary and normally ungifted persons or literary and normally gifted ones, transcend

their usual output by about the same ratio. That is, *sometimes* persons of the former class can automatically or semi-automatically do a little better than they can by conscious effort, and sometimes persons of the latter class can do a little better than they can by conscious effort. It was Coleridge, a man of manifested poetic genius, a voluminous reader and a scholar, who dreamed out 'Kubla Khan'. It was Stephen Crane, a man of marked literary ability, out of whom a sheaf of poems 'boiled' without effort, surpassing his average excellence. But neither these nor any other literary men of whom I have heard was able to depend upon, and to command such a method habitually, as does Mrs. Curran.[24](#)

Clearly, one of the first issues to confront is the apparent disparity between Pearl's demonstrated abilities and those of Patience. Does that suggest that Patience's skills must be ascribed to an intelligence other than Pearl?

First, it should be noted that savants exhibit striking discrepancies between skills, even within the same domain of abilities. Of course, Pearl had none of the deficits of a savant. In fact, she seemed not only normal but also quite intelligent. Prince commented, 'her intelligence is above the average, and in ordinary conversation she shines more by virtue of that intelligence than many who have received a greater education'.[25](#) But it turns out that the surprising disparity of abilities noted with savants occurs also among the exceptionally gifted. For instance, in Baumgarten's study of nine child prodigies,[26](#) she found that

violinists and pianists demonstrated poor hand coordination in bending wire, drawing, and folding and cutting—though one girl violinist had a talent for drawing. Additionally, a 6-year-old boy showing difficulty in making a circle out of two or three sections or a pentagon from two sections was, at the same time, extraordinarily good at map drawing.[27](#)

Moreover, various converging lines of research show that 'giftedness, rather than being a generalized endowment (that is, extending to all or most aspects of cognitive development), is *domain-specific*'.[28](#) But in that case, it would be a mistake to infer that Pearl couldn't possess Patience's literary gifts simply because she failed to demonstrate talent in other areas.

This isn't the only intriguing similarity between Pearl's history and the life-profile emerging from research into exceptionally intelligent and gifted people. Morelock and Feldman note how highly gifted children 'may fail to exhibit the interest and enthusiasm others expect of gifted children'.[29](#) That seems clearly to have been the case with Pearl. In fact, Pearl also exhibited a related characteristic of the gifted child: namely, troubles at school. As Pearl admitted, from a very early age she found school boring and her teachers uninteresting. That, too, often happens with prodigiously bright children whose education is geared toward those of only average intelligence (and whose teachers, needless to say, may likewise be distressingly ordinary and uninspiring). Perhaps Pearl's teenage breakdown reflected, among other things, the stress of trying to make herself far more ordinary and conventional than she really was. Morelock and Feldman also observe an important tension in the life of extraordinarily gifted children: between (on the one hand) developing and expressing one's gifts and (on the other) establishing peer

relationships. They note that in some cases the former yields to the latter. It wouldn't be surprising if something of the sort happened to Pearl. Perhaps the pressure to conform and Pearl's desire to be accepted outweighed the development of her intellectual and creative gifts.

But why did Pearl give no signs of Patience's literary and intellectual gifts until she was an adult? Interestingly, there is reason to think that Pearl's literary and other intellectual gifts were *unlikely* to emerge early. As Morelock and Feldman observe,

Prodigious achievement can only occur within domains accessible to children. This means that the domains must require little prerequisite knowledge and be both meaningful and attractive to children. Equally important is the adaptability of the domain's media and techniques to children (e.g., child-size violins are necessary for child prodigy violinists). Given these prerequisites, music performance and chess seem especially amenable to budding prodigies—as is substantiated by the fact that the largest proportion of child prodigies in recent decades emerge from these fields. Other fields produce comparatively few prodigies.³⁰

So perhaps we should view Pearl Curran as a kind of gifted underachiever, at least until Patience Worth emerged at the Ouija board. Perhaps Pearl was an unusually intelligent child whose abilities and potential were stunted, at least temporarily, by traditional turn-of-the-century expectations regarding appropriate female behaviour. For example, Pearl may have been a victim of a 'general cultural undervaluing of feminine achievement'³¹ and nonsupportive child-rearing patterns passed down in the family through many generations. In fact, it is plausible that many would have found Patience's feisty personality, acerbic wit, and unorthodox views on both formal education and organized religion unacceptable coming from Pearl. But since Pearl seemed merely to be a medium for those personality traits and views (however charming some may have found them), she didn't have to accept responsibility for their expression. Furthermore, mediumship was an already familiar and acceptable female role; women had been attaining some prominence as mediums since the mid-nineteenth century. So we can conjecture, reasonably, that Patience allowed Pearl to express deeply felt but unpopular opinions, and also otherwise hidden and potentially abrasive personality traits, without taking any personal risk and without having to break from her relatively safe and conventional female roles.

