

BELIEF AND CUSTOM SURROUNDING  
THE OUIJA BOARD

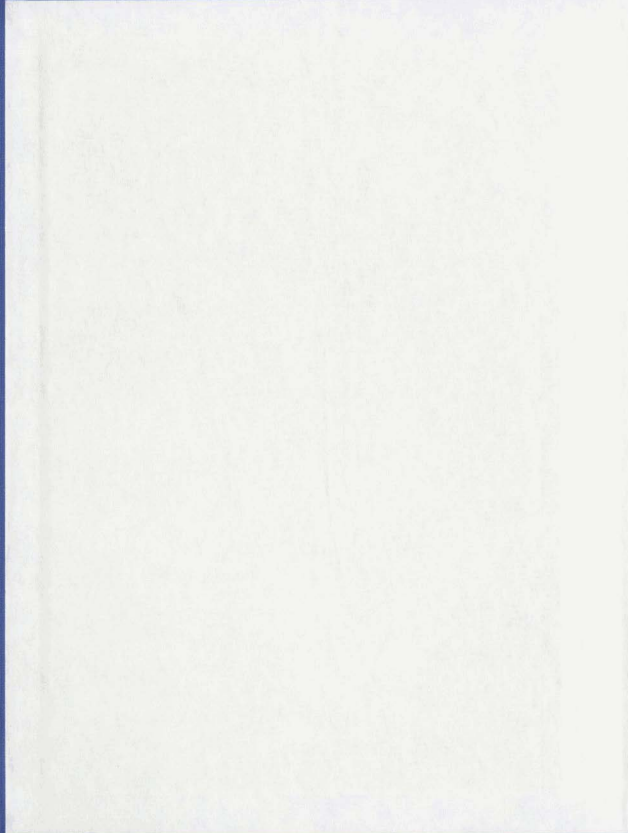
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# **BELIEF AND CUSTOM SURROUNDING THE OUIJA BOARD**

by

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A thesis submitted to the  
School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Arts

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## Abstract

This thesis presents an analysis of the Ouija board from a point of view that has not been published by any other folklorist, to date. That is, it looks at the actual *beliefs* that people have about the Ouija board phenomenon and the rationale by which they maintain this belief. Most scholars in the past have studied the Ouija board in terms of its “use” and in doing so, have focused on trying to convince believers that what they believe is false. It is not the intention of this thesis to show who is right or wrong, but simply to report the beliefs, the rationale behind the beliefs, and the consequential customs that surround the Ouija board phenomenon.

The nature of the Ouija board phenomenon is directly tied to the way in which people believe. What a person believes or does not believe is largely dependent upon previously established belief systems. A person who has no logical basis to believe in life after death, may not believe that spirit communication is possible. On the other hand, those who believe that survival is possible after death do have a logical standpoint by which they can connect a new belief—such as the powers of the Ouija board.

Anyone studying supernatural beliefs is well aware, however, that the opinions of our informants are not so black and white. If anything, when it comes to the Ouija board a lot of people simply cannot conclude, definitively, what they believe. At the time of an experience with a board they may have had absolute belief but in retrospect, begin to doubt and question that belief. As a folkloristic study, therefore, this thesis utilizes the concepts of traditions of belief and *traditions of disbelief in order to show how adherents of both traditions logically explain their opinions.*

## Acknowledgments

It has been a long and seemingly never-ending journey-- a voyage that I more than once thought to turn back from. It was with the support of my supervisor, Dr. Diane Goldstein, that I continued on, came to believe that I could succeed and began to see an end to this particular academic quest. Diane, I sincerely thank you for your patience, understanding and willingness to "go to bat" for me.

A great deal of appreciation also goes out to other members of the Memorial University Folklore Department. First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Paul Smith for his encouragement over the years and his continuous ability to supply all students with photocopied information pertaining to their work. Paul, you really are the photocopier God. Special thanks, also, to Dr. Martin Lovelace who has always shown an interest in what I was doing; Dr. Philip Hiscock for helping with photographs and other archival materials; Dr. Barbara Rieti for loaning me her Ouija boards; and, not to be forgotten, Karen and Sharon, for your willingness to help me in any way you could. As well I would like to thank the School of Graduate Studies for allowing me the extra time to *complete my thesis*.

Recognition must also be paid to my informants who, due to the decision to keep their real names concealed, cannot be individually thanked. You know who you are and I want to thank you *for your time and the opportunity to speak to you about such a delicate and potentially emotional subject*.

More than anything I would like to thank those who are closest to me: my mother, Regina, for her role in urging me to *continue with my education*; my sister, Michelle, for listening to me, throughout the years, whenever my academic goals wavered; and my boyfriend, Garry, who has had to cope with my "insane" lifestyle for this past year. To my father, Michael, my brother, George, and my sister, Yvonne--*thoughts and memories of you are forever entwined within the pages of this thesis*. I know your spirits were, and always will be, watching over me...

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## Preface

### My Ouija Board Story

Even though I had always had an interest in the supernatural. I never encountered the Ouija board when I was a young girl growing up. The closest I ever came to it was in an adolescent fictional novel entitled *The Game*<sup>1</sup>. This book tells the story of how an injured teen starts using a Ouija board as a past-time. At first she sees it as only a game and plays by herself but it does not take long before a demon possesses her body and mind. Terrible, frightening things start happening and it is left up to the girl's sister and her friends to help free her of the evil spirit. This was an interesting book that fed into my growing curiosity about spirits, ghosts and goblins. I had all but forgotten about this book until years later when I rediscovered it in an old storage box.

The seeds of my current interest in the Ouija board can be traced back to when I was about 18 years old and a new student at Memorial University of Newfoundland (hereafter, MUN). It was here that I met new friends and heard their stories of the Ouija board. None of them looked upon it as a game. Through their own experiences they concluded that the Ouija board was evil. Their tales of

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<sup>1</sup> Les Logan. The Game (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1983).

cats flying through the air, of secrets coming out, of people becoming upset or “possessed” gave me the chills and that was enough to convince me that this game was evil. I did not have to try it for myself. I believed that it was a tool of the devil.

Several years later, my sister and a different group of friends started playing around with the Ouija board. My sister tried, several times, to convince me to use the board with her. She felt that it was possible to contact good spirits and that our combined energy would ensure the possibility of contacting our father, brother and sister, all of whom had previously passed away. *During one of* her attempts to convince me, I distinctly remember that I made a make-shift cross with my fingers, pointed it toward her and shouted “NO!” The evil stories I had heard earlier *had stuck with me and I automatically used the cross as a way to* ward off the evil. I had never tried the Ouija board, yet I knew, instinctively, that it was something I should not tamper with and that nothing good would come from it.

Shortly after that, I had to choose a topic for my thesis. I knew I wanted to do something in the area of belief but I was not sure exactly what. It was not until a professor brought up the topic of the Ouija board in one of my classes that I began even to think about it academically. Thinking of the Ouija board in

academic terms allowed me to step back from my own fears and question why I had reacted so strongly against it.

Like most of my informants, I cannot readily say that my beliefs are directly linked to my religion. The Bible tells us in Deuteronomy 18:10-12,

There shall not be found among you *anyone* that maketh his son or daughter to pass through the fire, *or* that useth divination, *or* an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things *are* an abomination unto the Lord: and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out from before thee.<sup>2</sup>

As a Roman Catholic, I believe in God, His angels and archangels, but I do not necessarily believe in everything that the Church teaches. In fact a good general knowledge of the Bible was never one of my strong points. In growing up, though, I heard many stories about guardian angels, ghosts, fairies and death omens from my parents and grandparents. I think that it was their stories of their experiences that led to my own belief in the supernatural.

While I had made a personal vow to myself not to try the Ouija board, I eventually did after a lot of coaxing from my sister and cousin. Nothing happened, however, and I have not tried it since.

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<sup>2</sup> This passage is taken from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. The particular Bible cited was published in 1975 by Thomas Nelson Publishers in Nashville, Tennessee.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction and Methodology

### 1.1 Introduction

*Acceptance of nonsense as a harmless aberration can be dangerous to us. We live in a society that is enlarging the boundaries of knowledge at an unprecedented rate, and we cannot keep up with much more than a small portion of what is made available to us. To mix our data input with childish notions of magic and fantasy is to cripple our perception of the world around us. We must reach for the truth, not for the ghosts of dead absurdities (Randi "Help" 80).*

In the past, and the not so distant past as the above quotation from the early 1990s exemplifies, the standard view of supernatural beliefs was that they "... arise from and are supported by various kinds of obvious error" (Hufford "Traditions" 47). That is, throughout history (and indeed within many modern day disciplines) scholars have chosen to focus their studies on the possible "errors" that may have occurred (for example a gust of wind, lights from a car, one's present state of mind, etc.) as opposed to the actual belief(s) that a person may hold. Such scholars were only concerned with how someone's claim of a supernatural occurrence could be logically and rationally explained. Even when this could not be done, when the incident or sighting could not be explained

scientifically, most scholars tended to fall back on the old adage that “a natural force or agency that is not yet understood or perhaps even known to exist” (Hufford “Traditions” 52) was the true source of the experience. The underlying assumption was that once this “natural force or agency” was discovered, then, and only then, could a person’s experience be truly explained.

The notion that a person’s belief need not be explained scientifically (i.e., verified or proven false) did not seem to occur in the minds of these scholars. David Hufford suggested in his article “Traditions of Disbelief,” however, that such a scientific perspective has its limitations and that “we should *sometimes* instead take a truly external point of view when considering folk belief and folk religion, a view that is naive”(48). In this way one will be able to consider traditions of belief as well as “traditions of disbelief.” As he put it, “from this perspective *atheists are believers as much as the faithful are*” (48).

Traditionally the Ouija board has been looked at in terms of “use” by such academics as historians, religious scholars, and parapsychologists. *That is, they* have focused on the question of “why” someone would use and believe in the powers of the Ouija board. Rarely, however, has the Ouija board been looked at in terms of folk belief--that is, “how” or the way in which a person describes their belief in the Ouija board phenomenon. Aside from the casual mention of Ouija



boards in scholarly work as an example of occult activity and supernatural experiences or the occasional student paper found in an archive, the only folklorist to actually devote an entire study to the Ouija board is Bill Ellis. Ellis' work, however, also focused primarily on the "use" of the Ouija board. As the title of his article "Speak to the Devil: Ouija Board Rituals among American Adolescents" suggests, Ellis has analyzed the Ouija board in terms of ritual and not necessarily belief. He looked at how the Ouija board ritual has a definitive pattern and considered how this ritual can be a form of play and narrative. Unfortunately, he did not focus on the actual beliefs that his informants had or why they felt the way they did. Ellis, himself, noted that there is very little scholarly work done on the Ouija board and stated that "an objective description of Ouija board users and group dynamics is badly needed" ( 86).

In recent years it has been noted by several folklorists that supernatural belief has been a forgotten genre within the field of folklore. David Hufford in his article "Beings without Bodies: An Experienced-Centered Theory of the Beliefs in Spirits" explained that supernatural belief was a somewhat neglected area of the discipline in part because of the tendency of other scholars and disciplines to conclude that all spiritual beliefs were false and would die out:

*...official culture in the Western world has been increasingly opposed to spiritual beliefs of all sorts, at least since the Enlightenment. In the*

eighteenth century, philosopher David Hume asked the question, "Can we ever have rational grounds for the belief in miracles?" In his essay, which became a classic of disbelief, he claimed to demonstrate conclusively that no supernatural belief could ever be considered rationally founded. By the mid nineteenth century, theologians had come to consistently condemn most cognitive spiritual belief as superstitious. These trends sometimes made exceptions for religious belief, on the condition that God was not conceived of as currently acting directly in the world. In the twentieth century, Freudian psychoanalytic theory--an enormously popular belief system that has affected every aspect of American intellectual life--identified all spiritual belief as a neurotic defense mechanism, an illusion based on infantile fulfillment. At the same time, Marxism explained spiritual belief in political terms as an instrument of the powerful used to *maintain an unjust status quo*. By the 1960s theology seemed to have completely capitulated on spiritual matters and declared that "God is dead." Through all of these historical changes, spiritual folk belief has been under even greater official pressure than institutional religion, because folk belief consistently refers to spiritual events erupting into the everyday world: ghostly visits, angelic assistance, answers to prayer. It was expected that such straightforward spiritual beliefs could not be sustained in the face of hostility from the official worldview that led scholars...to anticipate the ultimate secularization of modern society (25-26).

Contrary to the assumption that these beliefs would disappear, they have actually survived up into the 1990s. The people who held these beliefs, on the other hand, were less likely to talk about their beliefs and, therefore, the "appearance of a disappearance" evolved. As Diane Goldstein suggested,

The fact that supernatural beliefs and experiences are less frequently reported now than in the past has led scholars to the assumption that the beliefs themselves are no longer widely held to be true ("Perspectives" 29).

In terms of folklore scholarship she went on to say that,

...the extent of belief in the supernatural has for some time been seriously underestimated....remarks of astonishment on the part of the investigators, all [point] to one crucial question: "Why have we for so long overlooked the extent of contemporary belief in the supernatural?" Answers to this question are as complex as the data which ultimately led to its asking. But, as is so often the case in the social sciences, the clues to our blindness lie in our scholarly assumptions and are best ferreted out by an examination of the state of our discipline ("Perspectives" 31).

Hufford also pointed out that as a discipline, folklore has often found itself in a struggle to be considered more scientific within the academic world.

...academic enterprise presents itself today as the basic source of authentic knowledge about what is useful and good, and even more fundamentally, about what is real....Today one's claim to be modern and progressive is largely measured by the ability to establish connections with academic science....It is this normative status of science that forces disciplines such as folklore to establish themselves as "scientific" in either the social or the behavioral sense. At a time when scientism, as the ideology of science has been called, has so thoroughly captured the central epistemological terrain that a word such as "rational" has come to mean a proposition with which one would expect a hypothetical modern scientist to agree, rather than a process by which one may reach conclusions about everything from what to have for breakfast to how to build a hammered dulcimer, one had better be perceived as "scientific" if only to be seen as sensible.

The effect, though goes beyond acceptance as intellectually sound and largely determines the scope of the scholarship and the research materials on which one is allowed to comment with authority—quite apart from one's specific training ("Supernatural" 22-23).

Such an academic atmosphere, of course, has led folklorists to look at belief only in terms of "the rules of discourse about belief rather than beliefs themselves and the reasons they are held" (Hufford "Supernatural" 26).

Thankfully, however, folklore and folklorists have recently begun, if slowly, to look to the supernatural as a genre worthy of more in-depth study. This current trend goes hand in hand with the fact that people are now more willing to talk about their supernatural experiences and beliefs. As Hufford asserted,

...beliefs and experiences that a large part of modern humanity has had to keep quiet about for a hundred years or so are again becoming—very gradually—polite topics for general conversation. At the same time it is—again very gradually—becoming safe for the student of belief to turn attention to the genuinely interesting matters that should have been at the center of interest all along. Foremost among these are the roles of experience and reason. As I have already shown in connection with traditions of supernatural assault, this will frequently demonstrate that experience bulks larger and is far less dependent on culture in this connection than has been thought; and that reason of the ordinary and appropriate kinds is very often involved (“Supernatural” 27).

With disappearance, revival or reappearance of belief as a subject for discussion, perhaps it would be worthwhile to posit a definition of belief and folk belief in order to establish exactly what is meant here by these terms. Kenneth Pimple in his article *“Folk Beliefs”* discussed several definitions worthy of consideration. He defined belief as “a conviction or an acceptance that something is true” (51). He explained that this definition suggests the notion that people can either *think* that something is true or *feel* something to be true. Pimple said that, more often than not, when you *feel* that something is true it is harder to explain that belief. He points out that there are generally three kinds of things that people

believe in: facts, categories or systems of categories, and theories. Folk belief, he explained, is not really a “kind” of belief but rather a perspective or point of view to be taken when studying beliefs (Pimple 51-52).

In defining folk belief Pimple examined several common definitions and popular usages:

1. Folk beliefs are beliefs that are false.
2. Folk beliefs are beliefs that have not been demonstrated to be true.
3. Folk beliefs are beliefs that are held uncritically, are taken for granted, or are never examined very closely by their believers.
4. Folk beliefs are beliefs that members of a (folk) group hold because they are members of that group.
5. Folk beliefs are traditional beliefs; that is, they are beliefs that are circulated by word of mouth or by observation and imitation and, as a result of this circulation, undergo change (Pimple 52).

The definition that can be applied most readily to this particular study of the Ouija board is the one Pimple listed as number five, which focuses on the relationship between the beliefs and the believer. It takes into account “the attitude of the believer toward folk beliefs; the social, shared nature of folk beliefs; and the ways folk beliefs are circulated” (Pimple 52). Folk beliefs about the supernatural are widely held and are expressed in various manners—one of which is through the use of the Ouija board. This definition allows for the examination of how the informants actually feel about Ouija board phenomena; how information, rules, beliefs and stories about the Ouija board and Ouija board

experiences are shared; and how certain beliefs about the Ouija board, its power, and potential danger, are passed on from one person or group to the next.

As noted above, folk beliefs have often been looked upon as erroneous by academia and the disciplines. It is not my intention, however, to question the validity of my informants' stories or, for that matter, if the Ouija board actually does or does not act as a medium between this world and the next. The purpose of this thesis is to focus on how people view the Ouija board as well as how and why people use it. In this way, this study is not limited to a consideration of those who believe that they were speaking with a spirit while using the board. I also include accounts from those who do not believe that the Ouija board functions as such a medium. This study, therefore, exemplifies the theory proposed by David Hufford, in his article "Traditions of Disbelief," that there exist "two parallel sets of traditions about the supernatural where we had thought there was only one: traditions of belief on the one hand and "traditions of disbelief" on the other" (48). Both traditions, it should be noted, are equal in terms of folklore research since the believer and disbeliever both have their own way of reasoning out their beliefs. My interests in this study lie in how the Ouija board functions in the lives of those who use it or have used it. Further I am concerned with whether their

belief (or disbelief) coincides with other beliefs that they may have as well as with the rationale or method of reasoning they use in order to explain their beliefs.

