

Luminous Phenomena at Death: The Case of the Monk Family

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Abstract – Over the years there have been reports of perceptions of mists, lights and spirit bodies floating over or coming out of dying persons. This paper contains a reprint of the account of a case published by a lady called Dorothy Monk in 1922 in *Light*. Monk reported collective perceptions of lights and mists around the body of her mother. The case is discussed in terms of the features it presents and in relation to other reports. While impressive, the case, like so many of this type, lacks the presentation of independent testimony to support collective percipience. It is argued that, in addition to carefully collected testimony, future studies should collect information about the psychological profile and previous psychic experiences of percipients.

Keywords: Shared death experiences – death bystander experiences – Dorothy Monk– luminous phenomena at death

Lichtphänomene bei Sterbenden: Der Fall der Familie Monk

Zusammenfassung – Im Laufe der Jahre gab es immer wieder Berichte über Wahrnehmungen von Nebeln, Lichtern und feinstofflichen Körpern, die über sterbenden Menschen schwebten oder aus ihnen heraustraten. Dieser Aufsatz enthält einen Nachdruck des Berichts über einen Fall, der von einer Dame namens Dorothy Monk 1922 in *Light* veröffentlicht wurde. Monk berichtete über kollektive Wahrnehmungen von Lichtern und Nebeln um den Körper ihrer Mutter. Der Fall wird

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im Hinblick auf seine Merkmale und in seinem Verhältnis zu anderen Berichten erörtert. Obwohl beeindruckend, fehlt dem Fall, wie bei so vielen dieser Art, eine unabhängige Zeugenaussage, die die kollektive Wahrnehmung stützt. Es wird argumentiert, dass zukünftige Studien zusätzlich zu sorgfältig gesammelten Zeugenaussagen Informationen über das psychologische Profil und frühere psychische Erfahrungen der Wahrnehmenden sammeln sollten.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Gemeinsame Todeserfahrungen – Erfahrungen von Umstehenden am Sterbebett – Dorothy Monk – Lichtphänomene bei Sterbenden

Introduction

In a previous study of luminous phenomena one of us presented many examples of published cases in which luminous effects were seen around various individuals (Alvarado, 1987). The paper had cases as those occurring to mediums, mystics and saints, various other persons, and dying individuals. The latter cases have also been briefly discussed in surveys of unusual phenomena near death by the other author (Nahm, 2011; see especially Chapter 8 in Nahm, 2012). In the present article, we discuss in detail such a deathbed case of luminous phenomena and reprint the original report in full.

The case in question was written by a lady called Dorothy Monk (1922), and was published in the spiritualist magazine *Light*. It consisted of luminous phenomena and mists seen around the body of the mother of the writer by her, as well as by other members of the family as the lady in question was dying. This is part of a literature about deathbed phenomena consisting of perception of lights, mists, or spirit forms seen hovering above or coming out of the body of the moribund, perceptions that sometimes are collective.

We reprint and discuss Monk's report here for three main reasons. First, although the case has been mentioned before in the modern literature (e.g., Alvarado, 1987, 2006b; Crookall, 1967; Muldoon & Carrington, 1951; Nahm, 2012), it does not seem to be too well-known today. Second, the case presents very interesting features deserving attention, such as mists, colors, and collective experiences. Third, it is our hope that discussion of cases of this sort, a rarity in the modern literature, will encourage new investigations presented with more details than those of more popular descriptions of cases (Moody, with Perry, 2010; Wills-Brandon, 2000).

Deathbed Bystander Observations Cases

There is a long history of discussions and analyses of deathbed visions in which the dying person sees things such as family members (for overviews see Alvarado, 2014; Rogo, 1978; Sherwood, 2009). But here we are focusing on visions seen by bystanders around a deathbed,

cases consisting of visions of mists, lights, and subtle bodies seen emanating or floating close by to a dying individual. Cases of this sort are part of an ancient belief in the idea that spirits and subtle bodies leave the body at death.³ Examples have been described from dying mystics and saints of Western traditions (Görres, 1837; Wills-Brandon, 2000), but they were also reported by indigenous people from regions such as Tahiti and Papua (Bozzano, 1927). An extensive case description that had considerable influence on the spiritualistic scene developing in the second half of the nineteenth century was published by the “Poughkeepsie-seer” Andrew Jackson Davis (1850).