But even if these larger social and familial forces hadn't played a role, it is reasonable to conjecture that Pearl's natural gifts would have received little if any support from her family. Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Menuhin were born into families that appreciated their gifts and also had the means and desire to nurture them. If these musical prodigies had been raised in much less supportive family environments, it's probable that their gifts would either (a) not have surfaced at all, (b) manifested in less flamboyant and impressive ways, or (c) surfaced only later, after the musicians found an environment in which their gifts could be discovered and nurtured. But Pearl was raised in conditions that one observer described as 'strained ..., financially speaking'³² He also noted, 'Her [early] surroundings were such as to be anything but "inspiring"'.³³ Pearl also wrote how at one point 'Father

had lost everything financially and mother was ill and nervous'.³⁴ Moreover, she commented on how depressing and uninspiring her environment was.

For example, she wrote, 'we moved to Palmer, Mo., where my father was secretary of the Renault Lead Co. I did not like it there; I wanted to learn, to know and to see life ... I wanted life and here was desolation'.³⁵

Prince, too, commented on Pearl's environment. Although he was remarking on the absence of opportunities for acquiring Patience's distinctive vocabulary, his observations apply generally to Pearl's intellectual development. While mentioning 'the extreme unlikelihood of [Pearl's] acquiring a taste and pursuing studies ... under the circumstances of her life', Prince asked,

Where was she likely to have done so, in the common schools of Texas and on the prairies? In the school in St. Louis where she was put back for deficiency in studies, and which she left at fourteen, going to Palmer? In the mining villages of Palmer and Potosi? While in Chicago laboring as a clerk and spending her spare time in practicing music? In her intervals back from Chicago in the uninspiring little towns of Potosi, Irondale, and Bismarck ... ?³⁶

Does it help to suppose, as Cory does, that Patience Worth existed for some time as a self-conscious alternate personality and gradually developed the cognitive powers and characteristics that emerged full-blown in 1913? Prince objected to that proposal. He wondered, reasonably, whether the personality, Patience Worth, could have existed for so long with no prior signs of its existence, or any other indications of Pearl being dissociative. That is, he doubted whether an alternate personality could have been practising and developing literary skills for years, never doing anything detectable by ordinary observation, until a year after Pearl began experimenting with the Ouija board.

Survivalist Conjectures

The advantages of a survivalist explanation are clear enough. It would explain the sudden appearance in Pearl Curran of Patience's mature talents. One would simply posit that the fully developed personality already existed in a discarnate form and simply manifested through Pearl at a propitious time. Moreover, a survivalist hypothesis could presumably explain Pearl's anomalous knowledge of ancient and Victorian times as well as archaic locutions. However, that also seems explicable in terms of (a) Pearl's intelligence and mnemonic abilities, (b) her perhaps only passing exposure to relevant information from books and conversations, and (c) ESP of other pertinent facts. At any rate, these are the only advantages of the survival hypothesis. Too many other serious questions remain unanswered, perhaps even more than arise in connection with non-survivalist explanations.

First, the Patience Worth case is simply non-evidential. Despite diligent research, no one has discovered a previously existing individual even roughly corresponding to the Patience persona. So the Patience Worth case is ostensibly a case of survival only in form, not in substance.

Still, we might wonder how much the discovery of a real Patience Worth would bolster a survivalist interpretation of the case. Perhaps surprisingly, the answer is that it would make almost no difference. Let us suppose that we discover the existence of someone named Patience Worth, who lived at about the right time and place. Now we know that no one, from that or any time, was ever reputed to have demonstrated the creative gifts manifested by Pearl Curran's Patience persona. So how do we explain why, if a corresponding Patience Worth actually existed, no one remarked on her improvisational prowess and no body of works survived? It seems extremely unlikely that Patience would have exhibited those abilities without someone documenting them and without Patience leaving a legacy of compositions for posterity.

So if Patience Worth existed, presumably she never demonstrated any striking literary or creative talents. And if so, that seems to leave two options. First, the real Patience might have had the abilities of the persona 'Patience' but never expressed or demonstrated them to anyone. More plausibly, however, we could regard the real Patience as someone without any notable literary or creative talent. And in that case—unless the correspondence to Pearl's 'Patience' is merely a coincidence—she would simply be a 'hook' (so to speak) on which to hang Pearl's latent abilities and deflect responsibility for behaviour which would have been personally risky for Pearl to present as her own. Recall that the Patience persona gave very few confirmable details about her alleged former life. Even if all of those details were subsequently confirmed, we could easily suppose them to have been obtained by a relatively modest application of ESP (no greater, apparently, than the achievements of the best remote viewers). The only way the discovery of a real Patience would actually strengthen the survivalist view would be if there were additional evidence that the real Patience had creative gifts roughly comparable to those exhibited by Pearl. Otherwise, the discovery of a real Patience is, at best, neutral with respect to the two options just mentioned.