Such a study should not focus on trying to prove or disprove folk belief but instead try to understand belief and its place in an individual's life. As Hufford suggests,

...we should be collecting not only supernatural beliefs and narratives...but also people's reasons for holding those beliefs so that we may inductively describe their empirical and logical components" (Terror 54).

## **1.2 Methodology**

It is with this sense of purpose that I approached people when interviewing them about the Ouija board. Initially, I had intended to focus my study entirely on the student population at the Memorial University student residences. While I did come in contact with a few residence stories, I quickly found that my most valuable informants appeared by accident. That is, usually, people in general conversation would ask me what I was studying and, upon hearing that it was the Ouija board, would offer accounts of their own personal experiences or stories that they had heard. I conducted seven extensive interviews in total (five females and two males).

During the interviews, several of my informants were uneasy about their names being used in a thesis that others could read. Some informants were worried about the fact that they had mentioned the names of other people who in turn might be upset with them for doing so. It is due to these concerns that I decided to use fictitious names for my informants and to use only first names and initials when an informant mentioned the name of another person during an interview. If one informant mentioned the name of *another informant*, however, the fictitious name of *that* informant was used.

*As my thesis will be open to all for reading and usage as a reference, my bibliography will maintain these fictitious names. The real names of my informants will be found only in my research material which, when submitted to the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archives (hereafter MUNFLA) will have certain restrictions applied to its usage.*

In the spring of 1995, I also distributed a questionnaire to several undergraduate and graduate folklore classes. Of the 100 questionnaires passed out, 46 were returned. Once broken down into percentages, of this 46, 58.7% answered "yes" to the question "Did you ever use the Ouija board?" and 41.3% answered "no". In terms of gender, 35 females and 11 males decided to answer and return the questionnaire. Of those who said "yes" to usage of the board,



81.5% were female and 18.5% were male and of those who answered “no”, 68.5% were female and 31.5% were male. Within the questionnaire I also gave the individual the option to reveal his or her name or remain anonymous. Of the 46 who answered, 23 gave their names and 23 did not--exactly 50% on either side. This option proved to be quite useful since the anonymity allowed people to be uninhibited in their responses. Since I will be dealing with quotations from these questionnaires but do not have the names of all the individuals who responded, for the purposes of citation they have been numbered from 1-46 and are listed in the bibliography as “Ouija Board Questionnaire.” These along with my notes, interview tapes and transcriptions will be deposited into MUNFLA should anyone wish to view them. As with my tapes, transcriptions and notes, however, usage of these questionnaires as a reference, will be restricted.

In selecting informants I did not limit them to being residents of Newfoundland nor did I impose limits upon age, gender or religion. Those that were interviewed were people who knew me, to some extent, and felt comfortable enough in my presence *to discuss their beliefs with me. I feel that it is necessary,* at this point, to include some details pertaining to each individual’s life, personality and/or background. Even just a little insight into the lives of these

people can help us see them as more than just informants, but rather as the everyday human beings that they are.

### **1.2.1 The Informants**

Phonse Hann was born in 1952 and grew up in (and currently lives in) St. John's. He, himself, is an academic and holds the position of archivist in a local archive. The interview occurred at his workplace. There were not a lot of researchers or workers in the archive so he did not mind being interviewed as long as it did not take too long.

Phonse was brought up in an Anglican family but he said that by the time he was 11 he had no real religious beliefs. He pointed out, however, that he had "...always had a kind of intellectual interest in religion and its supernatural beliefs..."(personal interview). He was quite eager to talk about his experiences with the Ouija board and did not hesitate to say that he believed it to be simply another game. In speaking about it he said,

I never, ever, in my life had thought that the Ouija board was something that worked....I had heard of Ouija boards when I was much younger, like seven or eight or something, but it was always just a game, you know. Like playing cards or something....It certainly didn't have any real power or real communication to the dead or anything (personal interview).

Phonse declared that he loves ghost stories and said that he still gets chills when he hears them. During the interview he told a story about himself when he was a young boy and saw the ghost of an old woman whom he knew had just died. Even though he saw it himself, however, he still did not believe that it was actually her ghost. "I just don't believe that dead people are alive, you know. I mean when you're dead, you're dead" (personal interview).

I also interviewed Mary-Dawn Bennett in the same archives as I did Phonse. There were a few people around, and we did not want to disturb them, so I decided to conduct the interview in one of the vacant rooms being renovated as an addition to the archives. As there was no furniture, we simply sat on the floor and started talking. Mary-Dawn is originally from Ottawa and she came to Newfoundland in order to attend MUN. At the time of the interview Mary-Dawn was in her early 20s and was also enrolled in the folklore graduate program. Through the folklore department, classes and socials I came to know Mary-Dawn fairly well. She has a very vibrant personality and a zest for life that emanates from her. She is a very easy person to talk to and is quite articulate in describing her experiences.

While Mary-Dawn had experimented with the Ouija board as a young child it never caught her interest then because she did not know what to do with it and it never worked for her. The second time she came across the Ouija board was when she came to Newfoundland and stayed in a residence on MUN's campus. Due to her first encounter with the Ouija board, she was skeptical of its ability to work for the other girls. Once she tried it, however, and saw it move with her own eyes and received answers to questions that none of the other girls could possibly know, she began to believe that there was something to this Ouija board phenomenon business after all. After describing several accounts of an evil spirit coming onto the board and of the other girls getting upset about it, she said that *she did not react that strongly since "I'm not Christian in my beliefs at all"* (personal interview). On the other hand, when speaking of her own opinion about the Ouija board she said, "...I don't think of it in terms of a game. I viewed it as very serious because, like I said, we were obviously dealing with something real. And there was no question in my mind but that this was real" (personal interview).

Yvonne Peddle was working as a bartender at a local pub when I interviewed her. It was during the early afternoon so there were no customers around, and we could discuss at length her experiences, beliefs and opinions about

the Ouija board. I knew Yvonne because I also worked in that pub. Yvonne, at the time of the interview, was 25 years old. *While she had been living in town for seven years or more, she was born and raised in the small community of Greens Harbor, Trinity Bay. She was raised in a somewhat strict Anglican family but since some of her closest friends were Roman Catholic, she was also influenced by their religious beliefs and practices.*

Yvonne had often heard stories about the Ouija board when she was growing up but never wanted to try it. She said "I didn't want to know if it was real or not real. I didn't care. It was evil. That's all I knew" (personal interview). It was not until her sister moved in with her that she began to use the Ouija board. *At first she had stood in the background to watch other people play with it and had speculated if they were in fact moving it themselves. She only decided to use the board when one of her friends coaxed her by saying that since she, Dawn, did not believe, and Yvonne simply did not want it to move, then they could both be assured that the other was not intentionally moving the pointer.*

Once Yvonne began using the board with her friend and the pointer started moving, she felt that the Ouija board really had power. She said that from that point on, whenever she was using the board, the spirit would call her "bitch" and curse at her. She felt that for some reason *the Ouija board did not like her and at*

times this notion frightened her. When speaking about the Ouija board she said, "I think it's real, and I think it's something not to be messed with. That there's something out there beyond us that we know nothing about and it's probably better off that we didn't" (personal interview).

Yvonne also mentioned in her interview that my cousin Theresa Murray had sat in on a few Ouija board sessions. I thought that it would be interesting to hear her point of view. I called Theresa up one day and asked if she could drop over to my home so that I could interview her, and she agreed. This turned out to be a rather interesting interview because while I had only intended to interview Theresa, my sister Margaret Murray, who happened to be there, also ended up being an informant. As well, after the interview, they decided to try the Ouija board again and convinced me to join in (my first and only time). Margaret, who had used the Ouija board with some of the same people as Theresa, had not used it with Yvonne or Theresa. Nevertheless, they all knew about each other's experiences because they all belonged to the same group of friends who were using the Ouija board.

Theresa was 24 when I interviewed her and had just recently enrolled in a secretarial course at Cabot College. Margaret, a primary teacher by trade, was 28

and the manager at the same pub where Yvonne Peddle worked. Both girls had been brought up as Roman Catholics in the small community of St. Shotts which is located on the southern tip of the Avalon Peninsula. In both cases, it had been several years since they had seen or touched a Ouija board but they each had gone, a couple of times, to see a fortune teller. A further similarity between these girls is that they had both been through the tragic death of a loved one. Theresa had lost her fiancé through a car accident and Margaret's father and brother had drowned at sea while bird hunting along the coastline.

*The first time Theresa heard about the Ouija board was when she worked in a card store at the Village Mall. Another girl who worked at the Mall told her that she and her friends were using the Ouija board. At that time Theresa said she had felt that such a experience would be too uncomfortable for her. Margaret's first encounter with the Ouija board was when she was a second year student at MUN. A friend in the apartment building where she was staying had bought a board but Margaret's roommate would not allow it in their apartment so she never tried it at that point.*

It was not until Theresa and Margaret met up with Yvonne, and the other people associated with the pub, that they both wanted to try it. Theresa said that "... a part of me wanted to reach the spirits, or whatever, to find out, you know, if

you could actually talk to someone who had died. And, you know, if you could, I wanted to do it" (personal interview). Likewise, Margaret said that when it comes to "...the supernatural, I'm always curious. Whether to believe in it or not. I always have been. What if it's true?" (personal interview). Both felt, however, that there was no sense in contacting random spirits. They wanted to use the Ouija board only to see if indeed it worked and, if it did, to reach the spirit of a loved one who had passed away. Margaret, for instance, asked, "...what's the sense of reaching a spirit that you don't know....That could be all just hogwash, right?....But if you reach somebody that you know and they answer something you know, that will prove it" (personal interview).

When I first met Gerard Flynn he was working on a project for the Head of *the Folklore Department at MUN*. Later on I became aware of the fact that he was an undergraduate student majoring in folklore and that he was from Harbor Grace. He, too, had a keen interest in the area of belief and had done several papers on fortune telling and Tarot cards. After having several conversations with him about this topic and my own thesis, I decided it might be a good idea to interview him. Gerard did not feel comfortable in coming to my home so we arranged to meet at the Blarneystone Pub on George Street. It was a quiet afternoon at the



pub so I did not have to worry about noise interfering with the recording. In the comparatively relaxed atmosphere of the pub, with alcohol present, Gerard was clearly more comfortable being interviewed and was able to relate some very emotional Ouija board experiences.

At the time of the interview Gerard was 25 years old. While he was born a Roman Catholic, he asserted that he did not think of himself as being Roman Catholic. He said that, to him, the Roman Catholic Church is an institution, like a business, and he preferred to think of himself as a Christian. Gerard first came in contact with the Ouija board when he was about 15 years old. A friend of his had acquired one and had shown him how to use it. Gerard said that at first he was a "doubting Thomas" and just looked upon it as a game like "...monopoly with, you know, just a higher form" (personal interview). After using it over and over however, he admitted that he began to feel that it was more serious and he felt that

....it wasn't monopoly anymore. It was some kind of Nostradamus like dude in cloaked in the heart. And it was like somebody that could prophesy but somebody who was evil that was prophesying. Not somebody who was good (personal interview).

He and his friend used the Ouija board for about two years until his friend's mother became worried about what they had been experimenting with, and she made them throw it away. About five or six years later Gerard came in contact with the Ouija board again at a house party. This time, however, Gerard related

that the Ouija board got a little more personal with him when the spirit contacted claimed to be his father, who had died six months previously. Gerard said he never touched a Ouija board after that but would not mind trying it again.

Tammy Power was perhaps my most fascinating, complex and informative informant. Tammy was 24 at the time and lived in Carbonear but she enjoyed coming into St. John's to see bands play at the pub where I worked. After a few months she began dating the manager of the pub and because she was, therefore, around more, we got to know each other better. I told her about my interest in the Ouija board and she mentioned the fact that she had used it when she had been at college. When we met she worked as a counselor in Whitbourne.

At first I thought that Tammy had only used the Ouija board a couple of times but once we got into the interview I realized that Tammy's experiences did not begin and end there. Some of the experiences she reported to me included some of the following events and activities: going to fortune tellers; holding seances and being the medium; appearing as a Demon when under a trance as well as seeing one herself; being followed by a spirit when she went away for a weekend trip; having several near death experiences in which she was saved by a voice that whispered a warning; seeing several ghosts and spirits at different times

in her life: having the ability, at times, to foreshadow tragedy and danger; and constantly experiencing *deja vu*. To be quite honest, my thesis could have been focused entirely upon Tammy and her experiences.

With regards to the Ouija board, the first time Tammy ever heard about it was in high school. Usually when there was a slumber party the Ouija board would be brought out for a bit of fun. She became more interested in the Ouija board when she went to college in Stephenville. The building where she stayed was said to be haunted by the spirit of a man who had fallen to his death while there. *When someone mentioned the Ouija board, she and her friends decided to see if the stories were true.* This one experience led to a couple of years during which, Tammy commented, she became so involved with the Ouija board that she had her own spirit that would ask for her when others were on the board and she was not in the room. She related that this spirit's name was "Don" and that he appeared to have a romantic interest in her.

Tammy is a Roman Catholic and she said that she came to believe in and look at things differently because she was always rebelling against and questioning her Catholic upbringing. She does not really see any connection between the Ouija board and her beliefs about the Church. The only connection she recognizes is the belief in the devil and the traditional image of what he looks

like. Basically, though, she felt that “the Ouija board is just another form of communication, that’s all” (personal interview). It has been a few years since Tammy has used the board. She admitted that she missed having a Ouija board and that “it’s like having that penpal who doesn’t write you a letter anymore” (personal interview).

### **1.2.2 Overview of Coming Chapters**

While the people I interviewed and those who answered my questionnaire play a strong role throughout the thesis, additional research, such as student papers at MUNFLA and different articles done by other scholars on the Ouija board or on belief and the occult in general, also play an important role. It is through these other reports and scholarly works that one can understand and interpret what the informants have said and consequently place them within the proper folkloric context.

Chapter Two of the thesis looks at the historical origins of the Ouija board from the perspective of written history as well as oral history. This chapter shows how the Ouija board is linked historically to other areas of spiritualism and the occult. More often than not, what the informants had to say about the origins of

*the Ouija board differed greatly from that of the “official history.”* Therefore, this chapter also discusses the creation or invention of folk history.

Chapter Three examines “official” and popular beliefs about the Ouija board. Here we look at the typical theoretical approaches that have been applied to the Ouija board where a “tradition of disbelief” is readily evident. As well, this chapter focuses on how a study of the Ouija board fits into the realm of folklore scholarship.

The final chapter looks more closely at the actual narratives that my informants told me. This chapter focuses mainly on examples of “traditions of belief” but also contains several instances of “traditions of disbelief.” These narratives are used in order to determine the rationale behind these two traditions as well as the folk use, beliefs, and customs surrounding the Ouija board.

The conclusion reviews several different points that have come up during the course of research and preparation of the thesis. It looks at the difficulties that folklorists face when trying to establish a study on *supernatural belief and why or* how these obstacles exist. As well, the conclusion looks in some detail at one narrative, in particular, in order to illustrate more clearly that the supernatural stories told by my informants *do follow a general pattern of reasoning* (albeit to varying degrees). This chapter reiterates not only that there exists two traditions

of belief but that individuals within these traditions exhibit the ability to use their own methods of reason and logic as a means of explaining or describing their beliefs and/or supernatural experiences.

## Chapter 2

### The History of the Ouija Board

To the general consumer, the Ouija board is seen as simply another game on the shelf in a toy store. The average person would perhaps liken it to *Monopoly*, *Snakes and Ladders*, and other such board games on the market. The question of how the Ouija board was created, and by whom, does not generally pose an area of concern to the average person. Some board games do have simple histories--someone came up with the concept and marketed it. The Ouija board, on the other hand, has a long and complicated history involving *spiritualism*, the occult, and automatic writing, to name just a few of its influences. The development of these influences will be looked at in this chapter in terms of their relationship to the *Ouija board*.

In exploring the history of the Ouija board two forms or types of history are considered: "official" and "folk." While different scholars often have *conflicting opinions* about the trustworthiness of one or the other, it is not my intent to illustrate the veracity of the "official" or "folk" history of the Ouija board. Both are worthy of consideration in a folkloristic study on the Ouija board.

## **2.1 “Official” History of the Ouija board**

When using such a phrase as “official” history, certain connotations are attached to it. Typically speaking, it implies that one is dealing with factual, written documents whereby “fact” signifies truth (Widdowson 44). This section, then, looks at some of the documented facts about the Ouija board as well as a brief history of other events or activities that have influenced its evolution into a common household board game.

### **2.1.1 Ouija Board: What Does “Ouija” Means and Early Versions**

According to the Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology the word *Ouija* is derived from the French “oui” and the German “ja,” both of which mean “yes.” The Ouija board is defined as an “apparatus for psychic communication” that “consists of a wooden tripod on rollers which, under the hand of the medium, moves over a polished board and spells out messages by pointing out letters with its apex” (“Ouija Board” 989). While some people think that the Ouija board is relatively new, *people have been using similar devices for thousands of years in order to help them make decisions, find peace of mind in times of trouble, diagnose illness or find cures, receive guidance from God, speak with dead loved ones and foretell the future* (Covina 10). In fact as far back as 540 B.C. a device



quite similar to the above Ouija board description was used by the philosopher Pythagoras. It is noted, in an historical account of his life, that his sect would hold seances whereby a table on wheels would move toward signs. These signs were then interpreted by Pythagoras and his pupil, Philolaus, as revelations from the unseen world ("Ouija Board" 989).