Such observations have been discussed by several authors. A prominent one has been Italian student of psychic phenomena Ernesto Bozzano (e.g., 1923, 1934, 1947, n.d.), who promoted the view that these phenomena were the release of an etheric body from the physical one and that they implied the survival of consciousness after the dissolution of the body.⁴ The sixth chapter of William Barrett’s (1926) well-known book *Death-Bed Visions* was about “Visions of the Spirit of a Dying Person Leaving the Body.” Although there has been little modern scientific investigations on the subject (for an exception see Fenwick, Lovelace, & Brayne, 2010), over the years several authors have recognized the existence of these cases (e.g., Alvarado, 2006b; Alvarado & Zingrone, 2014; Nahm, 2011, 2012), most of them in the context of the idea of survival of bodily death (e.g., Becker, 1993; Crookall, 1967; Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008; Muldoon & Carrington, 1951; Nahm, 2011, 2012; Rogo, 1973). In addition to popular books, the topic has also been discussed in the web (see, respectively, Moody, with Perry, 2010; Tymn, 2010).

One of us has briefly reported on a compilation of 142 cases published during around two centuries (Nahm, 2011, 2012). This included 113 cases of dying persons in which bystanders reported mists or luminous mists leaving the body of the dying. In 58 of these cases, these mists assumed the shape of a double of the dying. In addition to these 113 accounts of mists and clouds, 29 cases of “luminous halos, radiances, or flame-like protuberances emanating predominantly from the head of the dying” were reported (p. 468).

An interesting case of mist was recorded by Louisa May Alcott in her diary in 1858 about her sister’s death: “A few moments after the last breath came, as Mother and I sat silently watching the shadow fall on the dear little face, I saw a light mist rise from the body, and float up and vanish

3 For examples of discussions of ancient ideas about death and subtle bodies see, respectively, Long (2019) and Poortman (1954/1978). We refer interested readers to several articles by one of us about selected ideas of subtle bodies from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Alvarado, 2009, 2011, 2019, in press). We are not concerned here with other visions by observers around deathbeds, such as seeing and hearing spirits, hearing music, and perceiving experiences by the dying person (their visions, panoramic memory) (Moody, with Perry, 2010; Nahm, 2011, 2012).

4 On Bozzano and these phenomena see Alvarado (2005, in press).

in the air. Mother's eyes followed mine, and when I said, 'What did you see?' she described the same light mist" (Cheney, 1890: 98). Other cases consist of luminous effects, as seen in one in which a halo was seen around the head of a dying woman, which "was at first pale in color, but gradually deepened to a rich purple," which also showed other features (Tweedale, 1921). The Monk (1922) case reprinted here consisted mainly of luminous effects, but also included cloudy formations. This shows how various features can be combined in a single case.

Then there are the mentioned cases in which doubles of the dying are described. An example, among many, is a case involving a dying child: "Then I saw mist above the little body. It took the shape of the body which lay on the bed. This was attached by a very fine silver cord. The replica was about three feet from the body on the bed. It rose gradually to above five feet above the body, then gradually lifted itself into an upright position. It then floated away" (Crookall, 1967: 40; see also "Hallucinations", 1908).

The accounts of luminous or misty emanations from the dying have not had the systematic attention that cases of visions seen only by the dying person have received, as seen in the studies in which researchers have not only analyzed many cases, but also have systematically explored many other variables related to the perceivers (e. g., Fenwick & Brayne, 2011; Morita et al., 2016; Osis, 1961; Osis & Haraldsson, 1986). Over the years there have only been single case reports of the bystander type (e. g., Hallucination, 1908; McAdams, 1984; Tweedale, 1921).⁵

The Monk Case

The case reprinted below is one of the most dramatic ones on record (Monk, 1922). Here it is, as it appeared in *Light* (Monk, 1922).

