

# IN MEMORIAM

Rex Stanford (1938–2022):

## A Personal Reflection and Appreciation

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My colleague, mentor, and friend, Rex Stanford passed away on May 11, 2022. He was part of a stellar group of parapsychologists that included Robert Morris, Chuck Honorton, Jim Carpenter, and John Palmer, among others, who worked in J. B. Rhine's lab at Duke University in the mid-1960s and who themselves independently went on to make significant contributions to our understanding of psi phenomena. During the time I knew Rex, we had many discussions about various matters related to psychology, parapsychology, and science in general and thus feel comfortable in providing the following remarks. I note, however, that my commentary on Rex's extensive research record will surely lack the level of depth it merits, for I feel that I am not sufficiently versed in the parapsychological literature to offer a thorough appraisal of his many contributions to the field.

I first became acquainted with Rex's work in the spring of 1976 when, as an undecided college sophomore, I enrolled in a popular undergraduate philosophy course titled "Psychic Phenomena and the Nature of Man" taught by Michael Grosso at the New

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Jersey City State University (formerly Jersey City State College). Initially inspired by that course and under Grosso's helpful guidance, I began to immerse myself in the parapsychological literature by reading books on the subject and by subscribing to periodicals, such as the *Journal of Parapsychology (JP)* and the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research (JASPR)*. Living in a town in New Jersey situated right across the river from Manhattan, I also took advantage of my proximity to the ASPR and to the Parapsychological Foundation (PF), which at the time were both located in New York City (NYC) and visited these facilities on several occasions to browse through their libraries and attend ASPR-sponsored presentations by noted parapsychologists such as William Braud, Stanley Krippner, Helmut Schmidt, and Ian Stevenson. Arguably, still the golden years of parapsychology, these meetings were held in a large auditorium in the United Engineering Center, a modern hi-rise that was home to various engineering associations (sadly, the building was demolished in 1998 and the space is now occupied by Trump World Tower, a residential building). One such ASPR-sponsored event I attended and tape-recorded in the late 1970s was a dual presentation by Rex and Ray, his identical twin brother. Ray, who is known to have shown exceptional, ostensible psychic ability, is himself a remarkable explorer in the citizen science tradition with his most recent contributions being in ichnology, a subfield of paleontology (see Stanford et al., 2007, 2018; Vastag, 2012). Little did I suspect at the time of Rex's lecture that I would soon be carrying out research under his supervision and would later become his colleague and friend.

Following Grosso's advice, I ended up double majoring in psychology and philosophy with the eventual goal of embarking on an academic career and carrying out research in parapsychology. After earning my undergraduate degree in 1979 I enrolled in the Master of Arts (MA) program in General Experimental Psychology at St. John's University (SJU) in Queens, New York, where Rex had been a psychology professor from 1973 to 1976. Although I was aware that Rex was no longer at SJU –he had assumed the

position of director at the newly established Center for Parapsychological Research in Austin, Texas- I had hoped that at least some of the psychology faculty at SJU were a bit more "parapsychology-friendly" (some were) relative to those at my undergraduate institution, and that I might perhaps pursue my interest in that field with one of them. As it turns out, however, I found other ongoing research areas in that department equally exciting, specifically research in visual perception and in cognitive neuropsychology, both of which would become important themes in my own professional development; the former for my doctoral studies at Rutgers University (Newark campus, New Jersey) and the latter for my own research as a beginning academic.

Sometime in the Spring semester of my first year (1980) in the MA program, Leonard Brosgole, who at that time was department chairperson, was aware of my interest in parapsychology, and with whom I had been carrying out research, called me into his office to share the good news that arrangements were being made for Rex to return to SJU as a faculty member. And, thus, at the start of the new academic year in early September, I was introduced to Rex as his graduate research assistant (GA) and so began my life-long association with one of the top experimental parapsychologists of his time; a mentor and friend whose thoughtful guidance left an indelible mark on my own development as an individual and an academic.