Along with Pythagoras's version of the Ouija board, other variations have been used throughout history in different areas of the world. According to Stoker Hunt in Ouija: the Most Dangerous Game the Ouija board is "nothing less than a folk knowledge, a universal folk instrument" (4) since it has been reinvented and rediscovered by many different people in a wide variety of locations in the world. Hunt's comments suggest that no one person or place can be accredited with its discovery. He noted that in China, for example, around 551-479 B.C. the use of a Ouija-like instrument was fairly common, and no one considered it to be dangerous to try to communicate with the dead. Hunt also pointed out that reports from third century A.D. Rome indicate the use of such a device. Traditional narrative holds that there were three people experimenting with the Ouija board who decided to ask for the name of the successor to the throne. When they announced their findings, they were tried for treason and the person they had named as successor, a soldier named Theodosius, was executed. Hunt indicated

that thirteenth-century Tartary also saw the use of a *Ouija-like device* that was used for divination and instruction by the Mongols. He said, however, that one of the earliest traces of a *Ouija-like device* in North America can be credited to the Native population. Long before Columbus arrived, Natives were said to use devices called “squidilac boards” in order to find lost items or people. The boards had symbols on them, instead of an alphabet, which directed individuals as to how and when certain religious rituals should take place (4).

While various types of *Ouija-like devices* have been used for thousands of years, when one looks at the whole phenomenon as it presents itself today, one can see a connection to Spiritualism. In order to understand this connection it is necessary to look at the development of Spiritualism.

### **2.1.2 The Development of Spiritualism and Its Connection to the Ouija Board**

Rev. Simeon Stefanidakis in his article, “What is Spiritualism” provided three potential definitions for Spiritualism:

Webster defines Spiritualism as: The belief that the dead survive as spirits which can communicate with the living, especially with the help of a third party, called a medium.

The National Spiritualist Association of churches defines Spiritualism as: the science, philosophy and religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit world.

The definition adopted in 1948, during the centenary of the movement known as Modern Spiritualism, very succinctly defines Spiritualism as :  
The proof of survival (1).

Most scholars pinpoint 1848, and the experiences of the Fox sisters, as the beginning of the Modern Spiritualist Movement. Spiritualism itself, however, has a history with roots reaching back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Through several articles, Rev. Stefanidakis has given an excellent summary of the development of Spiritualism throughout history and the prominent people involved. As well, Felicitas Goodman in her book How About Demons: Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World has also devoted some time to considering the earlier seeds of *Spiritualism*. In this section I will draw heavily on the work done by Goodman and Stefanidakis. Both suggested in their work that Spiritualism began with the Swedish visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).

While Emanuel Swedenborg was not concerned with spiritual possession, he is noted as being the philosophical forerunner of Spiritualism. He was a highly educated man who was interested in the natural sciences, mining, physics and chemistry. While he was successful in his pursuits, he also felt that he had missed something along the way. In short, he felt he had missed the “mystery of life.” His quest led him to the study of anatomy and philosophy. Not finding the

answers he sought, he went through a severe emotional crisis that eventually found its resolution in a visionary experience. During his vision he saw spirits of heaven and hell and said that he met up with many people with whom he had previously been acquainted.

While others before Swedenborg had received spirit communications, the messages were said to have come from "higher beings." Swedenborg was the first to claim that he had communicated with the spirits of men and women and that they had basically the same characteristics in death as they did in their lives on earth. The possibility of communicating with ordinary people was quite new, suggesting that life and death were not so far apart (Goodman 27-28; Stefanidakis "Forerunners...Emanuel" 1-3). This possibility of the layperson being able to communicate with the dead would play an important role in popularizing the Ouija board.

Many followers of Spiritualism may not even be aware of Swedenborg's contribution to the Spiritualist Movement. While he did lay the path he did not actually bring forth any theoretical foundation upon which Modern Spiritualism is based. This accomplishment is credited to another forerunner of Modern Spiritualism. Andrew Jackson Davis (Goodman 28-29).

Davis was born in Blooming Grove, New York in 1826. Unlike Swedenborg, Davis was born into a poor family and was not highly educated. As a child he heard comforting voices and after his mother's death had a vision of the place where she had gone after life. One of his comforting voices led him to convince his father to move to Poughkeepsie in 1838. It was here, in 1843, that Davis attended a lecture by Dr. J. S. Grimes and was introduced to mesmerism. Davis was tested by Dr. Grimes as a subject for mesmerism but this first attempt was unsuccessful. It was not until a local tailor, William Levington, helped Davis enter a mesmeric trance that positive results came forth. It was discovered that Davis could diagnose medical disorders in this trance state since he was able to see all the organs of the body. Organs that were healthy stood out brightly but those diseased would be dimmer (Goodman 29-30; Stefanidakis "Forerunners...Andrew" 1).

In 1844, Davis had an experience that changed his life forever. One evening he felt overcome by a power and was quickly transcended on a journey. In the morning he woke up amidst the Catskill Mountains (about 40 miles from his home) where he claimed to have come in contact with the deceased philosophers Galen and Emanuel Swedenborg. From this meeting Davis reported acquiring a lot of knowledge and understanding of the spirit world and proceeded

to travel and teach what he knew (Goodman 30-31; Stefanidakis

"Forerunners...Andrew" 1).

During his teachings he met a physician, Dr. Lyons, and Rev. William Fishbough. With the help of these men as mesmerist and transcriber respectively, Davis dictated his great work The Principles of Nature: Her Divine Revelations and A Voice To Mankind.<sup>1</sup> Within this work Davis gave a prediction about the movement Modern Spiritualism which stated that the time was coming soon when "the interiors of men will be opened and the spiritual communication will be established" (qtd. in Stefanidakis "Forerunners...Andrew" 3) through a live demonstration. At exactly the same time on March 31, 1848, when Davis was *recording and trying to make sense of the message* "brother, the good work has begun--behold, a living demonstration is born"(qtd. in Stefanidakis "Forerunners...Andrew" 3), the Fox sisters in Hydesville, New York were receiving their first "rapping" from an unknown source (Goodman 32-33; Stefanidakis "Forerunners...Andrew" 2-3).

The Fox family lived in Hydesville, a farming community near Rochester, New York. In December of 1847, they moved into a house that was known locally as being haunted. The family did not experience anything to affirm these

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<sup>1</sup>Published in New York by S.S. Lyon and W. Fishbough in 1847.

stories until March of 1848 when they heard noises that were so loud, furniture shook. Attempts were made to discover where these sounds originated, but a source could not be found. Kate, the younger Fox sister, decided to challenge the sounds and demanded that whatever was present repeat the clapping sound of her hands. The challenge was met and with every clap there was a corresponding knock. When the knocking responded to Kate's movement of a clap (without sound), it was concluded that whatever was making the noises could also see (Goodman 33; Stefanidakis "Hydesville" 1).

The girls proceeded to develop a code which involved using one knock for "no" and two for "yes." The girls' mother then asked for answers to questions about her own life. She received the correct responses to her questions. They tried to find out who was producing the knocks by asking the knocker specific questions about itself. They discovered that the knocker was the spirit of a peddler, Charles B. Rosna, who had been murdered for money. The spirit told the Fox family that his body was buried in the cellar. While digging underneath the cellar did not produce results at that time, 56 years later a body was found in the walls of the cellar (Goodman 33; Stefanidakis "Hydesville" 2-3).

Word spread quickly about what was happening in the haunted house in Hydesville. This phenomenon of a spirit communicating through knocks drew

more public attention when the girls moved out of their house. Kate moved to her brother's in Auburn, New York, and Margaret went to her sister Leah's in Rochester. *The knocking then began to occur at both of these locations although it was at Leah's house that the knocking was stronger.* As the spirit followed the girls, it was believed that they were the ones who emanated the energy that the spirit needed to manifest itself. The girls became professional mediums, and neighbors as well as strangers came to witness their ability. Now, however, other spirits besides the spirit of the dead peddler responded to their questions. *Those who visited the Fox sisters often found that they could communicate, through the knocking, with dead loved ones, and they were comforted to discover that the departed lived on and were happy* (Goodman 34; Stefanidakis "Hydesville" 4).

The girls and Hydesville had become famous overnight. Soon Kate and Margaret were touring the country exhibiting their ability to communicate with the spirits. As the girls became more proficient at spirit communication, the spirits began to manifest themselves further by moving furniture, most often a table, as a way to answer questions. *This physical phenomenon was first observed in Europe. By 1854, the knocking and the movement of furniture merged into the one tradition of "table tapping" and experiencing this became a common parlor pastime in Continental society* (Ellis 63). Other names associated with this table



tapping phenomenon are table turning, table-lifting, table-tilting, table-levitation and table rapping (Hunt 19).

Table-turning (lifting/tilting/levitation) involved a group of people sitting around a three legged table with their hands lying flat on the tabletop. They would then wait for some indication of movement. Sometimes the table would rotate in one location while at other times it would move quickly across the room leaving the participants out of breath as they tried to keep up with it. Typically, during a tapping (or rapping) session, those sitting at the table would ask a question and the table would respond by its leg or legs. Usually one tap meant “no” and two taps meant “yes.” As well, the table often tapped out words by using a *number code* for each letter of the alphabet. As this practice became more popular mediums claiming to be able to conduct table-tapping seances began to emerge in North America, Great Britain, France, Germany, Turkey and China (Hunt 19-21).

As the number of mediums increased, interest also grew in the scientific exploration of table tapping. *Several experiments conducted in the late 1800s* by such prominent investigators as Dr. Walter Franklin Prince of the American Society of Psychical Research, proved that the tapping came from the very people who were sitting at the table. In 1888, Margaret Fox declared that she and her

sister had been frauds. She said that they were able to produce the sounds with their fingers and their toes. Despite such evidence of fraud, however, Spiritualism and the desire to communicate with the dead did not fade away. If anything it went on to become more popular (Hunt 99-102).

### **2.1.3 The Evolution of the Ouija Board: “Planchette” to Parker Brothers**

Perhaps because of the difficulty and time consuming nature of table-tapping, participants quickly became bored and strides were made to develop new devices that made the task of spirit communication a little easier. One such device, the “planchette,” was in use as early as 1867 (Ellis 64-65). The Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology defines “planchette” as follows:

A simple instrument designed for the purpose of communication with spirits. It consists of a thin heart-shaped piece of wood, mounted on two small wheel-casters and carrying a pencil, point downwards, for the third support. The hand is placed on the wood and the pencil writes automatically, or presumably by spirit control operating through the psychic force of the medium (“Planchette” 1041).

Legend has it that a French Spiritualist, M. Planchette, invented this device in 1853 and gave it his own name. Some researchers have suggested, however, that there is no evidence of such a person existing. As well, the fact that the word “planchette” in French means “little plank” would seem to indicate a possible error in translation (“History” 1). Gina Covina suggests in The Ouija Book that

the planchette actually originated in French monasteries and nunneries. She related that the usage of this little board was so widespread among the monks and nuns in France that in 1856 the Bishop of Paris had issued a letter forbidding them any further contact with the planchette (98).

The planchette gained popularity in 1868 when an American toy company decided to market the device. Thousands of planchettes were sold and the articles and books<sup>2</sup> written on the subject greatly added to its notoriety. The problem with the planchette, however, was that the messages coming from it were often very difficult to read since the pencil could not lift off the sheet as it wrote. Words, therefore, often ran together or were crossed out and illegible. Because of this difficulty, a new device, the "dial-planchette" (or dial-plate), was invented. The "dial-planchette" was a circular board with a pointer attached at the center. The letters of the alphabet, numbers, "yes," "no," "don't know," and "goodbye" were printed on the outer perimeter of the circle. People would put their fingers on the pointer, which would go to the letters and numbers in the circle. Another person was needed to write down the letters. While messages proved to be more readable

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<sup>2</sup>For an example of books on the planchette please look to the following: see Kate Field, Planchette's Diary (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1868).; Revelations of the Great Modern Mystery Planchette, and theories Respecting It (Boston: G. W. Cottrell, 1868).; and Epes Sargent, Planchette; or, the Despair of Science (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1869).

than those produced by the planchette, the “dial planchette” also proved to be problematic. If the spirit made a complete circle around the dial-planchette, for instance, the participants would have to get up and move with every rotation in order to keep their fingers on it (Covina 98-102).

Dial-planchettes never gained popularity, so once again attempts were made to produce a more effective instrument for spirit communication. Some mediums found that they could still communicate with the spirits mentally or by simply using a pen and a piece of paper whereby the spirits could write automatically through them. The planchette, as well as the Ouija board, are basically variations of “automatic writing.” “Automatic writing” is described in the Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology as,

Scripts produced without the control of the conscious self. It is the most common form of mediumship, the source of innumerable cases of self-delusion, and at the same time one of the highest and most valuable spiritual gifts as, if reliable, it opens up a direct channel for obtaining teaching from the beyond (“Automatic Writing” 108).

In order to write messages automatically from the spirit world it has been suggested that one’s mind should not be aware of what the hand is, or is not, doing. Therefore, if one were trying to develop this ability it might be wise to attempt it while involved in conversation. In that way one is not consciously aware of what is happening with the pen and paper (Buckland 28-29).

While some spiritualists were comfortable with attempts at automatic writing others felt that it was necessary to have a “proper instrument” as the vehicle of spirit communication. The people who were finally able to come up with a solution were E.C. Reiche, Elijah Bond, and Charles Kennard, in 1890. They borrowed from the model of the dial plate talking board and created a new alphanumeric design. That is, instead of having the alphabet and numbers spread around in a complete circle, they spread the letters of the alphabet in twin arcs across the middle of the board. Beneath these arcs were the numbers from one to ten and in the corners of the board were the words “yes” and “no.” They still had a planchette-like device on top of the board as a pointer but, instead of wheels used padded wooden pegs which allowed for a smoother flow of the pointer. With this new invention, all one had to do was make contact with the spirit world and record the letters that were pointed out. It has been said that Kennard was told by the board that its name should be called “Ouija” after the Egyptian word for good luck. Even though Kennard realized that this was not the true meaning of the word, he decided to use it because the board was said to have asked for it during a session. He borrowed some money in order to establish the Kennard Novelty Company and in 1890 started to produce the first commercial Ouija board (“History” 2). With regards to the name “Ouija,” however, there is also the

suggestion that Kennard had in fact called his creation “Witch board” (Panati 93). The first Ouija board patent, however, was actually granted in 1880 and belonged to *Frederick Becker of Albany, New York* (Cox 103).

Regardless of previous patents, the most commonly accepted “Father of the Ouija” is William Fuld (Eliason “Ouija” 534). Fuld was a Baltimore customs inspector who had previously worked as Charles Kennard’s shop foreman. Kennard was forced out of business by a hostile takeover from his financial backers and William Fuld, along with his brother and *business partner, Isaac*, became the new owners. The name of the company was changed to Ouija Novelty Company and they began producing massive numbers of Ouija boards (“History” 3).

While several other “spirit boards” were being sold toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Sears Roebuck and other firms, Fuld’s board “Ouija, the Mystifying Oracle Talking Board,” that was patented in 1892, was the most successful. By 1899, their business had grown so much that the Fuld brothers had to open up a small factory in order to keep up with the demand. Fuld seems to have entered into the business at the right time. His Ouija board gained popularity through several occurrences—one of those being in St. Louis with Pearl Curran’s contact with a spirit in 1913 who called itself “Patience Worth.” This spirit spoke

to Mrs. Curran through the Ouija board and, over time, dictated numerous poems and other literary works.<sup>3</sup> This attracted a lot of attention from the media and consequently spread the word of the wonders of the Ouija board to those who had never heard of it before (Ellis 65).

Aside from Mrs. Curran's experiences, the sales of Fuld's Ouija board were also increased during times of crisis. During World War I, for example, people tried to use the Ouija board to communicate with their loved ones on the war front. Sales peaked again in 1929 with the Great Depression and yet again during World War II. The 1960s brought with it a revival in interest in the paranormal and, again, people turned to the Ouija board. In 1966 Fuld's company, with all trademarks and patents, was sold to Parker Brothers, an American business known for their production of game boards. Parker Brothers still manufacture the Ouija board today and it can easily be obtained in numerous department and novelty stores (Ellis 9-10).

While Fuld's model of the Ouija board does represent the large majority of the type of Ouija board being sold today, other boards on the market include

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<sup>3</sup>For examples of published books by the spirit "Patience Worth" through Ouija board communications with Pearl Curran, please look to the following: The Sorry Tale: A Story of the Time of Christ (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1917); Hope Trueblood (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1918); The Pot Upon the Wheel (St. Louis, Mo.: Dorset Press, [c1921]); and Light From Beyond (New York: Patience Worth Publishing, [c1923]).

“Aye-See,” “Mystic Eye,” “Planchette,” and “Cybernetic Destiny Wheel” (Cox 107). Likewise, as the interests of society change so do variations of the Ouija board. Currently, there is a growing curiosity over angels and game board manufacturers have caught on to this market. An advertisement in Fate magazine in 1995, for instance, offered a board where you could talk to your own guardian angel. It was called “Angel Guide: a message board conveying good thoughts and spiritual guidance” (7). Similarly, the Ouija board has demonstrated that in this age of technology (and, of course, computer games) it can still find its niche. In Wireless magazine (summer 1995), for instance, the reader is offered a computer mouse pad with the design of the Ouija board on it (5). This, of course is only a sample of the new products being produced that use the same premise as the Ouija board--that is, giving the average person the ability to communicate with the nonliving.

The above subsections have reviewed what others have written about the origins of the Ouija board. While the written, or “official,” history of the Ouija board is important, in a folkloristic study on the Ouija board, it is also crucial that we look at the folk, or “unofficial,” history of how the Ouija board evolved.



## **2.2 Folk History of the Ouija Board**

Richard Dorson in his article "The Oral Historian and the Folklorist" explained folk history as

...the versions of past events that have remained in folk memory and folk tradition. This folk history has little in common with the elitist history that prevails in professional historical circles (43).