The Process of Dying Witnessed by Eight Persons: Visible Evidences of the Spirit Body

In our home we had a strange experience at the death bed of our mother, who left us on January 2nd. It has impressed us so much that I am wondering if you could give us an explanation of what we saw. After a long illness, terminating with gastric influenza, mother died of heart failure. Our doctor gave her morphia to relieve the pain on Saturday morning, December 31st, and she slept peacefully until late afternoon, when she gradually roused, but never again became fully conscious. She was frightfully restless, and as the evening wore on she continually spoke the names of her father, mother, and three sisters, also my brother who died before I was born, and once she said "Jesus." All through the

5 See also the questionnaire study of Fenwick, Lovelace and Brayne (2010). Some older cases appear in De Morgan (1863, Chapter 3); Marryat (1895: 124–126); Moses (1887), and *Spiritual Birth* (1856). Particularly interesting are the experiences of clairvoyants such as Andrew Jackson Davis (1850), Riblet B. Hout (1935), and Joy Snell (1918).

night our family, consisting of father, a brother, five sisters and myself, watched by her; an old friend of hers was also there, but no change occurred. It went on so until mid-day Sunday, January 1st, when I had an overwhelming desire to stretch my hands over her; I did so and almost immediately she became quieter. Her hands had continually been going to her head, and caught in her hair, but when I saw her hand[s] going up, I put mine over her head without touching it, and her hands dropped again. For three hours I did this without feeling the strain. Very gradually she quieted down and only spoke once after I started, calling her sister's name twice. During the afternoon we saw bright blue lights, sometimes near her and sometimes about the room. We could only see them for a second or two, and usually only one or two of us at a time. I watched carefully, and three times out of four when I saw one near her she stirred and endeavoured to speak, but was past it by this time. At dusk that afternoon as she lay perfectly quiet, I and three sisters all at once noticed a pale blue mauve haze all over her as she lay. We watched it and very gradually it deepened in colour until it became a deep purple, so thick that it almost blotted out her features from view, and spread all in the folds of the bed-clothes like a purple fog. Once or twice she feebly moved her arms and the colour travelled with them. We thought it very wonderful, so called the two remaining sisters to see if they could see it too, and they could. At this time our sister saw a grey smoke-like object pass between two chairs; it was about three feet high and just glided away from the bed. I was sitting there, but did not see it. As we watched very gradually patches of bright yellow light, like sunlight, appeared on the pillow; one at the left side of her head was particularly bright sometimes, and then would slowly dim and once more become bright again. Mother's old friend was also in the room during this time, but she neither saw the purple mist around mother nor the blue lights, and said that our eyes were tired with watching and that we were over-wrought. We drew her attention to this very bright patch on the pillow and she saw it, but said it was the reflection of the fire or gaslight; we screened both, and she then went round the room and moved pictures and photograph frames and tilted the mirror, but without making any difference to the light. At last she came and put her hands directly over it, but without shading it in any degree; after that she sat down without saying a word.

Early in the evening I saw my eldest sister, and the other sister who saw the grey object before, both turn and look at the same time to the place where it had appeared, and they saw it once more; again I did not see it but they both did, and both agreed as to the description. The sister who first saw it about this time rise saw a large blue globe-like light resting on mother's head, but none of the rest of us could see it. She explained that the inside appeared all moving and gradually it turned to deep purple and faded out.