Moreover, we might wonder 'why, if Patience Worth is a discarnate spirit, she did not manifest herself until two hundred and fifty years after her alleged death'.³⁷ We might also wonder, along with Clowe, 'why, among the many millions of living persons during the two hundred and fifty years after the alleged death of Patience Worth, only Mrs. C. was found as a medium of manifestation'.³⁸ No doubt survivalists could propose various scenarios to accommodate the facts, but they'd have to be even more speculative than the proposals considered in the previous section, concerning the relatively humdrum psychogenesis of the Patience persona.

Furthermore, as Schiller noted, the spirit-possession theory (as he called it) 'seems too good to be true'.

Never before has a 'spirit' found such complete and unobstructed expression through a 'medium'; never before has a 'spirit' given such convincing proofs of the reality of progress in the spirit-world, as those which have turned 'Patience Worth' from an illiterate servant girl of the seventeenth century into the literary character of the twentieth. If she is indeed a spirit she must be congratulated on her success in surmounting difficulties which have baffled many more pretentious communicators.³⁹

Concluding Remarks

The Patience Worth case seems no less mysterious today than it did initially. That's probably why commentators tend to endorse Prince's conclusion that

*either our concept of what we call the subconscious must be radically altered, so as to include potencies of which we hitherto have had no knowledge, or else some cause operating through but not originating in the subconsciousness of Mrs. Curran must be acknowledged.*⁴⁰ (Emphasis in the original)

However, perhaps we can be somewhat less noncommittal about the interpretation and import of the Patience Worth case. For the reasons considered above, it seems that a survivalist interpretation of the case simply leaves too great a residue of mysteries. By contrast, we can formulate a credible, although largely unsubstantiated, account of the psychogenesis of the Patience Worth persona, and we can explain Pearl's creative facility and anomalous knowledge in terms of latent capacities and (presumably psychic) processes for which we have independent evidence. For that reason, some may prefer to echo Schiller's comment that 'it is ... safer to credit "Patience Worth" to the unconscious and to classify her, officially, as Mrs. Curran's "secondary self"'.⁴¹

Thus, the Patience Worth case illustrates why one must take very seriously non-survivalist interpretations of more evidential cases. If Pearl Curran could tap into the latent creative capacities needed to produce the Patience Worth scripts, and if she could use her psychic abilities to access obscure but relevant chunks of historical and linguistic information, then presumably similar feats can occur in cases where verified information is provided about a previous personality. So the Patience Worth case reminds us to be very circumspect in rejecting non-survivalist explanations of the better cases. Moreover, and perhaps most important, the case is a humbling reminder that there is much still to learn about the human mind.

Stephen Braude

This article is adapted from a more detailed consideration in Stephen Braude, *Immortal Remains: The Evidence for Life after Death* (2003).

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Prince (1927/1964), 11.
- [2](#). Prince (1927/1964), 12.
- [3](#). Prince (1927/1964), 13.
- [4](#). Prince (1927/1964), 16.
- [5](#). Prince (1927/1964), 5.
- [6](#). Prince (1927/1964), 20.
- [7](#). Prince (1927/1964), 15.
- [8](#). Prince (1927/1964), 21.
- [9](#). Prince (1927/1964), 21-30.
- [10](#). Prince (1927/1964), 445.
- [11](#). Prince (1927/1964), 446.
- [12](#). Prince (1927/1964), 446.
- [13](#). Prince (1927/1964), 36.
- [14](#). Prince (1927/1964), 342-43.
- [15](#). Litvag (1972), 58.
- [16](#). Cory (1919), 401; Prince (1927/1964), 431.
- [17](#). Prince (1927/1964), 398.
- [18](#). The poems have been reparsed by the author.
- [19](#). Presumably that is why Pearl was able to abandon the ouija board in favor of speaking the letters, and then finally whole words.
- [20](#). Braude (1995); Gauld (1992).
- [21](#). For some details on the searches, see Braude (2003).
- [22](#). Thouless (1959), 142.
- [23](#). Prince (1927/1964), 487-88.
- [24](#). Prince (1927/1964), 473.
- [25](#). Prince (1927/1964), 492-93n.
- [26](#). Baumgarten (1930).
- [27](#). Morelock & Feldman (1991), 353.

- [28.](#) Morelock & Feldman (1991), 354, (*italics in original*).
- [29.](#) Morelock & Feldman (1991), 351.
- [30.](#) Morelock & Feldman (1991), 355.
- [31.](#) Morelock & Feldman (1991), 355.
- [32.](#) Prince (1927/1964), 22.
- [33.](#) Prince (1927/1964), 23.
- [34.](#) Prince (1927/1964), 14.
- [35.](#) Prince (1927/1964), 14.
- [36.](#) Prince (1927/1964), 492.
- [37.](#) Clowe (1949), 76.
- [38.](#) Clowe (1949) 76.
- [39.](#) Schiller (1928), 575.
- [40.](#) Prince (1927/1964), 509.
- [41.](#) Schiller (1928), 576.

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