More often than not, the term "folk history" is interchanged with the term "oral history" and their meanings are further complicated when the two terms are seen together as "oral folk history."<sup>4</sup> To the novice, both folk history and oral history are often seen as one and the same--and seeing such a term as "oral folk history" may seem to suggest that this is true. There is, however, a small difference between the two terms. Trevor Lummis in his article "Oral History" defined oral history as "essentially an account of firsthand experience, recalled retrospectively and communicated to an interviewer for historical purposes" (92). The keywords in this definition are "firsthand experience" whereas in Dorson's definition of folk history the keywords are "folk memory and folk tradition." Oral history is more concerned with collecting the recent history of events. While folk history does

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<sup>4</sup>For example, this term is used in Richard Dorson's article "The Oral Historian and the Folklorist" p. 43--full citation in bibliography.

involve collecting recent history it also involves the collection of memories of past events that have been passed down through generations. Dorson, however, further identified a difference by suggesting that there are actually two types of oral history: "oral traditional history" and "oral personal history." He said that oral traditional history

...seeks out the topics and themes that the folk wish to talk about, the personal and immediate history with which they are concerned. We have no way of knowing in advance what are the contours of this history, except that they will bear no resemblance to federal government-structured elitist history ("Oral" 45).

Dorson saw *oral personal history as involving accounts of first-hand experiences* of the non-elite or folk. He felt that these two terms, when combined, make up "oral folk history."

A folk history of the Ouija board was gathered through my interviews with my informants as well as through the results from the Ouija board questionnaire. When asked directly about the history of the Ouija board, most of my informants said that they did not know a lot about it. No one, for instance, came out and said that the Ouija board came from William Fuld, was a form of automatic writing or was related to Spiritualism. What they knew of the Ouija board had been passed on to them from other people.

When Phonse Hann was asked about the history of the Ouija board, for instance, he pointed out that he did not know much about it. He thought of the Ouija board as

...one of these Parker games, you know. That's all. Just like Monopoly or whatever. It was something that some company somewhere had decided it could make a living selling and they did and people bought it and period. That's it (personal interview).

When I asked Mary-Dawn Bennett about the Ouija board history she said "...I think I've heard it said that each board has a spirit or deals, or contacts, one spirit" (personal interview).

Some informants did not respond to my question with any clear sense of Ouija board history, but dwelt, rather, on their feelings that the Ouija board was simply evil. Theresa Murray, for instance said,

Well, I was after hearing a lot of things like if you had a Ouija board in your house it was bad luck and, you know, houses after burning down and all that kind of stuff....That's about all....just superstitious feeling I guess that something would happen. That it was just bad luck, evil spirits, you know, possessing you or taking over your house (personal interview).

Margaret Murray, on the other hand, had heard that it was bad luck to throw a homemade Ouija board out. She said that she had heard that "it was bad luck to destroy a Ouija board once it's been made" (personal interview). With regards to the history of the board she only recalled what a friend had told her in second year university:

...he was telling us about *Ouija* board and stuff, and I had never heard about it before and he was telling, you know, about the spirits and could call up the dead and all this, you know....He had a real one though. He bought a real one (personal interview).

Both Margaret and Theresa made a distinction between real *Ouija* boards and boards that were not real. To them the “store bought” type, that is, the Parker Brothers’ *Ouija* board was real.

Yvonne Peddle, on the other hand, suggested that “real” *Ouija* boards were made by witches or occult leaders and held a stronger power than the home-made one that she had used. Of the “real” *Ouija* board she said, “I’ve heard that people that have used [it]...have become engulfed in it [and] have disappeared like off the face of the map, right” (personal interview). This sense of “real” and “fake” also came up in my interview with Tammy Power. She felt that store-bought Parker Brothers’ *Ouija* boards were *not* real and were used by people who just wanted to have fun. She said that if someone was seriously interested in the occult then they need to have a real one--that is one that is made and bought from an occult store.

Gerard Flynn was the only informant who had a bit more detail about the origins of the *Ouija* board. In an interview he said,

The history that I heard was that it was, the *Ouija* itself, the [configuration] that you use on the *Ouija* board, the like, little heart. In some cases, that’s what we used to have the little heart-shaped, was a trapped spirit of a Chinese deity or God....That’s what we heard when we were growing up....I’ve heard a lot of different things...one that it is the devil. Another

one that it's your guardian angel....Ah, like I just said, it was believed, now this is what we heard and it's the only origins I have was that a Chinese spirit. some say god...I wouldn't say god myself I would say spirit, is trapped in the device used for the Ouija board and this is basically where it came from. A Chinese. it was a Chinese board first and eventually it became modified into English whereby you can find a Ouija almost anywhere now. So, my origins, Chinese. That's what I've heard....it branched out from Chinese (personal interview).

Just as my informants often answered that they did not know anything about the origins of the Ouija board, the people who answered the questionnaire also knew little about its history. What follows are some excerpts from the questionnaires that show how the respondents perceived the Ouija board:

Before we played she explained that it was used centuries ago by the witches of Europe who tried to speak to their dead (#2)

The Ouija board game made originally by Parker Brothers (I think) that enables you to talk to spirits caught in purgatory (#6).

I don't know where it originated but I associate it with the Asian East. I think of it in terms of the Victorian Parlor games. I guess I have assumed that it came to England from India or China during the hey day of the British Empire, and from there to here (#11).

...maybe it's linked to belief in witchcraft and superstition. It is after all used to contact spirits (#13).

I suspect it might have connections with 19<sup>th</sup> century parapsychology fashions-the mediums/seances that were big among upper classes in Ireland, Britain, New York State...(#14).

I believe it has some sort of roots in sorcery or witchery (#27)

Ouija boards can be bought in a store or made by hand. The ones made by hand are supposed to be the best (in terms of accuracy) (#35).

*I heard it came from gypsies or it was used in that nature (#33).*

While a few informants who had already done research on the Ouija board did touch upon what one could call the “documented” history of the Ouija board, others described it in term of passed down folk history and beliefs.

### **2.2.1 Questioning Folk History**

*In some respects the folk history of the Ouija board may be looked upon by some scholars as “invented tradition,” since what we are dealing with are fragments of origin legends. It is my feeling, though, that the literature on invented tradition casts a shadow of falsity and questions the authenticity of the perspectives of the informants. Consequently, one has to be cautious in using this literature on “invented traditions.” I bring this up now not to suggest or illustrate that what my informants have told me is false, but rather because there are two different perspectives on the Ouija board history--“official” and “unofficial.”* Scholars taking an “official” historical perspective would say that the folk history, the “unofficial” history, that the informants have related is invented. In a sense, what the informants are doing, every time they retell their stories, is reconstructing

a setting from the past, a past they did not experience. Richard Dorson suggested that this can often present a problem.

If there are such differences of opinion in the folk memory, how then can the folk memory ever be trusted to transmit a consistent historical record? The question of the trustworthiness of oral traditional history has been endlessly debated in a variety of scholarly disciplines, with judgements ranging the whole spectrum from complete rejection of verbally relayed testimony to its acceptance as gospel ("Oral" 48).

As well Trevor Lummis in his article "Oral History" pointed out that

In going beyond living memory and relying on information that has been transmitted orally from generation to generation and is not part of the direct, lived experience of the communicator, collectors of oral traditions work with data of a different quality from that of direct experience. Such information requires a different methodology for its evaluation and authentication (97).

In such a context it is easy to see why some would suggest that the folk history of the Ouija board is a form of "invented tradition." Eric Hobsbawm explained that

"invented tradition" is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past ( 1).

He maintained that inventing traditions is "essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (4).

Invented tradition is also closely related to “fakelore.” Richard Dorson coined this phrase and defined it as “the presentation of spurious and synthetic writings under the claim that they are genuine folklore” (American 9). He pointed out that leading up to this phrase are several positions which he had taken, by 1950, on folklore and folklore scholarship:

- 1) American mass culture was highly commercial, blatant, loud, aggressive, and the book industry partook of these traits;
- 2) in another age, say Victorian England, subtle thrusts might be appreciated, but in twentieth-century United States one needed to shout at the top of his voice;
- 3) the study of American folklore was being invaded by commercializers and could not as yet be protected by scholars, since specialists in American folklore had not yet been trained;
- 4) the distinction must be made between the frivolous and the serious investigation of American folklore;
- 5) even some respected scholars of American literature and American history turned fakelorest when they dabbled with folklore; (American 7).

I chose to include the above quotation from Dorson not only to show how fakelore was created but also to illustrate how even today some scholars may reason that fakelore--which is more established and embedded in culture now than when Dorson first noted it--may influence the validity of the information received from one's informants. When dealing with supernatural belief this becomes even more evident. In the Preface I mentioned that one of my first encounters with the Ouija board was through a short novel. From this, whether consciously or



subconsciously, I came to certain conclusions about the Ouija board: it was evil, it was ancient, and it could control a person. Likewise, several of my informants mentioned popular movies about the Ouija board that they had seen and from which they acquired some knowledge and/or belief about the Ouija board. In speaking about what she knew about the Ouija board before she started using it, Yvonne Peddle said

I didn't know anything. Like I'd watched movies and stuff, right. Ah, I remember one movie an "Amityville" or something where ah, they were up in a room. They moved into this house and they were up in the room and they found a Ouija board in the corner. And they had asked the Ouija board, this always stuck in my mind, asked the Ouija board, "is there someone in this room that won't be here *this time next year*?" And it spelled out the girl who starred in the movie basically. And ah, that afternoon her mother and father were down in the kitchen, and she'd seen *her daughter come in*, the daughter that was supposed to not be here this time next year, come in and just walk up over the stairs and go into that room. And ah, when they looked out, here all her friends that were with her were out frantic out on the beach in the boat. And here she had just drowned, and her body was washed up on shore. But her parents just saw her walk up the stairs. Now that was I know, that was a movie about, but that stuck in my mind about a Ouija board (personal interview).

Later on in the interview Yvonne mentioned that asking the Ouija board if someone is going to die is considered something that one should not do. Quite possibly *this notion of what not to do* stemmed from the movie. Mass media, movies and books on the Ouija board often exploit the sensational about the subject and present hearsay or fiction as a part of folklore and culture.

Undoubtedly Dorson would conclude that such a representation of the subject affects the beliefs and opinions that a person has or eventually develops about the Ouija board.

As mentioned previously, however, it is not my intention to question what my informants have told me. At this point, the discussion on folk history, oral history, invented tradition and fakelore has been conducted in order to show how the scholars of the "official" history of the Ouija board may view the reported "unofficial" history offered by my informants. Whether or not one looks at these history tracings as true or false or invented or somehow in contrast with "official" history, the study of origins is intricately tied to belief about Ouija function, personal concepts of how the board works and understanding of veracity.

## Chapter 3

### **“Official” and Popular Beliefs About the Ouija Board**

*Today the challenge before all of us interested in knowledge of the paranormal is to seek a break-through to an undergirding hypothesis which can embrace, tie together and plausibly account for the wide variety of veridical data from the various psi fields (Pike 351).*

As was illustrated in Chapter 2, the Ouija board has a long detailed history connecting it to various other devices that have also been used to communicate with the dead. In terms of scholarly work, however, the Ouija board has not had a lot of attention. In fact, according to Gina Covina in The Ouija Book the Ouija board has never been seriously investigated (124). This is not to say, however, that there exist no opinions, beliefs or criticisms relating to the Ouija board phenomenon. “Relatives” of the Ouija board such as automatic writing, the planchette, table rapping, seances, dowsing, mediumship, as well as the occult in general, have all received considerable attention.

The various opinions expressed by those who have discussed these issues fit into three categories: those who believe, those who do not believe that it is possible for people to communicate directly with the spirit world, and those who are unsure about what to believe. While the majority of research and investigation

has come from scientific fields, social scientists have also made their opinions known. Scholars from different religious disciplines or belief systems have also contributed to the wealth of information on and discussions about the paranormal. While most of these disciplines are in agreement that the Ouija board is a hoax, the way in which they investigate the Ouija board phenomenon is somewhat different. While most groups or disciplines could be grouped together, a clearer understanding can be acquired by separating them as much as possible.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this thesis looks at traditions of belief as well as "traditions of disbelief." To a large extent, this chapter on official and popular beliefs about the Ouija board focuses on traditions of disbelief. David Hufford explained "traditions of disbelief" by saying that they

...operate primarily by criticizing what are believed to be the grounds of supernatural belief. This is expected since science, often thought to be the *basic protagonist in this conflict of beliefs*, does not try to prove negatives. Nor, for example, does physics argue that there can be no ghosts nor astronomy that there is no God. Rather, physical science simply does not speak to interpretations which extend beyond the material universe nor deal with data that refuse to be reconciled to that universe ("Traditions" 48).

I feel it is necessary, at this point, to reiterate that I do not intend to show that traditions of disbelief are wrong, harsh, insensitive or irrational in comparison to traditions of belief or vice versa. I am not pitting these two traditions of belief against each other. Both are worthy of consideration and help us as folklorists to

develop a more complete picture of the beliefs surrounding the Ouija board. As David Hufford pointed out,

the traditions of disbelief are especially interesting because there are indications that they are surprisingly homogeneous across the entire range from genuinely unlettered folk-disbelievers all the way to the most eminently lettered materialist ("Traditions" 48).

In following Hufford's assertion that traditions of disbelief are equally important as traditions of belief when discussing supernatural belief, the ensuing sections will look at some disciplines that have questioned the validity of the Ouija board as a medium or doorway to the world of the dead.

### **3.1 Investigating the Ouija Board Phenomenon**

*"Belief in the occult is as old as mankind"* (Rawcliffe 13).

In his book The Psychology of the Occult, D. H. Rawcliffe maintained that the various occult phenomena that people were facing in the late 1800s up to the 1950s were actually superstitions of the past. He said that these superstitions were simply renamed:

Prophecy and divination of the future becomes "precognition." The warlock's art of descrying the past becomes "postcognition." The soothsayer's reputed faculty of seeing events at a distance becomes "paranormal cognition" or clairvoyance. The witch's ability to read the

thoughts or influence the actions of other people at a distance becomes “telepathy” (14).

Just as the validity and trustworthiness of the warlock or soothsayer may have *been questioned* by skeptics of their time, the credibility of individuals claiming to communicate with the dead, whether through psychic means or Ouija board communications, is currently scrutinized by various recognizable and respectable disciplines. What follows is a closer look at how several disciplines have viewed spirit communication and the Ouija board phenomenon.

### **3.1.1 Science and Psychology**

As seen in the last chapter, the birth of modern-day Spiritualism is generally attributed to the Fox sisters who, in 1848, heard rappings in their home and interpreted them as messages from the dead. The thought of the possibility of contact with the dead led to the popularity of Spiritualism. As a result of this need or desire to contact the dead, a steady stream of people came forward proclaiming to be chosen mediums capable of intimate communication with the dead. This increased interest in Spiritualism did not go unnoticed by the scientific world. As Terrance Hines said in his book Pseudoscience and the Paranormal,

The rage of Spiritualism attracted the attention of some of the period's leading scientists. Most were highly skeptical and critical of Spiritualism, but several attended seances and came away convinced of the reality of

spiritualistic phenomena. A few then instituted often impressive studies of individual spiritualists which, they claimed, gave solid scientific support to the claims of Spiritualism. This type of research and interest led in 1882 to the founding in England of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). The goal of the SPR was scientific investigation of spiritualistic and other "psychic" phenomena. As such, it represented an alliance between the spiritualists and a small portion of the scientific community that accepted their claims (22).

Although at first the Spiritualists and the scientists appeared to be working toward the same end, this unity did not last. The Spiritualists began to feel that the scientists had deviated from their joint goal. For the Spiritualists it was *important to show that "these phenomena [seances] proved the existence of an afterlife and the reality of the individual soul, and demonstrated that they were in communication with the dead"* (Hines 22). The scientists, on the other hand, began to look at and interpret this phenomenon as a form of telepathy and psychokinesis. The Spiritualists did not agree with this interpretation and the union of these two groups collapsed. It should be noted, however, that this usage of telepathy and psychokinesis as the rationale behind seance phenomenon experiences prevailed in the Society for Psychical Research and is still accepted in parapsychological research today (Hines 22).

Hines noted that "probably the most famous scientist to become involved in the investigation of spiritualistic phenomena was Michael Faraday" (23), the great

English chemist and physicist who discovered electromagnetism. Faraday was known for his skepticism about table moving at seances and as more people started to engage in seances he felt, as Stoker Hunt reported, that “it was getting out of hand and set out to explore the workings of table-rapping in a scientific manner” (20).

Faraday gathered a group of individuals who were avid table-rappers and brought them to his laboratory where he could observe them. As he watched, the table moved and responded to the questions of the participants. Faraday investigated but could not find any electrical or magnetic forces to explain the movement. Because he still adamantly believed that the rappers were, in some way, responsible for the movement, he created and tested several experiments with this group (Hunt 20).

*Hines maintained that it was difficult to prove and explain table-rapping as non-supernatural when a group of friends, without a paid medium, tried table-rapping and got positive results.*

When the seance was conducted by a professional medium, it was easy to attribute the movement to conscious shoving of the table by the medium--one of many types of cheating practiced by mediums. What made table movement so convincing and fascinating, however, was that it commonly took place at informal, private seances where only a group of friends was in attendance and cheating could usually be ruled out. It was even possible for a single individual to sit at a table and have it move about—yet the



individual would swear that no conscious attempt had been made to move the table (23).

It was this notion of “conscious” knowledge that Faraday further investigated. Through his experiments he had wanted to show that undetectable muscle movement by the sitters was responsible for the table moving. Hunt, in describing Faraday’s experiment said that Faraday

...inserted glass rollers between two flat boards that rested on the table top. He then rigged a lever arrangement so that if the upper board moved to the left before the lower board did, an indicator made of reed leaned visibly to the right. This meant that if the operators exerted pressure on the table—not merely followed it as it went through its paces—the reed would lean to the right (21).

When the experiment was conducted, it was observed that the reed did lean to the right and Faraday concluded that the movement was due to unconscious manipulation by the sitters. Hunt reported that “when the table-rappers saw that they indeed were causing the movement, their surprise was great. And suddenly they were no longer able to create table-rapping or -turning effects” (21).