About seven o'clock that evening mother's lips parted and from that time we gradually saw a thick white mist collect above her head and spread across the head of the bed. It came from the top of her head, but collected more thickly to the opposite side of the bed to which she was lying. It hung like a cloud of white steam, sometimes so thick we could scarcely see the bed rails, but continually it was varying although it moved so slowly as to be scarcely perceptible. I and my five sisters were still with her and all saw it distinctly, also my brother and one brother-in-law. The blue lights continued about the room, also

tiny flashes of yellow, like sparks, appeared sometimes. All the time mother's lower jaw gradually fell a little. For some hours we saw little difference except that a halo of pale yellow light rays came round her head; there were about seven in number; they varied in length from twelve to twenty inches at different times. By midnight everything had cleared off, but she did not die until 7.17 on the morning of January 2nd. At 6.15, one sister, who was resting in another room, heard a voice say, "Another hour now—another hour now"; it roused her, and she came back to mother who finally breathed her last one hour and two minutes later. The passing had been so very, very gradual that the last three breaths that were deeper than they had been came and went without the least disturbance.

We performed the last duties to her ourselves, and covered her body with a sheet, and the soft purple haze that we had previously seen, hung all over, and we came away and left it. We feel God has indeed been good to let us see so far, it has taken out the sting of parting and made us feel that mother was in reality received with such care when she got past our aid.

Remarks About the Case

The Monk case illustrates the occurrence of these phenomena in family circles and the impact of the experience, at least on the narrator. Furthermore, this account shows an interesting variety of phenomena. These were things such as seeing: blue lights (near the dying woman and around the room), a blue haze over the body, "grey smoke-like objects," "patches of bright yellow light," a "blue globe-like light," a "thick white mist" around Mrs. Monk's head, and light rays. In addition, a voice was heard. The experiences lasted many hours, going from one day to another.

Some of the descriptions were unusual, as when Monk referred to "light rays ... round her head; ... about seven in number; ... [which] varied in length from twelve to twenty inches at different times." Similarly, the account refers to changes in the blue haze, becoming deep purple, and to changes in brightness in the patches of light. The phenomenon, regardless of its explanation, was a dynamic one.

The case is also valuable in terms of the number of people perceiving the phenomena. There was some evidence of collective percipience when Monk stated that the white mist was seen by her, as well as by five sisters, a brother, and a brother in law. However, it is not always clear how often this took place. One of the weaknesses of the report is that we are presented only with Dorothy Monk's account, and not with the accounts of all the witnesses, as has been done in the past in some studies about apparitions and other experiences (e. g., Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886). One thing is to say that others saw the same thing, and another is corroborating this with actual testimony, a problem we still have in recent accounts of bystander death-bed phenomena (Moody, with Perry, 2010). Without such information one cannot be sure if the various perceptions were actually identical, or if there were differences.

The editor of *Light* preceded the account with a statement saying: “Miss Dorothy Monk ... was, it will be seen, not the only witness. We have seen her and other members of her family, who agree in their descriptions of the manifestations of light and color which accompanied the mother’s departure.” But unfortunately this does not answer the questions we ask above.

On another issue, Monk’s account presents evidence of selective percipience, that is, of instances in which people saw different things. In part of the account it was stated that blue lights were only seen by “one or two of us at the time.” The smoke-like object was not seen by the writer twice, but by a sister (but what about the others?), and it is also stated that one sister only saw a blue globe of light, and not the others. Again, there are no additional details. Were these different sisters? Is there evidence that some of the witnesses saw more than others?

Interestingly one person present that was not part of the family (a friend of the dying woman) was said not to perceive anything. An exception was when her attention was directed to a patch of light for which she could not find a normal explanation, such as reflections of light.

These observations remind us of the phenomenon of selective percipience discussed before in the literature (Alvarado, 1987; Crookall, 1967; Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886; Nahm, 2011). This may include cases in which not everyone present perceives some apparition or another experience (Bozzano, 1923: 234; Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2: 221–2213, 237–238, 619–622), cases that may suggest the experience is hallucinatory, although perhaps accompanied by veridical information. Another type of cases are those in which those present experience different things, like if each of them had a different piece of the puzzle (e. g., Gurney, Myers, & Podmore, 1886, Vol. 2: 203–204, 236–237, 639–641; Sidgwick et al., 1894: 318–319). All of this is consistent with the idea that the witnesses showed different degrees of psychic perception.