Rex was born on June 21, 1938 in Robstown, a western suburb of Corpus Christi in the state of Texas. With a subtropical climate and its associated rich foliage and fauna, Rex enjoyed and appreciated the natural beauty of the area. Raised by nurturing parents who encouraged his drive to learn and understand the world around him (Stanford, 2013), Rex was already reading voraciously and widely ranging from subjects in philosophy and religion, particularly Hinduism, to books in the sciences, including works by Darwin, Freud, Hoyle, and Einstein. The contributions of the latter two authors led Rex to consider the study of theoretical physics as a career path and, to that end, he read a considerable



amount in areas such as relativity theory and cosmology and even made student presentations on some of these subjects at Texas Junior Academy of Sciences meetings. A pivotal experience at one of these encounters, however, ended up having a profound impact on his conception of the way the universe was supposed to work: He attended a presentation given by a fellow student about parapsychology, specifically, about the work of J. B. Rhine. Rex became very intrigued by what he had heard and felt that he needed to learn more about ESP phenomena. He befriended that student and not only did he begin to read about Rhine's research, but Rex went on to carry out his own ESP experiments with his friend and even initiated correspondence with Rhine himself. He reconsidered his earlier career aspirations and decided instead to major in psychology. During his undergraduate studies in psychology at the University of Texas, Austin, Rex visited Rhine's lab at Duke University on several occasions and interacted with him as well as with many of his associates who were at the time carrying out ESP research.

Rex's early commitment to parapsychology began to pay off: His first professional contributions to the field were two presentations he gave at the annual meeting of the Parapsychological Association (PA) held in New York in 1963, subsequently published the following year in *JP* as separate journal articles. From that point on, Rex continued to steadily present his work at PA meetings and to publish it mainly in the *JP* and *JASPR*. During his long career, he also presented in other venues, particularly in meetings sponsored by the PF, which had also provided him with a considerable amount of funding, but also in non-parapsychological conferences, such as the Annual Meetings of the American Psychological Association and at the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Those who have worked with Rex and/or who are well acquainted with his extensive research record would probably agree that, as a parapsychologist and psychological scientist, he was first and foremost an experimentalist. His emphasis on an empirical

approach to the study of psi can be partly traced back to the work of J. B. Rhine (Stanford, 2013). Like Rhine, Rex felt strongly that the most effective approach to begin to understand the nature of psi events is to study them under controlled, laboratory settings and to systematically manipulate the conditions, both physical and psychological, thought to facilitate them. However, Rex also recognized that in order to have a good understanding of how psi operates it was important to "get close to the phenomena" and, in that regard, he very much valued the work of those who studied psi in more naturalistic settings. In fact, Rex himself has acknowledged that his research was often informed and/or inspired by the careful observations and/or thoughtful reflections of non-experimentalists such as Jules Eisenbud, Bill Roll, and Louisa Rhine. For example, it was one of Louisa's cases that, in part, led to a study (Stanford, 1970) which Rex credits as being the impetus for the development of what is perhaps the most fruitful theoretical development in parapsychology, the "Psi-Mediated Instrumental Response" (PMIR; Stanford 1974a,b), for which he received the PA's Outstanding Contribution award in 1993. Essentially, the PMIR proposes that unconsciously psi-derived information can alter our behavior/cognition in favorable ways that lead to the satisfaction of our needs. One of several examples Rex used to illustrate how the model works was an incident involving a retired attorney who was riding the NYC subway on his way to pay a casual visit to some friends. The man gets off at the correct stop because he needed to switch trains to get to his destination. But, instead of waiting for the second train to arrive, the attorney absentmindedly walks right out of the station. Realizing his mistake and not wanting to pay another train fare, he decides to walk the rest of the way as his friends lived just a few short blocks away. Surprisingly, as the attorney was walking toward his friends' residence, he ran into them as they were on their way to an appointment elsewhere. Surely, each of us can probably recall a handful of incidents such as the one above, which can be easily explained away as a mere coincidence. But, according to Rex, another possibility is that the PMIR is at work in such cases. At some point during the train ride, the attorney may have unconsciously



picked up the information about the whereabouts of his friends via psi, leading to his “inadvertent” choice of leaving the train station (instrumental response) to fulfill his wish (need) of seeing his friends who he would otherwise have missed had he taken the correct sequence of trains. Rex suspected that because many such experiences may not appear as unusual or appear to involve ESP, they will not be reported to investigators thereby introducing a source of bias in case collections (Stanford, 1978).