Faraday’s findings, however, did not lead to the demise of table-rapping or of Spiritualism. Table-rapping continued to be used as a vehicle to communicate with the dead. Another investigator, Sir William F. Barrett, who was one of the original vice-presidents of the SPR, felt that he was successful in eliminating doubt about spirits communicating through the Ouija. He explained his

experiments and findings in his book On the Threshold of the Unseen. Barrett's experiments lasted for several years and involved a specific group of people who would meet regularly to receive communications from the Ouija board. In order to prove that individuals were not moving the pointer themselves, he decided to blindfold them. This did not hinder communication so he decided to take further cautionary steps:

I asked the "control" if I might turn round the board with its alphabet. Instantly the reply was spelt out "Yes, it makes no difference." So the sitters, still blindfolded, raised the indicator and I turned the board so that the alphabet was now upside down to the sitters, and even could they have seen, there would have been some difficulty in picking out the right letter (177-178).

Even with this additional inhibitor, rational communication and facts unknown to the sitters still came through the Ouija board. To further demonstrate that a spirit was communicating, Barrett decided to add a screen:

Objection might be made that it is very difficult to blindfold a person effectually by bandaging the eyes. Although the sitters, who were personal friends of mine, declared they could see nothing, it was desirable to meet this objection. Accordingly opaque eye screens were made and fastened over the eyes ....I tried one of these screens and found it pleasanter to use than a bandage and absolutely effective in preventing vision (179).

Again, communication was not interrupted. Next, Barrett decided to change the form of the board and add an additional screen to prohibit sight:

A new pattern of “board” was now made; this consisted of a sheet of plate glass resting on a table of the same size, beneath the glass an alphabet was placed, and the indicator, which had very short legs tipped with felt, now moved more freely over the smooth glass surface. The letters of the alphabet were on separate bits of thin card, and could be arranged in any way we pleased on the table beneath the plate glass.

A clerical friend, who was an interested but skeptical enquirer, was invited to be present at some of the sittings, and whilst the indicator was rapidly spelling out a communication through the blindfold sitters, he silently held a large opaque fire screen over the moving indicator and alphabet below (179-180).

In this way, even if one of the sitters could see through the blindfolds he or she would not be able to see through the screen in order to make out the arrangement of the letters. Again, it was shown that questions could be answered correctly. This experiment proved to Barrett and others involved that there was no way that one of the sitters could have been the source of the communication. Barrett concludes that “...whatever may have been the source of the intelligence displayed it was absolutely beyond the range of any normal human faculty” (181).

Barrett also gave an example of a Ouija board session where a communication came to a woman from a spirit claiming to be her cousin. Her cousin was an officer who had been killed in battle. The spirit of the officer told this woman to give his pearl tie-pin to the girl he had been planning to marry (he gave her full Christian name). He also gave her an address where this girl

could be reached. The woman and other relatives were not aware that he had even had a fiancé. When they tried to track her down at the address given there was no such person there, and they assumed that the communication had been false. Several months later, however, when the officer's belongings were sent home, the name of his fiancé was among his things, spelled out exactly as the Ouija board had given it. Along with it was the pearl tie-pin. In such a case as this one, Barrett said that "there could be no explanation of the facts by subliminal memory, or telepathy or collusion, and the evidence points unmistakably to a telepathic message from the deceased officer" (185).

Contrary to Barrett's findings, other scientists have suggested that those who use the Ouija board are the actual source behind its workings. Gina Covina argued that our minds and bodies are capable of receiving and translating information from other human beings, animals, and from the plant and mineral world, as well as from emanations from other-than-physical realities (128). In other words, the Ouija board is just a tool, among many other tools, that uses the talents of the human nervous system as the receiver and translator of information (Covina 124).

Covina also pointed out that even though scientists believe that it is one's own body moving the pointer across the Ouija board, many still question the exact

*nature of the energy that causes this movement. Scientists felt that this energy was a “substance,” and the search for this “substance” led them to look for something physical and tangible about the “energy.” They suggested that this energy is essentially everywhere, linking people and things in time and space. The exact nature and workings of this energy, however, have never been unearthed (Covina 129-131).*

An early attempt to explain this energy was made by Samuel Guppy. In 1863, he produced a book called Mary Jane: or Spiritualism Chemically Explained.<sup>1</sup> He said that the human body has gases that are constantly emitted from the skin as invisible vapor. Guppy explained that this vapor is more commonly known as electricity and that it can come through one’s fingers, thus, making the planchette move. He went on to say that some people have these gases in excess and that this is why they can direct something more complicated, like a pencil, when automatically writing (“Planchette” 1041).

The Ouija board is closely related to another modern-day device that some practitioners have tried to introduce into mainstream science. Kathleen Dillon in her article “Facilitated Communication, Autism, and Ouija” argued that

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<sup>1</sup> For more details consult Samuel Guppy, Mary Jane: Or Spiritualism Chemically Explained (London: John King and Co., 1863).

this “twin” is the technique Facilitated Communication (FC) that was developed in the 1970s by Rosemary Crossley. The most common use of FC is with individuals with autism who, because of their condition, cannot communicate “normally.” A facilitator sits down with the subject and places his or her hand on the subject’s hand as it moves to letters, numbers, words or symbols. What is spelled out is said to have come from the subject. Dillion pointed out, however, that as with the medium and the Ouija board, the facilitator is often credited with the communication and the subject thought not to have communicated at all. For scientists, FC is nothing more than another Ouija-like device (Dillon 281-283).

Psychologists have also tried to explain the Ouija board phenomenon. Stoker Hunt in his book Ouija: The Most Dangerous Game related a psychological experiment that was conducted by the Toronto Society of Psychical Research. A group of volunteers was assembled and agreed to meet at specific times to try to have a seance-type experience. They did not want to call upon spirits but instead tried to elicit a “group thought” by concentrating on a previously memorized biography of a fictitious character. The character’s name was *Philip* and thus the experiment was called “*The Philip Experiment*.”

After several unsuccessful attempts at meditation, the group decided to try an actual seance. Their first attempt at a seance actually produced a knocking

from the table. One rap was for “yes” and two for “no.” They went through questions and the story they had memorized came out through the rapping. In describing the experiment Hunt said the following:

The conversation, once started, went on for five years. The manufactured ghost became extremely adept at producing a variety of knocks on request. He even developed the ability to transfer his responses to objects apart from the table around which the conjuring group sat....As the conversation went on and Philip expanded on his stories, the details he added and the further incidents he revealed were always logical extensions of the original group-invented story. The personality of Philip via his communications was made clearer, sharper, more distinct; but again, always only in terms of the assigned biography (109).

As well, if the participants decided to change one of the previously agreed upon biographical facts, Philip would also change his story. The Toronto Society of Psychical Research thus concluded from this experiment that a group could produce a thought-directed force that could be expressed in a physical way. This experiment went on to be duplicated by various other groups and all came to the same conclusion--that there was no ‘spirit’ communication but rather that a telepathic experience had occurred and that these experiments supported the “collective hallucination theory”(Hunt 107-114).

John Godwin in his book Occult America said that among psychologists the Ouija board experience does represent a psychological phenomenon but not a spiritual one. Godwin asserted that psychologists were more comfortable with the

notion of “automatism.” Psychologists have argued that the nature of how the Ouija board works can be explained by adopting the same psychological reasoning as one would use when demonstrating how a person is capable of knitting a sweater and watching television at the same time. In other words, the movements are involuntary. Godwin said that psychologists believe that words from the Ouija board are *actually words from the person’s subconscious mind* (273).

D. H. Rawcliffe in his book The Psychology of the Occult explained that one theory directly related to automatism is “mental dissociation.” Mental dissociation is defined as

the existence of subsidiary mental activity, activity which is operating more or less in independence of, or dissociated from, the main mental system which constitutes the normal conscious personality” (32).

Rawcliffe noted that this theory was developed by a French psychopathologist, Pierre Janet, to explain “pathological hysteria.” While Janet’s theory contained a lot of detail on how the mind actually breaks into two or more mental systems, in terms of paranormal study it was used to denote an *underlying* stream of mental activity. As with the knitting example above, this dissonance can be readily seen in everyday life. In terms of paranormal activities such as automatic writing, Rawcliffe said that psychologists use this theory as a way to



explain "spirit communication." That is, they say that it is not spirits coming forth but repressed memories that for one reason or another have been forgotten or unnoticed by the person experiencing the phenomenon (Rawcliffe 32-39).

Stoker Hunt noted that while psychologists believe that automatisms can often bring on or cause psychoses, they also feel that it can be a cure for psychoses. The difference between the two lies within the circumstances surrounding the automatisms. According to Hunt there are basically two types of psychoses--schizophrenic psychosis and mediumistic psychosis. Both have similar symptoms such as hearing voices and experiencing delusions and hallucinations. The first, however, is believed to be inevitable and irreversible--a person may have been biologically predisposed to it. The latter, mediumistic psychosis, on the other hand, is reversible and occurs when a form of automatism is used and the individual confuses the results with spiritual communication. Hunt explained that psychologists believe that the use of a Ouija board opens up a door for the subconscious to emerge, at which point the subconscious tries to personify itself. The subconscious has the ability to acquire a lot more information than the conscious mind does and, thus, can appear as a totally different "being." For the person involved this experience or realization can be a shock. Hunt reported that

while this shock does not scatter the psyche into pieces, it does create “functional units,” a sort of “artificial” personality split (124-128).

Ironically, however, automatism can also be used in order to cure psychosis. Hunt explained that under the controlled environment of a therapist, automatism can be used to release repressed information from the unconscious. In such a case patients are encouraged and shown how to do automatic writing. Patients do not view what is written, however, for fear of something being too disturbing to them. Instead, the therapist sorts through the information in order to gain insight into the workings of their patients’ minds and then counsel them accordingly (128-130).

Another psychological function of the Ouija board is reported by Martin Edon in his article “Beware the Ouija Board.” Edon summarized the view of Rosalind Heywood (a British authority on psychic research) that the Ouija board proves to be more than just a game for the participants. She felt that the participants have a very emotional interest in the Ouija board because it serves a very important function:

The board functions as an alibi for the emotions. By seeming to communicate ideas, as it were, “from the outside,” the persons operating it feel they have no responsibility for the content of the messages. Moreover, when two people operate a board, responsibility is diffused or neutralized. A message can be attributed to the spirit entity, which supposedly has more

wisdom than the earthlings operating the board, and given much more weight than anything said by a mere incarnate human (Ebon 85).

John E. Alcock, a professor of psychology, took a slightly different road when trying to explain interest in the occult. In his article "The Belief Engine," Alcock looked upon beliefs (whether they are true or false) as something we all need in order to function. He envisioned our brain as a belief-generating machine putting out beliefs irrespective of their validity:

This belief engine selects information from the environment, shapes it, combines it with information from memory, and produces beliefs that are generally consistent with beliefs already held....These beliefs guide future actions and, whether correct or erroneous, they may prove functional for the individual who holds them (15)

He argued that the natural selection of beliefs does not select for truth--it selects for survival. Alcock maintained that in order to survive, human beings yearn to reduce the anxiety and stress they face in their daily lives. He felt that what we believe depends upon whether or not the belief serves this exact function.

Alcock noted, however, that we are less likely to be influenced by a new belief if we do not already have a corresponding belief. The only time a new conflicting belief may be incorporated is when an emotional experience occurs. Alcock believed that this is why people develop an interest in and turn toward the paranormal:

...very often an emotional experience accompanies the putatively paranormal. A strong coincidence may produce an emotional “zing” that points us toward a paranormal explanation, because normal events would not be expected to produce such emotion (17).

Often when people first experiment with the paranormal they consult a medium. There are some mediums who genuinely believe that they are capable of being the vessel through which a spirit communicates. For the psychologist, these individuals are not being dishonest but rather do not understand the workings of their own minds. On the other hand, there are some purported mediums whom the psychologists would say are frauds and who would use every trick imaginable. Rawcliffe suggested that the perfect client for either type of medium is the person who is more than ready and willing to believe. He felt that to these people mediums can do no wrong. All a medium has to do is present even the slightest piece of evidence of the supernatural and it will satisfy the believer. Rawcliffe concluded that “it is the subtle co-operation of fraud and self-deception which keeps the cult of spiritualism so vigorously alive” (306).

### **3.1.2 Parapsychology**

Research by parapsychologists has also led to some interesting theories on the Ouija board. *Stoker Hunt interviewed Barbara Honegger about her opinions*

on the Ouija board. Honegger has an advanced degree in experimental parapsychology and has put forth the argument that there are at least two personalities existing in every human being. The psychologist Sigmund Freud is well known for his explanation of the human brain as an entity with a conscious and a subconscious. Honegger expanded on this by arguing that there are actually “two” forms of the conscious and “two” forms of the subconscious:

I contend, and there’s strong evidence to support my argument, that *each* brain hemisphere has a separate and conscious ego. There are at least two personalities cohabiting in every normal human. Each hemisphere of the brain has a self-reflective consciousness and a substratum that allows us to sign and symbolize. I’m talking about a supersense, an inter-modality sense. That means whatever we feel, see, hear, smell, taste or touch gets channeled into a supersense that abstracts these sensations and allows for language.

My main point is that there are *two* such centers, one for each hemisphere, and they are totally separate. Furthermore, when one of the two centers is active, a neurophysiological mechanism actively inhibits the other from expressing its mental contents.

This means the ‘unconscious’ is always thinking and aware. It’s self-reflective and it needs to express itself from time to time. For instance, when the ego consciousness is missing important information, one’s normal inhibition is overridden so that the other side can communicate its knowledge....And there’s a physical parallel to this. The corpus callosum is the part of the brain that connects the two hemispheres. Still—somehow—when the corpus callosum is cut, communication between the two hemispheres continues (although not on the same level of efficiency). We may not understand yet how the egos in each hemisphere communicate with each other, but when they do, we know that as spiritualization. And when you finally understand that your overriding consciousness is not alone in your mind, the process of spiritualization accelerates.

For this to happen, the Normal Everyday Awake ego must first acknowledge the existence of the other, and vice versa. What happens then is a period of mutual discovery, crises, et cetera, just as in a marriage. A lot depends on the two personalities (Hunt 133-134).

Honegger further explained to Hunt the process whereby both sides of her brain are in essence communicating with his two hemispheres:

As I'm talking with you now, my left-hemisphere entity is talking with *your* left-hemisphere entity. But within each individual there is also a right-hemisphere entity, and inter-hemispheric communication is possible. The more this communication takes place, the more spiritualized the 'I'—the left entity—becomes. Furthermore, our right-hemisphere entity can communicate with other right-hemisphere entities. That, in my opinion, is what we call telepathic communication: right-to-right communication, *across* brains. My left-hemisphere ego cannot communicate to your left-hemisphere ego except through 'normal' voluntary motor means, using muscles of speech.

Each individual right-hemisphere-associated consciousness has its own strategy or style of finally getting through to the left consciousness. Some people play around with the Ouija board and discover it that way. Some people through bibliomancy. Some through automatic writing. Some through dreams. What's important is that the communication is made and that the Other is recognized as *normal* (Hunt 134).

Following Honegger's suggestion that telepathic communication could explain the Ouija board phenomena, Ebon felt that it was also plausible that Extrasensory Perception (ESP) was occurring. That is, the subconscious was acting as a transmitter for ESP impulses. He gave one example of this that he

took from the book The Challenge of Psychical Research. In this book Dr. Gardner Murphy gave an account of a boy who was able to send a message via ESP to a *Spiritualist group*. On one particular evening the boy had wanted to meet with this group but was forbidden to attend the Spiritualist meeting. The Spiritualist group consisted of four people who only spoke Dutch and two others who knew very little English. That same evening the Ouija board told this group that an Englishman would write a song for them. What came through was a poem assumed to be written by an anonymous *British spirit*. A few days later the group's curiosity about the origin of this message was alleviated when a member of the group discovered the wishes and strong desire of the boy to join their meetings. Apparently, on the same evening that the meeting took place the boy went to his room and began to read an English poem and quickly became drowsy. When the boy quoted the poem it was exactly what the Spiritualist group had received on the Ouija board. It was felt that because the boy's desire to join the group had been so strong he had unconsciously sent this poem to the Spiritualist group (Ebon 86).

Dorothy Lehman in her article "The Power of the Ouija Board," however, felt that "the theory that the board's words come from the subconscious doesn't seem adequate to explain all the facts" (46). She suggested that a more advanced

theory had emerged that could explain the origins of the Ouija board information. She pointed out that “many people are coming to believe in what is often called a universal or collective unconsciousness, a place deep within the mind where we are all connected throughout time and space” (46). Lehman thought that using the Ouija board may allow one to tap into the subconscious which acts as a “gateway” to knowledge about all people in all places in the past, present, and future (Lehman 46).

From the above discussions on the critical perspectives of science, psychology and parapsychology it can be concluded that while most of these scholars have exhibited an ongoing interest in the Ouija board experience, and occult phenomena in general, they have also remained determined to show that what happens when one uses the Ouija board is the result of one’s mind. The belief that life continues after death and that the potential exists to communicate with those in the afterlife is not considered as a theory worthy of consideration.

Since most religions do have the basic principle or doctrine that there is an afterlife, one might assume that the Ouija board would not represent a challenge or a paradox to their teachings. As the next section illustrates, however, this assumption is often wrong.



## **3.2 Religion and the Ouija Board**

### **3.2.1 Christianity**

According to Stoker Hunt, while most religions, in principle, have objected to the use of the Ouija board, the Fundamentalist religions (such as Seventh Day Adventists and the Pentecostal Church) firmly believe and preach that the Ouija board is an instrument of the Devil. They feel that people attempting to use the board for spirit communication are unnecessarily placing themselves in spiritual and physical danger (93). Reverend Stuart Mulligan was reported as feeling so adamant about this that he said the following:

The board should not be permitted under any circumstances in a Christian home. The use of the Ouija board and the faithful practice of Christianity is a serious contradiction. It is strongly forbidden, extremely dangerous (qtd.in Hunt 93-94).

Hunt explained that for the Reverend, as well as other practicing Fundamentalists, there is no question about the existence of evil spirits. Christians believe that demons are the fallen angels of God who have joined Satan. Hunt pointed out that the traditional Christian view maintains that there are two types of demons--confined and unconfined. Those who are confined are in hell while the unconfined are free to roam about spreading evil on Satan's behalf. These unconfined evil forces are believed to be like human beings in that they are

intelligent and have a will and a personality. According to Hunt, the belief in these evil forces being prevalent in our society has always been a concern for the Fundamentalist (93-94). He explained that

The Fundamentalist view of the Ouija board and the demonic powers they associate with the Ouija board is completely and aggressively negative. For the Fundamentalist, there is no doubt about it. The Ouija board is--without question, without qualification--a most dangerous game (95).