There is little more to do in retrospective analyses of past cases than speculate and observe the features of cases based on limited information. Unfortunately the lack of detailed accounts from each of the witnesses of this case makes it impossible to conduct meaningful analyses. At the very least we may comment on similarities and differences with other cases, (Alvarado, 1987; Nahm, 2011, 2012).

Further Research

It is to be hoped that if new cases of this type are reported and published, they will be studied in more detail than what has been done in the past (e. g., Bozzano, 1934; Moody, with Perry, 2010). This goes especially for collective observations, but there seems to be only one recent case description in which a substantial documentation was aimed at (McAdams, 1984). In addition, more needs to be found via systematic studies about the features of the cases, among

them the shapes and colors of mist, and the appearance of subtle bodies, or the duration of the observations. Questions also arise with regard to the contexts of the reports conveyed. For example, it appears that prolonged sightings of the formation of a subtle body of human shape above the dying were exclusively reported from the spiritualist context, often from psychics or mediums and with explicit reference to the paradigmatic description of Andrew Jackson Davies (1850) – whereas brief sightings of mists leaving the body, and also lights and glances shining around the head of the dying, were also reported from more ordinary contexts and people outside the spiritual setting, including physicians (e.g., Marsh, 1842; Martensen-Larsen, n. d.; see also Nahm, 2011, 2012). One wishes that there were studies of the features of these deathbed phenomena similar to those conducted with NDE features (e.g., Cassol et al., 2018; Ring, 1980).

Commenting on differences in deathbed cases, Bozzano (1934) stated that they were due to the “organic-psychic idiosyncrasies” of people, the “nature of the infirmity, or the kind of death” (p. 91, our translation). While deserving study, such affirmations have not been supported to date by empirical studies.

In addition to systematic interviews with *each* person involved in the case, to make sure of the actual events perceived, we should collect information about the percipients. Individuals such as Davis (1850), Garrett (1945), Hout (1936) and Snell (1918), who saw subtle bodies repeatedly leaving the body of dying persons also had other visionary experiences. Hout, a physician, who had seen the spirit of his aunt leave her body at death (Hout, 1935), also saw the spirit of hospital patients that were not dying, including that of a woman hovering over her body during surgery (Hout, 1936). Eileen Garrett, a medium and initiator of the Parapsychology Foundation, stated she even perceived misty clouds leaving the bodies of dying animals (Garrett, 1945).

Considering research that has shown a tendency of intercorrelations between claims of ESP, OBEs, apparitional, and aura experiences (e.g., Alvarado & Zingrone, 2007–2008), witnesses of death scenes may be interviewed to find out if they are prone to other psychic experiences. Furthermore, other psychological variables that have been shown in the past to be related to claims of psychic experiences, such as fantasy proneness and dissociative experiences, could also be assessed. Reports of seeing auras, which may be speculated to share similar cognitive processes to seeing lights and mists, have shown to be related to claims of other psychic experiences, to lucid dreams, and to dissociative experiences (Zingrone, Alvarado & Agee, 2009).

Similarly, more information could be collected about the dying person. This includes, as Bozzano suggested, the cause of death. Other questions to be explored may be the length of time for the person to die. Does the dying person around whom phenomena are perceived has a history of experiencing psychic phenomena? There may not be any meaningful relationship with the features of the phenomenon, but the issue is worth exploring.

Also worth exploring are the claims of some authors about similarities between the death scenes discussed here and other phenomena (Nahm, 2011, 2012). This includes some apparitions of the living, out-of-body and near-death experiences (Bozzano, 1934; Crookall, 1967; Muldoon & Carrington, 1951). Cases in point are mists seen in apparitions of the living (Gurney, Myers & Podmore, 1886, Vol. 1.: 182; Vol. 2.: 526–527) and luminous apparitions (Tweedale, 1920, Chapter 17) taking place in contexts other than deathbeds. But what is needed is a careful comparison of deathbed observations to other cases, not just a mention of the presence of mists and luminous effects.