Thus, as much as many of us will think of Rex primarily as an experimentalist, he was also very much a theoretician. For as long as I can recall, Rex was concerned about the general absence of testable theories to guide psi research. He likewise thought that certain areas of psychology were similar afflicted by what he felt were weak theoretical underpinnings. In part, he attributed this situation to parapsychologists’ (and psychologists’) lack of proper training in theory building, noting that much time is spent in Research Methods classes learning how to design and conduct experiments, but that little time is spent on learning how to appreciate, let alone construct, a good scientific theory. With respect to the latter point, Rex traced his affinity toward the need to have a solid theoretical foundation to a course in the philosophy of science that he had taken as a graduate student and, specifically, to a paper by Hempel and Oppenheimer (1948), which he felt should be required reading for all aspiring scientists. It is in this general context that his PMIR became such an important contribution to parapsychology, for here was a testable model about the functional characteristics of psi that received considerable experimental support from various independent labs and which Rex continued to refine over the years (e.g., Stanford 1990, 2015) based on the evidence the model had generated. His less popular, but arguably more intriguing (at least to me!) “Conformance” model (Stanford, 1978) was another example of his attempts to better understand psi by thinking creatively, “outside the box”, but always with the goal of providing better conceptual clarity as well as a means of generating testable hypotheses. In this newer approach, Rex posited that psi was a process by which a disorganized



operation, such as the output of a random event generator (REG), “conforms” to the needs or preferences of the organism. For example, consider a psi experiment in which a volunteer is asked to bias the output of a REG device that randomly displays a flash of either red or blue light by attempting to increase the number of red flashes. In this scenario, the inherently disorganized REG’s biased output favoring the red color is said to “conform” to the participant’s (and the experimenter’s) preference for that color. In other situations, it is the individuals’ sometimes disorganized, labile mental state that produces the output that conforms to that same individual’s needs. As an example of such a scenario, Rex cites a situation in which volunteers in a “clairvoyance” experiment are instructed to describe randomly selected images that are hidden from view in opaque envelopes. To do the task, they likely will rely on the many images they have stored in their minds, but which are only haphazardly accessible to their awareness as they attempt to select a match they deem to be appropriate. Those image selections scored as “hits” are said to conform to their presumed wish/need to be correct.

During our many discussions, I was always impressed with Rex’s exceptionally comprehensive and detailed knowledge of the parapsychological literature, particularly of the laboratory evidence for psi. My sense is that it was primarily based on that evidence that he was convinced of the reality of the psi, even if, as he often acknowledged, we still do not know much about how the phenomena manifest themselves, let alone about their often-elusive nature. In addition to being critical of the field’s apparent quest for replicability at the expense of learning about the processes by which psi occurs, he also repeatedly questioned some of the “traditional” assumptions that many of us continue to hold about psi operating in its discrete forms (e.g., telepathy, clairvoyance) or, for that matter, whether these phenomena are perceptual or even cognitive in character (see his presentation of the conformance model, Stanford, 1978). As he often would convey to me, we know very little about what psi really is, whether there is even a psi ‘signal’ and, if there

is, what might be the mechanism by which we generate it, send it out, receive it, process it or how it travels through space-time.