The Ouija board does find some acceptance with non-Fundamentalist Christians, however. Arleon L. Kelley, Th.D. summed up this view by saying,

It is my personal opinion that those in the mainline churches would understand the Ouija board and similar phenomena to be in the realm of the parapsychological. They would not see it as an evil force unless it came to the place that more faith were given to the Ouija board than to God (qtd. in Hunt 95-96).

Objections arise when the Ouija board is taken too seriously and people tend to depend on it for comfort and support when they really should be turning to their religion. Such an act would be looked upon as a sin because it is an insult to God and man and is, therefore, breaking the First and Second Commandments. For the non-Fundamentalist Christian, the Ouija board does not become evil until more faith is put into it than faith in God (Hunt 95-96).

Leszek Kolakowski in his book Religion said that, in general, Christianity has always been very skeptical of anyone or anything trying to acquire

experimental evidence of life after death. Above all other religions, however, the Roman Catholic church seems more adamant that their members not take part in any paranormal phenomena. Kolakowski said that

the Holy Office in 1917 formally forbade believers to take part in spiritualist sittings and the Catholic literature on the subject clearly perceived the hand of the Devil in performances of alleged ghosts (160).

Regardless of these prevalent Christian views, Bill Ellis in his article “*Speak to the Devil: Ouija Board Rituals Among American Adolescents*” pointed out that by 1920 the Ouija board was so popular among college students that it far outweighed the number of Bibles and prayer books in student residences and fraternities. Ellis said that this fact worried religious leaders so much that Pope Pius X commissioned J. Godfrey Raupert to warn American Catholics against taking part in spiritualistic activities.<sup>2</sup> Raupert published an article in the American Ecclesiastical Journal<sup>3</sup> that attacked the Ouija board and warned that although messages from the Ouija might at first seem friendly and helpful, these messages could, at any point, become nasty or mischievous and work to turn people against their religion or appeal to their inhumane instincts. He warned

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<sup>2</sup> For further information consult Carl A. Wickland, Thirty years Among the Dead (1924; London: Spiritualist Press, 1968) 19.

<sup>3</sup> For further information consult J. Godfrey Raupert, “The Truth About the Ouija Board,” American Ecclesiastical Review Nov. 1918: 463-478.

“that while it was an easy thing for [one] to open the mental door by which the mind could be invaded, it is difficult, if not an impossible thing, to shut that door and to expel the invader” (qtd. in Ellis 66). Evangelist Kurt E. Koch, author of Christian Counseling and Occultism,<sup>4</sup> also felt that the Ouija board lead to mental and spiritual problems (Ellis 66).

Gina Covina in her book, The Ouija Book, said that one form and usage of a Ouija-like device that does have the approval of some churches is called “radiesthesia.” This is actually a form of divining whereby a pendulum is used to diagnose illness and, at times, prescribe medicine. She said that this practice thrived in France and one Catholic priest, Reverend Pere Jean Jurion was well known for his work in this area. He had been taken to court several times by the French government because of his unorthodox methods. Nevertheless, the Catholic church supported the Reverend and gave him its blessing (126).

The preceding descriptions of Fundamental and Non-Fundamental Christians should be looked upon as generalizations. More often than not, especially during modern times, there is a questioning of what one should or

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<sup>4</sup> For further information consult Kurt E. Koch, Christian Counselling and Occultism: The Counselling of the Psychically Disturbed and Those Oppressed through Involvement in Occultism (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1972) 39-41.

should not believe. New experiences and new knowledge can change a person's world-view and incorporate beliefs that were once disbelieved.

Bishop James Pike was one such man who became involved with the question of Spiritualism and wrote several books and articles pertaining to life, death and survival after death. One of his books, The Other Side: An Account of My experiences with Psychic Phenomena, illustrates his own quest about life after death when he felt that his son, Jim (who had killed himself), was trying to communicate with him. Bishop Pike did not immediately set out to try to contact his deceased son. Shortly after his son's death Bishop Pike had to go to England on business and decided to stay in his son's flat. While there he began to witness poltergeist phenomena and quickly came to believe that it might be his son trying to get his attention in order to communicate. Acting upon the advice of a local canon, Bishop Pike and a friend tried the Ouija board to see if a message would get through. This experience ended in confusion, however, and they decided to see a medium. Pike felt that he had achieved some success here, and with future mediums, in establishing contact with his son's spirit (100-103).

At first Bishop Pike was able to accept the fact that this was his son communicating with him due to the "survival hypothesis"--that is, the belief that there is life after death. This was the only theory that he had come across that

could adequately explain his own experiences (365). He likened speaking with the dead to talking to someone on the phone. In either case, the person is not seen but after some amount of conversation one can generally infer if the speakers on the other end are in fact who they say they are (269). Pike said that figuring out if the person you are talking to is real comes down to one's own intuition:

Communication through a medium presents the same kind of problem. Though one cannot prove anything, yet after a certain amount of communication one intuits either that the source is or isn't the purported personality....asking for definite proof is asking almost too much, because in most realms of life--even in those we call sciences--we use facts *plus* faith...(270).

As Pike's experiences became more public, he received a lot of advice from people wishing to free him of the devil. Most sent him quotations from the Bible, the Old Testament in particular, that stated God's disapproval of spirit consultation. Pike felt that some of these quotations were misunderstood or that their meaning was derived out of context. The most frequent quotation he received was from 1 Samuel 28 which tells the story of how King Saul sought out advice from the Witch of Endor and as a result is said to have been cast out by God. Pike pointed out, however, that other scripture readings indicate that Saul had first consulted God and upon no response, then and only then, had gone to the

medium (282-283). As well, Pike noted that at that time in history there were two belief systems at odds--Judaism and paganism of the Egyptians:

The Jewish religious professionals--the priests and prophets--had to protect their own roles as those who could reveal and interpret the Word of God, so they were quick to denounce with vehemence any competitors, like mediums and foretellers of the future (Pike 284).

Further questioning, research and suggestions from other colleagues, however, eventually made Pike question his own initial interpretation of his experiences. The only theory that made him seriously question the survival theory was suggested to him by Dr. Ian Stevenson. Stevenson suggested that because Pike, consciously, appeared to be handling his grief over his son's death fairly well, it was possible that suppressed or repressed emotions in his subconscious mind found their expression in the form of poltergeist activity. Pike looked at other psychological and scientific theories about psychic phenomena, but in the end he was still uncertain as to whether the communication came from his son, from himself, or from some great common consciousness that we are all capable of accessing (375).

### 3.2.2 Judaism

Just as Fundamentalist Christian religions forbid Ouija board usage, some forms of Judaism also forbid members to use the Ouija board. The reasoning, however, is somewhat different. Stoker Hunt said that

God's purpose in regard to humankind, according to the traditional or Orthodox Judaic view, is to heighten and charge man's existence with freedom. The primary moral directive is to live in the present, not the past or future. Jews are directed to exercise free will, always to choose to live a moral life despite humankind's innate animality. The ethical ideal is right behavior at all times (96-97).

This is not to say that Judaism does not recognize the phenomenon of spirit communication--just that it is not foremost in its teachings. Hunt explained that the focus, in Judaism, is in the here and now and trying to live a moral life. Many practicing Jews believe that direct communication with a spirit interferes with one's own relationship with the living God and that, therefore, one should refrain from anything that might have to do with spirit communication. If there was to be any communication with the dead it would be the responsibility of a sage and for *the betterment of the community as a whole*. Hunt pointed out, however, that Judaism does allow participation in some paranormal activities such as astrology, astral projection, linguistic numerology and non-spiritual demonology (96-98).



### 3.2.3 Wicca

Another religion that tends to oppose the use of the Ouija board is, surprisingly, Wicca. While some may question Witchcraft as a religion, it does have its own set of guiding principles and beliefs for its members. Stoker Hunt interviewed Yvonne and Gavin Frost, the founders of the Church and School of Wicca in New Bern, North Carolina, and learned from them about these principles and beliefs. In short they are: the Wiccan Rede—"harm none, do what you will"; "reincarnation"--people are always advancing to higher levels; "power through knowledge"--learning to manipulate cosmic energy; the "law of attraction"--you get back what you put out; and "harmony"--there is a harmonious pattern to the world (98-99). Hunt also said that

Wicca believes that in addition to the deity and the human, other intelligences—evolving higher than human—do exist. These evolving entities ("Elder Ones") can be positive or negative in character" (99).

He explained that some members of Wicca feel that the Ouija board opens the door to the spirit world but that it also leaves that door open. Therefore, those using the board can never be sure about what type of entity they will receive. Hunt said that according to Yvonne and Gavin Frost, if one feels that he or she needs to communicate with the positive entities, meditation should be practiced (98-99).

### 3.2.4 Spiritualism

The only “religion” that whole-heartedly approves of the Ouija board is Spiritualism. Hunt pointed out that it is not surprising that Spiritualism supports the usage of Ouija board. By definition Spiritualism means a belief in spirits and as previously noted, Spiritualism has roots going back to 1848 with table-rappings--a Ouija-like phenomenon (99-100).

Bill Ellis noted that while most spiritualists did not find any harm in using the Ouija board, some spiritualists such as Carl A. Wickland<sup>5</sup> felt that it was necessary to warn people who are unaware of the powers of the Ouija board about its potential danger. Wickland had seen from his own experiences people who *had become so caught up in the Ouija board that they appeared insane and had to be committed to asylums* (Ellis 66-67).

The Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology commented that among one of the first things that a Spiritualist learns is that death effects no change. That is,

He who was known to speak trash while in this life will not usually be different in the after-life. But triviality has another aspect. Trivial incidents from the past life of the departed will carry the best proof of identity. The inability to convey a true picture of the life beyond is to be

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<sup>5</sup> For further information consult Carl A. Wickland, Thirty Years Among the Dead (1924; London: Spiritualist Press. 1968) 28.

expected as our language may not be adaptable to express the thoughts and ideas of a new plane of existence. It may also require considerable time until the newly-arrived spirit rises to a sufficient degree of understanding of the new environment (252).

Therefore, for Spiritualists it is not frightening or unusual to come in contact with a bad or confused spirit. For them it is as common as meeting someone on the street that they do not like or find offensive. Either way Spiritualists know that it is important not to take what is said by the spirits too seriously ("Communication" 252).

Some people who have written about the Ouija board believe that there is evidence to prove the spiritualistic theory. Edward Albertson in his book Seances and Sensitives for the Millions said that there are actually three very good pieces of evidence that people should consider when doubting the powers of the Ouija board--each of which gives a different element of proof.

Albertson pointed out that back in 1912, communication between the United States and England was not as simple as picking up a phone. When something happened in one part of the world it often took days before the story reached the newspapers and was known by the rest of the world. Therefore, when the *Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank off the coast of Newfoundland, there was no possible way that anyone in England could have immediately known about it. In London on April 14, 1912, however, two women did receive word of the

disaster from the Ouija board. One of the passengers on the ship had been William T. Stead, an automatic writer and author of works on spiritualism. One of the women using the Ouija board knew Stead and while she and her friend were using it that night, they received a message from Stead saying that the ship had sunk and that he was dead. The Ouija board was allegedly able to tell them of the tragedy before the newspapers had printed it (98).

Another sensational account of the Ouija board that Albertson pointed to as proof is that of “Patience Worth.” As mentioned earlier, Patience Worth was a spirit who was in constant contact, from 1913 and lasting about 20 years, with Mrs. Pearl Curran. *Patience Worth told Mrs. Curran that she had come from Dorsetshire to New England in 1649 and that Indians had killed her at the age of sixteen. What is remarkable about this Ouija board experience is the amount of outstanding literary works that resulted from the communications, several of which were published.*<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Curran was investigated and it was concluded that there was no way that she could have possibly created these works on her own. Mrs. Curran had attained a moderate level of education. If nothing else she would *not have had the ability to reproduce the style of the English language that came*

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<sup>9</sup> For a list of work published see Chapter 2, footnote 3

*from the Ouija sessions. Albertson said that even psychologist Dr. Walter*

Franklin Pierce concluded, upon examining the situation and Mrs. Curran, 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 through, but not originating in, the subconscious of Mrs. Curran must be acknowledged (qtd. in Albertson 101).

Albertson's third piece of evidence originated around the automatist, Mrs. Hester Dowden. Mrs. Dowden held a sitting with a Mrs. Grace Dribbell. Mrs. Dowden had not known beforehand that her sitting would be with Mrs. Dribbell, and yet her spirit guide, Johannes, was able to come up with detailed information about Mrs. Dribble's life and that of those around her. Mrs. Dribble knew some of the facts stated but some she did not, so she had to check on them after the sitting. In all cases the facts proved to be completely true. Not one false statement was made (101-102).

Albertson pointed to these three accounts as providing three different *elements of proof for the validity of Ouija board powers: knowing information before others did; producing works of literature that could not have possibly stemmed from the sitters; and giving information known by only one person and/or proven to be correct upon research.*

### **3.3 Social Science and the Ouija Board**

The majority of social scientific approaches to the Ouija board are functional. That is, they assume that belief is tied to function rather than to accurate observations. While psychology and parapsychology have generally looked at the Ouija board in terms of how it works and how it can be scientifically explained, sociologists Dan Russell and Warren Jones chose to look at it in a slightly different way. They noticed that even though the evidence against spirit communication is undeniable, belief in it continues to grow. This led Russell and Jones to argue that believers have a strong emotional attachment to the belief in life after death. They argued that people use the Ouija board to satisfy "basic psychological needs" and that

paranormal beliefs may operate as mechanisms for predicting, explaining, and controlling (or providing the illusion of controlling) events and experiences beyond the scope of scientific explanation. Rather than reflecting ignorance, paranormal beliefs may resemble religious or philosophical convictions, and therefore be highly resistant to change (83).

Russell and Jones conducted experiments that measured the level of emotional arousal of believers and nonbelievers when confronted with new information. They found that while nonbelievers had no trouble with the new information, the believers often showed evidence of selective learning. That is,

they only learned what they were already familiar with. Russell and Jones concluded from their experiments that paranormal beliefs persisted because, for believers, it was impossible to learn new information when that information was in conflict with what was already known and believed (87).

Similar to this social analysis of the Ouija board phenomenon is the work of Barry Singer and Victor A. Benassi. They maintained that occult behavior, and “superstitions” in general, are not just a passing fad but act as a place to turn when there seems to be environmental uncertainty, social dislocation, deficiencies in human reasoning, or fluctuations in religious beliefs. They felt that since these beliefs in the occult “are held widely and strongly, they are probably based on *psychological and sociological rather than rational determinants*” (353). Banassi and Singer argued that an answer to the question of why people continue to believe when faced with *scientific evidence proving their belief to be wrong*, comes from the function that these beliefs play within the lives of the individuals (358-359).

Robert Galbreath in his article “Occult and the Supernatural” found that the occult is so broad that there is no real focus on it in academic study. While there are several scientific and parapsychological associations devoted to investigating

the occult, there are no associations for studying the history, religious and social-scientific study of the occult. He said that independent work on this subject has to be sought out in journals and magazines (214).

Galbreath maintained that unlike what most scientists and sociologists have found, interest in popular occultism is not confined to times of crisis or when one is searching for different values. He contended that, instead, occultism seemed to be contributing to such positive factors as optimism, self-development, community and reform. He felt that "the study of American popular occultism may thus contribute to understanding the persistence and displacement of beliefs and the processes of social change" ("Occult" 213).

In following this "reaction to society" explanation of occult beliefs, many anthropologists, such as Phillip Stevens, Jr., attribute the appeal of the occult to arising from "deep-rooted historical traditions, the narrowing domains of mainstream religions, and the shortcomings of science education" (376). Along the same vein of reasoning, anthropologist James Lett theorized that the popularity of paranormal beliefs in American culture is due to "the uncertainty of the public, the unreliability of the media, the inadequacy of the educational system, and the inaccuracy of the American worldview" (387).



The main question for these scholars was not simply “why do paranormal beliefs exist?” Lett pointed out that scholars of anthropology have known for years that religion is a cultural universal and that every society on the planet has some sort of belief in the supernatural. Therefore, these scholars did not find it unusual for supernatural beliefs to persist. What they do find interesting, however, is the undeniable rise and growing popularity of occult beliefs and practices. They question “why now?” more so than simply “why?” Lett suggested that one reason for the continued persistence of supernatural beliefs is the rapid changes that people encounter. Now, more so than at any other time in history, technology is changing and has changed everything else, at a remarkably rapid pace. People cannot keep up with the rapid and profound cultural changes and it has left them feeling confused and looking for answers. Lett commented *that in such a state it is not surprising*

*...that millions of Americans find their answers in paranormal beliefs. At a time when traditional religious institutions are declining in influence (because of their increasing irrelevance to the new facts of daily life), paranormal beliefs are emerging as the new folk religion (382).*

Lett asserted that for the individual it does not matter if his or her beliefs are true or false as long as they are emotionally satisfying. He stated that “for millions of

Americans, life is a perplexing, frightening, and unsatisfying whirl, and they are looking for a way off the merry-go-round. They are looking for answers" (383). Lett's opinion followed along the lines as Paul Kurtz's theory of "transcendental temptation" put forth in Kurtz's "The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal."<sup>7</sup> Lett explained that this theory argues that "the tendency to embrace nonempirical explanations of puzzling phenomena is deeply rooted in the human psyche" (383).

Lett felt that adding to people's current confusion and uncertainty is the media and their relentless sensational stories about the paranormal. People in the media know that the paranormal sells and they run shows about the paranormal in order to receive higher ratings. He maintained that the educational system has also added to this willingness to believe in the paranormal. In school, science is taught as a dry, static body of facts and "the skills of evidential reasoning and logical analysis that are the heart of the scientific approach are rarely identified and examined" (385).