All of this needs to break from the use of single or just a few cases. More reliable findings will be obtained if we conduct studies with many cases, as has been done in some studies of deathbed visions (e. g., Morita et al., 2016).

Concluding Remarks

We have criticized Monk's report for lack of detailed information about the testimony of the persons who perceived the phenomena. There is no question that this is an important methodological flaw, and something that should be corrected in the reports of future cases. It cannot be assumed that everyone around perceived the phenomena when such event is only summarized. Similarly, this may obscure our attempts to find if selective perception was present, and more specifically, if some persons failed to see the phenomenon or if perceptions varied, something for which there was some evidence in Monk's account. However, while these are important issues, we need to remember that this was not a scientific report. Dorothy Monk presented a report of a family event of great emotional impact. From that perspective, this was both an account of wonders as well as of loss.

Cases like these remind us of the complexity of death-related phenomena. The Monk account in particular is especially valuable because it is one of the most complex cases of luminous manifestations in a dying person on record and it was a collectively perceived one (see also Tweedale, 1921). Accounts like Monk's were not frequent in the old literature, and are even rarer in the contemporary one. Unfortunately, reports of individual cases are largely out of fashion in the parapsychological literature, and even more reports of cases such as Monk's. As argued before such deathbed experiences are part of near-death phenomena that have been neglected in terms of research (Alvarado, 2006b; Nahm, 2011).

These cases have been of interest because they are believed to show that something leaves the physical body at death, and in turn, that they are consistent with the idea of survival of death (Bozzano, 1934; Crookall, 1967; Muldoon & Carrington, 1951). They have been referred to as one of the phenomena showing "events on the threshold of the after-life" (Crookall, 1967), and

a “journey elsewhere” (Fenwick & Fenwick, 2008). However, our impression is that many today consider that these cases are hallucinatory, and of little relevance to parapsychology. For these reasons collectively perceived cases are of particular importance.

However, although the idea of a projection of consciousness at death is a theoretical possibility, and makes sense when one is facing emanations from a dying body, we really have no direct evidence that consciousness leaves the body at death in a case like Monk’s. Even if something is seen to leave the body, mist and lights are not necessarily carriers of consciousness, as discussed by some authors that accept the existence of subtle bodies, a topic that leads us to more controversial ideas. For example, many cases of lights emanating from people in contexts other than deathbeds do not present indications of consciousness leaving the body (Alvarado, 1987).

Crookall (1967) has argued that observations at transitions, particularly when mists are seen, are the action of a semiphysical subtle body that does not have consciousness, and that is related to ectoplasmic manifestations (although he believes that the conscious spirit leaves the body as well).⁶ He presents many OBE cases where mist is involved, because, in his view, sometimes this semiphysical body is associated with a nonphysical spirit that carries consciousness. Before him, Gustave Geley (1924/1927) considered the Monk case an example of “transition between organic and ectoplasmic luminescence” (p. 343). Both lights, mists and materializations seen in the séance room were conceived by Geley as caused by the externalization of a vital substance, and idea that has permeated Spiritualism and psychical research (Alvarado, 2006a). While interesting, all these ideas are still underdeveloped and may involve different processes. Consequently, we should be careful to accept any interpretation at the moment without further investigations that may refine the comparisons Geley and Crookall have presented.

At any rate, independently of these considerations, an examination of new cases of emanations from the body of dying individuals could eventually lead to conceptual refinements and an increase of knowledge about the features of these experiences. These phenomena deserve more research without assuming they are only hallucinations created by bereaved minds. As stated by Oliver Lodge regarding the issue of survival of death: “What we have to do in such a region is to contemplate and make very sure of our facts, leaving deduction and explanation to follow in due time” (Lodge, 1920: viii).

6 The occult literature has several other examples of ideas of subtle bodies that are not carriers of consciousness (e.g., Besant, 1896). Also, there are many observations of cloud-like formations in the materialization literature with mediums (e.g., Adare, 1869: 28, 35; Schrenck-Notzing, 1920: 59, 198).

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