Those who knew Rex, whether through attendance at parapsychology meetings, as editors, or as authors of books reviewed by him are probably aware that Rex was known for not shying away from offering critical commentary. This approach was never about grandstanding at the expense of others, but about his conviction that the primary purpose of our work as scientists is to understand the phenomena we are studying. Thus, his penchant for thoroughness and for identifying potential weaknesses extended even to his own carefully designed, methodologically "air-tight" studies. It is no wonder that Rex was a highly sought-after reviewer for books or referee for journal articles. I always felt that his conviction of the reality of psi, his methodological rigor, and his critical approach to all facets of research and scholarship were all well-suited characteristics for the presentation of a controversial area of research, especially when addressing non-parapsychological audiences who are likely to be overly skeptical. One example of this situation that readily comes to mind occurred in the early 1980s when during my graduate studies at Rutgers' former Institute for Cognitive Studies I had the opportunity to secure an invitation for Rex to be a colloquium guest speaker. Upon hearing about the invitation, and given the generally skeptical climate at Rutgers, our colleague Len Brosgole, suggested that he come along as a guest audience in support of Rex. Len had been a former student of my dissertation advisor, John Ceraso, when they were both at a different university. Moreover, Len also knew some of the other faculty members at Rutgers and was highly regarded by that group. But Rex was in complete command of his audience and his presentation was nothing short of dazzling. During the question-and-answer period, he provided thorough responses to the few questions that were raised and though as I later discovered most of the audience remained skeptical of the concept of psi, typically dismissing it a-priori, and of parapsychology as not being a legitimate

scientific line of inquiry, no one could identify any flaws in his research. Rex had left them no room for criticism.

Two other activities that Rex enjoyed very much were opera and bird watching. Rex and Birgit, the love of his life, who passed away in October 2018, were frequent audience members at the New York's Metropolitan Opera. Rex tried his best to get me interested in this art form, but as a die-hard fan of various varieties of Rock and Roll, my younger ears and brain were simply not primed for opera. I do admit that as I got older and began to better appreciate classical and other forms of music, I regretted not having taken advantage of the opportunity to have an opera connoisseur such as Rex introduce me to that world. Bird watching was a different story, and I was happy to go on several bird-watching trips with Rex and Birgit to some local nature preserves in the New York-New Jersey area, especially Jamaica Bay, Brigantine, Turkey Swamp, and several other hot spots for birding. Rex was particularly fond of shore birds. Indeed,, his personal email was the scientific name for a species of sandpiper, a small shore bird often seen in key areas of Texas during its Spring and Fall migrations, and whose long-distance travels take them from its wintering grounds in southwestern segments of South America all the way to its breeding grounds in Canada's and Alaska's Arctic areas.

Rex was exceptionally generous with his time and during that entire year that I was his GA we spent many hours in his office or in the lab discussing all sorts of issues of mutual interest, including, of course, matters related to parapsychology, science, and a myriad of other topics beyond those related to my specific duties as his GA. After I graduated from SJU and went over to Rutgers for my doctoral studies, we remained in close contact with each other. In 1989 I joined the faculty of SJU at the smaller campus in Staten Island and began to spend more time with him, going to out to dinner about once a month, rooming together while attending conferences, etc. After retiring from SJU in 2007 and earning emeritus status the following year, Rex and Birgit moved back to his native Texas residing in the town of Weslaco at the time of his passing away. He continued

being active in parapsychology by writing articles, reviewing books, and refereeing papers until the very end of his life. Although we continued being in touch by phone on a regular basis, sometimes speaking as often as once per week, I am saddened by the fact that the last time I saw them in person was in late December of 2007 when they stopped by my house in New Jersey to initiate their long car drive to their new retirement home in Texas.

Rex Stanford leaves behind a long legacy of accomplishments in the field of parapsychology. In addition to many publications and conference presentations, Rex was an active member of the PA having been elected several times to the Board of Directors and twice as president. He was also an active participant in various PA committees and was particularly proud of having chaired the Committee on Professional Standards and Ethics that put together the PA's Ethical and Professional Standards for Parapsychologists (1980). His two-part series on ethics in parapsychology published in *Psychology Review* in the late 1980s (Stanford, 1988a,b) offered an overview of the various subtle and not so subtle ethical concerns related to human subjects protections and of various questionable research practices that are a source of increasing concern in the sciences. In fact, it was Rex's concern with personal and professional ethics and, especially, his modeling of such behavior, that was a major influence in my own interest and eventual specialization in the general area of research integrity, more specifically, responsible writing and publication practices.

In sum, Rex was a supportive mentor and valued friend who will be greatly missed by many in the parapsychological community. May his tradition of ethical and rigorous research and scholarship blossom not only in the hearts and minds of all current and future parapsychologists, but in the hearts and minds of all scientists and scholars across all disciplines.

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