

The Strange Adventure of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and My Aunt Pauline

by [Jeff Plude](#) (November 2019)



Séance, Josef Vachal, 1907

At first glance it seems incredible and almost blasphemous that the creator of Sherlock Holmes, whose powers of observation and deduction seemed superhuman, believed that you could talk with dead people. *Believed* isn't the right word.

"When I talk on this subject, I'm not talking about what I *believe*. I'm not talking about what I *think*," said Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in a sort of self-interview filmed in 1927, just a few years before his own death, sitting on a bench outside his home in the English countryside with his dog and a book, looking and sounding the epitome of the grandfatherly British gentleman. "I'm talking about what I *know*."

Sir Arthur immersed himself in occult phenomena of all sorts for four decades, and wrote several nonfiction books about spiritualism. In those books, among other fantastic revelations, he reported that he'd attended slews of séances and had witnessed many living people of good character (including himself) who were told things by mediums who were supposedly channeling messages from spirits of dead people (at least their earthly bodies had died), things that the mediums themselves could not have known. There was much fraud, Sir Arthur admitted, but there was also much that was truly unexplainable except by a supernatural means or agency.

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I too was once told something by a medium about a dead person that could not be explained other than by a supernatural means or agency. Like Sir Arthur, I too am not a materialist. But he and I are worlds apart when it comes to the source of these otherworldly communications.

I stumbled onto my first and only séance almost thirty years ago when I was frantically thumbing through the yellow pages of the phone book, in the days just before the internet, desperate for a feature story idea for the Sunday edition of the daily newspaper I worked for. Suddenly I saw something that stunned me: séances? It was a spiritualist church in one of the suburbs of Albany, New York. Halloween wasn't far away.

So the next Friday evening there I was sitting in the dark, in the corner of a second-floor room of a so-called psychic institute in a strip mall, scribbling in my reporter's notebook with one hand while holding a small flashlight in the other. I didn't want to disrupt the delicate proceedings. I was an observer, that was it.

A dozen women and three men sat in a spread-out circle. An end table in the middle, well out of anyone's reach, held a vase of flowers, two long funnels or "trumpets," and two glass bowls, one with salt and the other with water—items the spirits had reportedly asked for at previous séances. Five of the participants were newcomers; the two weekly séances were

open to the public for a fee of \$6. The cost of a movie at the time, but a lot more expensive if you're counting the spiritual price.

As they all held hands, the leader of the séance, a guy in his late thirties and co-founder of the spiritualist church, recited the invocation: "Divine parent, we thank you for the opportunity to join together in this circle" After a sort of warmup, in which he tried to telepathically send the group two images from pictures he later held up, he lead them through a guided meditation: "With your mind's eye, you see a shaft of light in this room . . . This light is protection and peace. It is through this light that our spirit friends travel."

Ever the impresario, he then announced: "I don't know if you sensed it during the meditation, but there are quite a number of spirit people here." And for the next hour and a half, the mediums took turns relaying messages to each other from these so-called spirit people.

Well into the séance, one of the women, a middle-aged student in the psychic institute, asked if she could relay a message to the reporter. Oh no, I thought, now I'm part of the story! The subject was sketchy enough, but now my editors would surely give me a hard time if I became involved in the whole circus myself. But what could I say? After all, I was a reporter, an investigator.

"I'm picking up several things about you," she said. "Kind of like a shotgun."

Several of the messages were general (I wasn't letting the child in me out—if she only knew!), and a couple were misses (she saw me taking a trip to London within six months; it was two years). She also said she was getting something from somebody I hadn't heard from in a while named Greg; I'd been friends with a former newspaper colleague named Greg, who was still very much alive.

That was it. I'd dodged a bullet. But then a few minutes later the same woman dropped a bomb—she had one more message for me.

“Aunt Pauline says hi,” she said. “I got someone with a cotton dress standing on a porch with a swinging door. She says hi. I'll leave that with you.”

I nearly fell out of my chair! A direct hit! In fact Aunt Pauline, my great-aunt on my father's side, who had died a half dozen years before, would always mention to me that she saw my byline in the local paper I used to work at. She was an elderly but jolly longtime widow who used to wear housecoat cotton dresses and sit in her upstairs apartment in a two-family house and look out the kitchen window and smoke Pall Malls and drink coffee into the wee hours. Kitty corner from the kitchen window was the swinging screen door on the back porch that was the entrance to her apartment.

Right after the séance the leader and church co-founder, who wore a dress shirt and tie and dress pants along with a Three Stooges watch, joked that one of the church members had called my co-workers to find out all about me. I wasn't amused. No

one I worked with would've known about Aunt Pauline. Not even my close friends would've known about her.

(What amazed me almost as much was that my editors never questioned a word in my story! That was unheard of even with the most straightforward and innocuous of subjects.)

Now I had proof of the supernatural, that was the upshot of it.

It might appear that it was a coincidence I was at the séance—I needed a story and it was that time of year—but it was more like a natural progression. I'd been interested in the occult since I was a boy. I was, like many, a big fan of the *Twilight Zone*, which I watched religiously in reruns. I had another great-aunt (Aunt Pauline's sister in fact), a devout Catholic and a sweet French Canadian-American lady, who used to watch over me and my little brother when my parents went out and she'd regale me with tales of psychics and aliens in the latest edition of *The National Enquirer*. Around fifth grade, I stumbled onto a recent book at the time in the library of my elementary school, no less, called *The Interrupted Journey*