Lett further revealed that responsibility for the confusion and uncertainty also lies with the American worldview. He argued that because this worldview

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<sup>7</sup> For further information consult Paul Kurtz, The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1986).

contains many accepted erroneous assumptions, it allows for the inclusion of *paranormal beliefs*. For example, someone who has had a paranormal experience might adhere to the following line of reasoning:

I know that God exists; the proposition that God exists cannot be substantiated by the methods of scientific investigation; therefore there must be something wrong with the methods of scientific investigation, at least when those methods are applied to the supernatural (or paranormal) (386-387).

Lett concluded that no amount of education and training could convince people to give up believing in beliefs to which they have a strong emotional commitment.

Eric Eliason in his article "Ouija" also pointed out that individuals have turned to the occult for answers about life and that the Ouija board has taken on a sort of folk-religious air similar to that of dowsing, crystal gazing, and Tarot. He maintained that these activities are engaged in by those who are not fully exposed to or do not agree with scientific thought and orthodox Christianity. Even though science has given a lot of evidence against it, the Ouija board has, instead, maintained its growing popularity. Eliason commented that in some parts of America up to 50 percent of American fundamentalist Christian youth have taken part in Ouija board sessions (534).

Studying how and why people believe in the supernatural is not limited to the above mentioned disciplines. At this point, it would be appropriate to look at

how the Ouija board has been viewed by folklorists. As this perspective is the center of the thesis, however, I prefer to leave this discussion for the last section in this chapter. Instead, I will now focus on some opinions held by various groups and individuals.

### **3.4 Other Opinions**

Thus far, we have looked at the opinions of some scientific disciplines, religions as well as the opinions of some social scientists. It should be noted, however, that these discussions are just a sampling of some opinions within various disciplines. By no means are they meant to be inclusive of everything available. *In some cases, for instances, valuable opinions necessary in* understanding how the Ouija board is viewed by society, simply did not fit under the above entitled sections. Therefore, this section will take into account the opinions of one more discipline, philosophy, as well as the opinion and experiences of one particular individual, Harry Houdini.

#### **3.4.1 Philosophy**

Philosophers have also questioned belief in the paranormal. In fact, William Grey in his article "Philosophy and the Paranormal: Part 1: The Problem

of Psi” said that questions about knowledge and belief have always been central preoccupations of philosophers. He felt that scientific inquiry into the paranormal has left no room for some dimensions of human experience and that this is why some people (perhaps believers) find scientific explanations unsatisfactory. He believed that by following two important domains of philosophical inquiry, epistemology (examining the nature of knowledge, how we acquire and understand it) and metaphysics (the structure of reality), a truer understanding of parapsychology and ourselves could be acquired (142).

Grey said that when looking at paranormal claims one should not be surprised to find that the same patterns of thought that have led to some of the best theories in the world are also the belief structures at work in interpreting the paranormal. He suggested that it is just a misapplication of these same thought patterns (“Philosophy...Part 1” 146). He felt that for some people psi and belief in psi provide them with a map with which to explain their experiences when there is no other map available. Even if a conclusion cannot be found, he believed that in searching for the knowledge and reality of the paranormal

It shows that we are pattern-making creatures par excellence; we have a great capacity to discover pattern in the world, and when we don’t find it we are disposed to invent it” (Philosophy...Part 2 294).

### **3.4.2 Harry Houdini**

*There are many people outside of the commonly recognized disciplines of thought who are and have been equally curious about the Ouija board phenomenon and its validity. One such person was the magician, Harry Houdini. As an aside to his work as a young magician, Houdini began holding seances. He thought seances would provide great amusement for his audiences. After conducting a few public seances, however, he realized that his audiences were no longer coming to his shows for entertainment but rather they now attended in hope of finding answers to their questions and to be comforted. He saw the pain in his audiences' faces and began to feel guilty about deceiving them. Consequently, he decided to stop using seances as a part of his act (Hunt 102-103).*

*When his mother died, however, Houdini was distraught, and like so many people in his audiences, longed to speak with her again. Consequently, he also began to seek answers through seances. Because Houdini was a magician and had managed to create the illusion of a seance himself, he knew all the tricks that were used in order to make a seance look real. Because of this knowledge, he also knew how to set up conditions for testing the claims of a medium. For thirty years, he pursued Spiritualism and investigated every medium who appeared to be successful and valid. He genuinely wanted to find someone who could, without a*

doubt, communicate with the dead. During all this time, however, he never came upon a single medium whom he felt was authentic. In the end he was so disgusted and disenchanted with mediumistic claims that he wrote a book about his experiences and experiments entitled A Magician Among the Spirits, in which he stated that the Ouija board was a fraud (Hunt 103-104).

Perhaps similar to Houdini's interpretation of the Ouija board was the opinion of James Randi. Randi is also a magician who was interested in the number of people willing to turn a blind eye to what he called "absurd beliefs." Randi blamed the popularity of these beliefs on the media's constant coverage of sensationalized stories, on prominent personalities who openly promoted their beliefs and on government agencies that had been set up specifically to look into paranormal claims. He summed up his opinion by saying that

*Acceptance of nonsense as a harmless aberration can be dangerous to us. We live in a society that is enlarging the boundaries of knowledge at an unprecedented rate, and we cannot keep up with much more than a small portion of what is made available to us. To mix our data input with childish notions of magic and fantasy is to cripple our perceptions of the world around us. We must reach for the truth, not for the ghosts of dead absurdities ("Help" 80).*

### **3.5 Folklore and the Ouija board**

Having examined various disciplines and several different points of view we must look at how or why a study of the Ouija board is important within the discipline of folklore. The answer lies within the realm of folk belief--focusing on how and why people believe the way they do. As Diane Goldstein pointed out,

Though individual scholars may hold unshakable ideas about the ontological status and nature of supernatural phenomena, our focus as folklorists is on the belief and not, at least initially, on the phenomenon itself ("Belief" 65).

Some people believe in the powers of the Ouija board while others are skeptical. Most beliefs, however, can be rationally explained by the believers themselves. That is, everyone has some sort of belief system whereby beliefs or disbeliefs are considered and connected or rejected according to beliefs previously held. It is due to the systematic nature of belief that one is able to logically connect a new belief (such as the powers of the Ouija board) with others. One's belief in God and the Devil as supernatural entities, for example, might also allow for the possibility of a belief in ghosts or spirits. David Hufford has suggested that the two most important characteristics of a belief system are its complexity (that is, the number of parts it contains) and its integration (that is, the number of orderly relationships among those parts). He compared a belief system to a jigsaw



puzzle that is heaped on a table. While initially the heap appears to be quite complex, *it becomes more integrated as the pieces are put together. As integration occurs the system becomes more stable. He further stated that an understanding of the system can only occur through the comprehension of the connections among the parts* ("Folk" 23).

*Often what causes a belief to be accepted into one's belief system is a profound personal experience. Hufford called this the "experience-centered theory" and explains it by saying that*

*...[it] is the proposition that much folk belief about spirits is reasonable. that it is rationally developed from experience. That is to say, the reasoning involved in many such beliefs utilizes methods of inference, based on observations, which are commonly accepted as valid ("Beings" 11).*

*Hufford noted that for years it has been predicted by scholars that as scientific knowledge increases, beliefs will decrease. This prediction, however, has not occurred. He maintained that the reason spiritual beliefs were able to escape such pressure toward secularization because they are rationally founded on experience. He pointed out, however, that "the rationality and empirical grounding of a belief are separate from its 'truth'; many false beliefs are rationally held on empirical grounds...and many true beliefs are held without rational or empirical grounds" ("Beings" 18).*

In terms of applying these theories to the study at hand, it is not my purpose as a folklorist to determine the validity of the Ouija board's powers. While most scholars have looked upon the phenomenon as a whole, this study looks *specifically* at the belief (and disbelief) that people hold toward the Ouija board and how such beliefs fit into an individual's life.

Hufford, in his article "Traditions of Disbelief," has opened up the doorway and showed us the path to the study of supernatural belief as something that is not in contradiction to official beliefs. He demonstrated that both traditions of belief and traditions of disbelief adhere to a logic or rationale that is quite valid in its own right. He pointed out that "traditions of disbelief should be recognized as such and no more accepted uncritically than are traditions of belief" ("Traditions" 54). Following this train of thought, the next chapter will focus on my informants--their experiences, beliefs, opinions, superstitions, and understanding of the Ouija board.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Ouija Board Stories

*...If you're not willing to believe, you never know what you're missing...*"

(Power personal interview).

Thus far, we have seen that different people throughout history and literature have looked upon the Ouija board, and other occult phenomena, in a variety of ways. Some see it as nothing more than a game while others see it as tangible evidence of life after death or as a way to examine the subconscious mind. As the above quotation illustrates, a distinct willingness to believe that spirits could speak to everyday people was displayed by some of my informants.

David Hufford has suggested that most people hold a lot of beliefs that they are unwilling to state or admit even to themselves. In such a case Hufford believed that *"the natural vehicle of folk belief, perhaps most belief, is stories that show what is true by what is said to have happened"* ("Beings" 20) and that *"this process combines beliefs with some of their reasons and some of their implications"* ("Beings" 20). As mentioned earlier, in my own research I found that when my informants were asked directly about a certain belief or aspect,

they would answer "I don't know" or "I'm not sure." An answer to the question, however, would often pop up, unsolicited, when my informants told me their stories about the Ouija board and other occult phenomena. It, therefore, follows that an analysis of the *Ouija narratives is needed in order to understand and* identify more readily the folk beliefs and customs surrounding the Ouija board.

To begin this analysis we will first look at selected narratives from my informants. While most of my informants told me several stories, I include here only one or two narratives from each informant. This is not to say that the other collected narratives will be ignored. Excerpts from all interviews will be cited as we look at different aspects of each individual's experiences and beliefs. I intend to include the following narrative types as they were volunteered by my informants: the typical pattern of a Ouija board session; the rules for playing the Ouija board; different types of boards used; who the informants think the spirits are; the possibility of religious influences on my informant's beliefs; the belief that some people are chosen to be mediums; beliefs about good and evil, heaven and hell; as well as several other sections which help illustrate the informants beliefs.

It would be well to keep in mind that these sections are general headings created in order to organize the material collected. In this way one can easily

recognize different areas of belief. More often than not, however, a chosen example could have easily fitted into several sections. For example, one informant described the general process of a Ouija session but, within that description, also defined the type of spirit with which they communicated. In such a case, the example was placed under the section where I felt it served its purpose.

#### **4.1 The Narratives**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the informants and briefly explained how they came to use the *Ouija* board as well as their general opinion about the phenomena. It is now time to look more closely at the experiences of my informants. What follows are my informants' narratives about their *Ouija* board experiences. While some of these narratives look at "first time" usage, others relate the most memorable *Ouija* board experience that left an impression upon the informant.

Phonse Hann said that he had a "very short life with the *Ouija* board" (personal interview) and described himself as a nonbeliever. His experience with the *Ouija* board occurred when he was a young man and, consequently, he could not remember exactly what had happened. Phonse did recall, however, that he

had purposely fooled his friends into believing that a spirit had been contacted:

...we were hanging around up at this particular friend's house. Neil Oliver's....And ah. Neil, or Neil's sister had a Ouija board and, ah, they really believed in it....Ah, his sister believed in it. She wasn't there that night and she owned the Ouija board. And so we took it out just for the laugh. And it was going on, there were probably, God...seems to me Jerry's girlfriend then was, was Lois. She might have been there too. But there was certainly me, Oliver, Jerry Conway and probably three, or four, or five other people but three of us were definitely on the board together and there may have been others.

And ah, we, ah, it was late at night....we were probably drinking a little bit. We certainly weren't loaded drunk or anything, but we were probably drinking coffee or something by that time of the night. And ah, we played the *Ouija board* and *nothing* was happening for awhile, and it was the very first time in my life I've ever played a Ouija board. And after awhile I just thought I'd start, play a joke on these guys, you know, because they all seemed to be pretty into it and I wasn't. I didn't believe in it. Ah, so I just started, just seeing how much pressure it would take to push it around and sure enough I could push it, and they wouldn't notice that it was going. Without anybody thinking that, doing it.

So the first thing I did was I said I was Queen Victoria. And in fact this is all I remember in great detail or any detail. And I just started talking about what Queen Victoria was doing in heaven and or wherever she was and, ah, all that sort of stuff. And everyone thought, "Hey, wow, this is great," you know. This is really something. And ah, Neil Oliver's, ah, father had died, oh, ten years before or something. And I remember some discussion with him too, his father. You know, me playing out the alphabet. The ah, what came back on me though, years later, was that I apparently dredged up Jerry Conway's father who'd died some years before too. And ah, Jerry was really impressed with this. Anyway, later on I owned up to all this. I told everybody, or at least I thought I did, that, "Look, this is all bullshit. This is me pushing the glass around. Doing this. I was Queen Victoria and everybody else." And ah, that was the end of it.

....Jerry moved up to Ottawa in the late '70s....In the last three or four years

I was in Ottawa and I called Jer and ah, we went out drinking together somewhere. And ah, of course, we were talking about old times. Ah, and I think it was Jerry who brought it up the night on the Ouija board. And he said, "Boy, you know, I believe all that stuff, still. I believe in all that." And I said, "But ah, but Jerry that night up at Oliver's, you know, that was me pushing the glass around. You know, when we got Queen Victoria and all that." He said, "Ya, I remember Queen Victoria, yeah, my dad." And I said, "That was me. I did all that." He said, "You did not. There was no way you could have done that." I said, "I did. It was me. There was nobody dead there. It was just me."

And ah, anyway, Jerry and I almost got into a fight over this because .ah, we were shouting anyway. Ah, because he said, "Look there's no way *anybody alive could have known the things that the Ouija board told me* that night. It had to be my father." And he didn't tell me exactly what it was that we'd asked that I was able to, and I can't remember....but apparently I was able to answer these in, you know, clear enough terms for him....Anyway, Jerry never believed it first nor last that I pushed the glass around. So when I saw him two years ago or whenever it was up in Ottawa, he came away from that thinking that I was trying to burst his balloon of his one after-death experience with his father, you know. And this is why he got so angry, you know. And ah, so I just gave up, I said well okay....I knew that the more I tried to convince him the angrier he'd get ah, so I just dropped it (personal interview).

What is interesting about this story is not so much that Phonse does not believe that spirits exist (much less that they communicate through the Ouija board), it is the fact that his friend Jerry refused to believe that they had not contacted his father. *Singer and Benassi have suggested that a person is more likely to listen to their instinct rather than scientific reasoning and "employ a belief approach most suitable to the personal need at hand."* (359). Even though

Phonse told his friend that he was purposely moving the pointer and making good guesses. Jerry refused to listen to him or accept any other rationale as to why the marker moved. He needed to believe that he had communicated with the spirit of his father and there was nothing that Phonse could say that would override his beliefs.

When Mary-Dawn Bennett first moved into residence at Memorial University some of the girls living there told her about a previous Ouija board session. Apparently, one girl in the residence had her student loan money stolen and the Ouija board told these girls who took it. At first Mary-Dawn was very skeptical but eventually some of the girls there convinced her to try it.

You know, one of the girls said, "Come on, try it. I'll show it works." So I said "What the hell. What have you got to lose?" And we went into the room and, into one of the girls rooms and set up the board and sure enough we were asking it questions, and it was moving and I know I wasn't pushing it, and I, honestly, I don't believe that any of the other girls were pushing it either.

....One of the proofs that I have of this is at one point, ah, myself and another girl actually had our fingers on the pointer and my roommate Cheryl asked the board a question. Ah, I remind you she was not touching the board at the time, and she asked what her grandfather's favorite hobby was. I had no idea, neither did the girl, the other girl who had her hands on the board. And the board started moving around and spelling like what looked to me, at first, like a very, very strange word. And it ended up spelling *flowers*, ah, which really perplexed me. I was going "Flowers?" And Cheryl said, you know, "Yes, my grandfather was a gardner. He liked



flowers and plants.”

Ah. I remember, ah, asking the board at one point they started playing around like, “Oh who does Cheryl want to sleep with?” and it would spell the name and “Who does so and so want to sleep with?” and, cause one of the girls was sort of torn between these two guys, and it pointed out one name and...And I asked the board the same question, and sure enough it gave me a truthful answer that I hadn’t shared with the other girls...I was touching the board at the time. Ah, but I can tell you I didn’t want the board to move because it was not particularly something I wanted the other girls to know, ah, at that point especially since the name of the man in question was not my boyfriend (personal interview).

When Yvonne Peddle first tried the Ouija board she got in touch with the spirit of a little boy who had been killed on his bike over by the Village mall in St. John’s. At that time she also spoke to a spirit who claimed to be the drunk driver who killed the boy. Her most memorable experience however, when it comes to the Ouija board, is the attitude it had toward her and the time she and her sister got in touch with the spirit of their grandfather. In describing her experience she said,

The first thing we did was, ah, asked would it speak to us or whatever. And it called me a bitch. It hated me, yeah. It told me to “Fuck off, fuck you bitch, bitch, bitch [Yvonne] bitch.” And then we started talking to this girl Nora who called me a bitch again. Wouldn’t talk to me but would talk to Dawn.

Then Corrette got on the board with me and we started talking to my grandfather who died when I was five. I’m 25 now. And ah, we were asking him how he was, and he was good and did he ever get in contact with dad and he said “Yes” and we said “How?” and he said “Through prayer.” He talks to dad or dad talks to him, whatever. And we asked him

do he still love Nan and miss her. And he said "Yes." And we said "She's remarried now. We have a step-grandfather," and he got really upset on the board. He didn't want to talk about it. "No, no, no, no, no." About Nan being remarried, yeah....we asked it did it want to talk some more.

So we chatted for a bit and before it left it spelled out "I love you Corrette and [Yvonne]. I love you both." And then it left. I cried to break my heart. I screeched, "Get it away from me! It's real!" And I was convinced by that time. Convinced, yeah. It was amazing. Wicked, yeah (personal interview).

As mentioned earlier, Theresa Murray and Margaret Murray were interviewed together. Both of these girls had been involved with the Ouija board with the same group of people, but neither of them had been there at the same time. Theresa's and Margaret's story illustrated the desire or need that they had to communicate with a dead loved one. Theresa Murray had recently lost her fiancé in a car accident and when she heard that her friends had been talking to spirits she wondered if she would be able to contact her boyfriend. She felt that if there was even a slight possibility that she could communicate with him, she had to give it a try. Her first real experience with the Ouija board follows:

So we gathered at her house and I watched them do it first, and I couldn't believe that they were actually talking to somebody. I forget who it was *now that they were talking to*. And so anyway I watched it for awhile, and I think it was the next night or the weekend after that I tried it. I wouldn't try it the first night. And ah, when I tried it ah, the first thing I asked to, I asked to speak to ah, Mick. That was my boyfriend.

And sure enough, *I got to speak to him. And ah, I asked them about the*

night that he was killed. And asked him, like did they know what happened and they said "No." Like it, I said "Did it happen too fast for you, like to even realize? Was there any suffering?" And all this and it came to "No." That there was, you know, no suffering, it happened too fast and that. And ah, I asked him, ah, was he with his brother and sister and he said "Yes." And I asked him was he happy and he said "Yes."

And ah, what else was I...Oh, now none of the girls there knew anything about him. And I asked him to spell out his mother's name just in case. Like it could've been an evil spirit or something like that, right. So anyway he spelled out "Philomena." And I asked him how old he was when the accident happened and all this kind of stuff and...Like the answer was coming up correct. And, like, you think that you were, ah, press, you know. To watch somebody else doing it you think that they could be moving the button. But it's not....

Oh, another thing I asked him, at this time I was seeing Barry, and like I asked him if he minded that I was seeing him. And he said "No." And I told him, like I was telling him what I was doing. I was telling him that I worked at the BlarneyStone and, ah, I asked him did he know that, where the BlarneyStone was and he said "No." And I asked him about George Street and "No." He didn't, he wasn't familiar with that area, right (personal interview).

Similarly, Margaret Murray wanted to use the Ouija board to see if she could contact her father and brother who had been lost at sea and her sister Yvonne who had died of leukemia when Margaret was only six years old.

I didn't really believe in it, but I wasn't totally skeptical....And we did it in their, there on Pleasant Street, right. And I think they might have had a candle going that night. I can't remember....Yeah and I know there was a good crowd around in the room. I know Tracey and Dawn and Denise and [Yvonne] and, I don't know if Jason was there or not. But I wanted to speak to my father, Georgie or Yvonne. That's who I wanted to speak to. And I got, I got Yvonne and all she spelled out was "Mom." She kept

*spelling out "mom." "mom." "M.O.M.," "M.O.M.," Just kept going "M.O.M.," And I, honest to God I don't remember if I got my father....I think they told me something about Cape Pine. They spelled out "Cape Pine" for an answer and I know none of the girls knew that at the time or something. I know that at that time it was only me that knew that answer whatever it was, right. And the answer was "Cape Pine" and that's what they spelled out. And that's what made me believe it. But I can't remember what the question was....And I don't even remember who was doing it with me....I think I might have asked Yvonne where we used to celebrate our birthdays together. Something like that and that came out "Cape Pine" (personal interview).*

Gerard Flynn has come in contact with the Ouija board several times in his 25 years. Over a two year period, when he was 15 or 16 years old, Gerard was constantly on the Ouija board with his friends. Later, when he was 25, he came in contact with it again. This second encounter, however, had a more personal and emotional effect upon him. It was fortunate that a good rapport was established during the interview and Gerard felt that he could share both occasions when the Ouija board played such an important role in his life.

During his first encounter with the Ouija board, Gerard remembered that he *and his friends simply asked questions about when they would marry, how old they would be and who was still a virgin.* Gerard noted, however, that the more they used the Ouija board the more serious their questions became. Gerard said that he and his friend *"...did it for two years and his mother made him get rid of it.* She became afraid. We started to [dove?] into some really scary stuff. Like we

started to ask really scary questions” (personal interview).

At first Gerard only saw it as a game. Once he decided to ask the board a question in his mind when he was not on the board. When the board answered correctly Gerard said,

...that’s when I started to believe. I was off the board. I was stood up. I was stood over the board. Two other guys were doing it. I asked a question in my mind and it answered the question. So that started to scare me. So, we became afraid. So we realized that, hey, maybe this has got some validity, ah, maybe this is, like maybe this can actually work so we started to ask questions, you know, serious questions (personal interview).

Gerard said that after that experience he never actually went on the board very much—instead, he would just ask a question when someone else was on it. He said that, *“This was the only way that I could really ensure myself that, hey, this is valid. I would stand up and ask the questions”* (personal interview).

After about nine or ten years, Gerard once again came in contact with the Ouija board at a friend’s house party. His father had just died six months previously, and this time he wanted to use the Ouija board to see if he could contact his father’s spirit.

So we were there talking and, ah, these two went on it and they were asking, and *they had a lot of trouble* with it. They couldn’t get it to move. These two girls that sat down. So, I told you that I never had a very good ah, relationship with this Ouija thing....And ah, so I said, “Hey, let me get on it, let me try.”

So I sat with this other person, we were having a chat. And all of a sudden it started going nuts. Round in circles. I'm like "Ah, jeeze," you know, "It's here!" 'Cause and I'm like this is the first time this ever happened to me. And she's like "You're moving that." So I took my hands off really quick but she kept hers on it, and it kept doing it and I put my hands back on it quickly again. And I'm like, "Now, am I doing that?" She said, "No." She started to become very afraid. So she wanted to get off it.

So she got off and the other one sat down, and we did it again and I said, "Are you here?" And it went up to "Yes." And it's very powerful too. Its pushing, it was like, it was very powerful. It was like and I'm like, "Jesus, this is the first time this has happened to me before that it's powerful." So we're having a chat and this thing is getting kind of personal. "Hey, what's going on here," you know. "What are you getting personal about there big guy?" And we're there talking and I'm like, "Who is this?" You know, *not expecting an answer. I got a scary answer though.* It went to "G." I'm like "Who the hell is G?" You know. "G." And I'm like, "Who are you?" And I'm going, "Ah jeeze, are you George?" "No." "Gerald?" "No." And I went "Gordon?" "Yes." And I went, "Ah, fuck, naw, this can't be."

My father's name is Gordon, and I'm like, "Okay, what's going on here," you know....So I said, "Who are you?" It went to "G." I said, "Specifically." It went to "G.F." And I said "Are you Gordon [Flynn]?" "Yes." "Are you my dad?" And it went "Yes." And I went, "Ah come on. This is, this is, you know. This is bullshit...This can't be right." And it went to "Yes" again. And I'm like, "Okay boy, if you are, ah, when did you die?" It went to "M." I went "May?" "No." "March?" "Yes." And I'm like, "[?] boy." I said ah, "Where are you to?" I said, "Spell it out. Don't give me a letter. Spell it out." And it spelled out "Heaven." "Cool." 'Cause I figured if this is true well I always knew he'd be going there instead of anywhere else.

I said, "Have you met up with grandfather [Flynn]?" "Yeah." "Have you met up with grandmother [Flynn]?" "Yeah." "Did you met up with grandmother Galway?" "Yeah." "Grandfather Galway?" "No." And I said, "Jesus, where is he to?" I said, "What is he in hell?" "No." "Purgatory?" "Yeah." *I started cracking up then. I said, "Jeeze, this can't be right. This can't be right."* I mean I'm thinking, "No, this can't be dad.

Jesus Christ.” But boy it appeared to be. It appeared to be, and I started really, become afraid then...To tell you the truth, I, ah, even if it was true or not, just that instance, six months ago. It was only six months dad passed away. I started to cry. I thought it was some kind of [a joke?]...this is a silly joke if something’s going on here. And I got up from the machine.

Then my girlfriend went back down and sat down, ah, with Chris, another guy. And they called it up again and it was still dad. So obviously the Ouija is whatever spirit it wants to be. I felt at that time, it was still dad. And they asked a question, they said, “Are you [Gerard’s] dad?” “Yes.” “What do you want to tell him?” And it went to “Love.” And that was it. I said “Thank-you very much. That’s enough now. I want to quit.” So I stopped right then and there (personal interview).

As mentioned earlier Tammy Power proved to be an informant with a great wealth of information about the Ouija board as well as a great deal of experience with the supernatural in general. During her time at college she had one constant spirit who would come through on the Ouija board. For weeks this spirit would not name himself so Tammy and her friends just knew him as the “fun spirit,” but they still did not know if he was evil or good. Eventually the spirit told them that his name was “Don.” Tammy had so many stories about “Don” that to include them all here would be impossible.

While the following narrative is not a first-time Ouija board account, I chose this one because of the different nature of spirit contact that Tammy experienced in comparison with my other informants’ experiences. Unlike most spirits associated with the Ouija board, Tammy felt that “Don” was always in the

room with them and followed her wherever she went. In other words, she felt that this spirit was not confined to the board:

It started first...we were in bed one night and, the way the rooms are they're split by a desk and you, ah, roommate's on the other side in her bed and you're over on one side in your bed. Now, I'm on the side with the thermostat, and every room has its own thermostat for its own electric heater. And we're in bed and I hear "Click. click." the thermostat went up. And Sharon said, "Turn off the heat [Tammy]. I wakes up in the morning, I'm dying with the heat." I said, "I didn't turn it up you little dicksmack. You did."

So I got up and turned it down and got back in bed. And we heard, "Click. click." I said, "Sharon, give it up because if I catches you turning up the heat and blaming me, I'll choke ya." And she said, "I'm in my bed!" We were fighting back and forth about it for days. So finally we left the light on, and we'd lie down in the bunk and you'd see the two of us leaning over looking at the thermostat and we watched it. We watched it turn...we couldn't even get up to run. And she had a brass unicorn wind chime. And they had about eight unicorns, they're really heavy brass, and she had them hung up in the window.

The way the windows worked is the top of the window is about five and a half feet but it doesn't open. The only part that opens is one foot on the bottom part of the window and it only opens inward for about three or four inches. So the only wind that could come in through that window is if that bottom window is open and then it blows in through the bottom and not the top. So her chimes never moved because of the window.

There was one time when the heater went on, I said, "Sharon, that's it, we gotta get out of here. I can't stay. I mean, spooked, right. And the chimes, "Clang." The door was closed, heat was off, windows closed. And I said, "Sharon, give it up you're not spooking me. You're not doing it." And she said, "I thought you did it." That was it. From then on every time that Don wanted to talk to us or if he was mad or if he just wanted to say "Hi," he'd clang the unicorns. Depending on how hard he clanged them or how long he did it, you knew what he wanted, right (personal interview).



Even though Tammy came to realize that “Don” was not confined to the Ouija board, it did not scare her. She felt that “Don” was a friendly spirit who preferred communicating with her than any of the other girls at the residence with her.

#### **4.2 Structure of the Ouija Board Session**

Bill Ellis suggested in his article “Speak to the Devil: Ouija Board Rituals Among American Adolescents,” that a narrative pattern consisting of seven possible steps can be recognized in most, if not all, personal narratives pertaining to Ouija board experiences. These seven steps are as follows:

1. The users invoke a spirit
2. They then name the spirit and determine its background
3. Participants test the spirit by asking it questions with known or knowable answers.
4. Through the messages or the indicator’s behavior, they characterize the spirit, usually good or evil.
5. The spirit threatens or warns the users of future events
6. The users challenge the spirit’s reality, and the spirit responds with a sign.
7. The users terminate contact (68).

The basic question I asked my informants was to describe one of their typical Ouija board sessions. While some of the descriptions collected did not

touch upon all of the steps that Ellis suggested, they all contain a definite opening and closing pattern and include proof questions or a test. Interestingly enough, some examples of the other steps did come up later in the interviews when we would be talking about something totally different than the structure of the Ouija session. Additional examples of step four, for instance, can be seen under the section "Defining the Spirits of the Ouija Board and/or Where They Reside." As well, examples of steps five and six can be seen under the section "Dangers Associated with the Ouija Board."

While it may not initially appear that all of these steps exist (as defined by Ellis), throughout the interviews they did come up and one can conclude that the Ouija board narratives do include the above listed steps. What follows are excerpts showing my informants' responses to my question of Ouija board usage. I have used subheadings to indicate where their descriptions fit in accordance to Bill Ellis' model.

#### **4.2.1 The Opening**

Phonse was not able to remember the exact circumstances surrounding his experiment with the Ouija board. He did remember, however, that they asked if someone was there:

*We started in the center and the lights were on and ah, I don't think there was anything like a dice or anything like that. I think you simply asked a question like "are you there?" and then hopefully the thing would start to move, you know....I remember someone telling me how to do it (Hann personal interview).*

Mary-Dawn was not aware of a specific way to start a Ouija board session.

The one they developed and she described, however, is actually very close to, if not exactly like, what would be considered the proper method by most users:

*Ah, we developed a sort of standard, ah, introduction where we'd say "hello." Well you always sort of asked "Is somebody out there?" ah, 'til the board moves and says "Yes" or "Hello" or "Hi" or something. Gives you an indication that, you know, we'd ask if there's someone else in the room 'til the board gave us an indication (Bennett personal interview).*

Theresa not only informed me of how she invoked a spirit but also of how some people felt that they needed to be more physically connected aside from having their fingers on the pointer. She also mentioned an alternative object as a pointer and the proper way to use it.

*You put your hand, ah, we used a quarter. You put your hands on the quarter. Just your fingers. Not even really on it. Just slightly touching it. And you'd ask, you know, "Is there anybody here?" "Can we speak to a spirit?" and ah, like if somebody was there, you know, you'd say, "Can I speak to somebody?" And it'd go to "Yes." And then you might ask okay, "Who am I speaking to?" It might spell out a name....Now I've often heard people say too like, like that girl I asked her about how they done it. This is the girl that worked at Dominion. And she said like how they all like put, they just put one hand on it. Like there was a group of them all around the table and then they all held hands. So like they were connected like on*

the button and they were all holding hands too. That could be one thing that they thought they had to do or whatever, right (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

Like Theresa's acquaintance, Gerard and his friends also felt that they had to be connected by more than their finger tips:

What we had to do, we had to sit across from each other. Directly across from each other. Ah, preferably at a very small table because our knees had to touch. Okay. I don't know why. I mean I didn't know why at that time, but our knees had to touch. We had to take our finger, the tips of our fingers. Each finger had to be touching. On our hand it had to be touching like each other, right. We had to lay it on the, what it was the heart. It was a heart. That's what we had. The ah, whatever you call it anyway. It was a heart and his fingers had to touch the tip of mine. As many fingers as you could. Were like this, three abreast, like that because you couldn't of course get the pinky touched. But you'll get three touched and it had to be laid very lightly on the, ah, little heart. And ah, this is where, this is how he told me how to do it. And you had to concentrate. You had to concentrate and in order to get the Ouija to respond you had to ask, "Ouija, will you answer our questions?" That's how we started...that was the opening. That's exactly what you had to say to it at first. You had to say, "Ouija will you answer my questions?" Or "Ouija will you respond to my questions?" or "Ouija are you awake?" Something like that. Just an opening to let the Ouija know that hey, we're here and we want you to come and have a chat (Flynn personal interview).

Perhaps due to the fact that Tammy and her friends usually dealt with the one spirit, "Don," their format for a Ouija board session was slightly different.

So we'd take it out and lay it on the bed between us and we'd all sit around it, all the beds pulled together and we'd all sit around it in a circle and hold hands and those that were using the board would use their finger, put their finger on the machine in the middle, right....And there was none of this, "Is

there a spirit in the room?" I mean we never talked like that or nothing. No we, actually what we'd do is sit down, put our hands on the board and say, "Don? We want to talk to you Don." And we'd wait. And if he didn't move, "Okay. Are there any other spirits that would like to talk?" (Power personal interview).

From the above examples it becomes apparent that even though there may be slight variations in how the Ouija board session would start, a proper opening was important to all of my informants.

#### **4.2.2 Naming**

Ellis pointed out that "users are generally interested in asking spirits they contact for a name, and follow-up questions will fill in details of the spirit's past life" (69). Both Theresa and Mary-Dawn explained that they would often ask a spirit various questions.

And, ah, then ah, you know, you just ask the person who they are, what happened to them, when did they die and all this kind of stuff (Murray, Theresa personal interview)

And then we would ask ah, "Who are we talking to?" And we got a spirit called Helen and she, you know, she'd spell her name and then the girls would start asking her well, "Hello, Helen. How are you?" "Fine." "How old are you or how old were you when you died?" "How did you die?" "Are you happy?" ah, things like that. And then go on and ask questions, you know, "Will you answer some questions for us?" "Sure." "Do you have any messages for any of us?" (Bennett personal interview).

It can be suggested that once a spirit is reached it is important to the

participants to find out more about that spirit. Generally, the spirit is asked to give a name and then asked to give specific details about its life on earth. For some participants in Ouija board sessions, the answers to these questions are important because it gives them something that they can research and, therefore, determine the validity and trustworthiness of the spirit that they have contacted.

#### 4.2.3 Testing

While each individual informant may have their own opinion about what type of questions should or should not be asked, most do ask the Ouija board some sort of “proof” question. In speaking about the type of question she asked, Mary-Dawn said,

Not so much tell the future because part of me doesn't want to know and. ah. I didn't think that the spirit was able to tell that sort of stuff. Ah, a few proof questions to sort of verify the accuracy of the answers. And that it could give you answers and tell you the truth. Sort of how old am I or what's my favorite color what's my mother's name ah. things like that....Oh, yeah. we could ask the board like, who's in the room...it would name everybody that was in the room touching or not touching the board. It didn't matter. Or we'd say “Oh somebody just walked in. who is it?” “Michelle.” “Cheryl,” whoever, it would spell it out. No problem (Bennett personal interview).

Yvonne said that even though she never really questioned the validity of what the board was saying, her friend Dawn always wanted the board to prove

itself to her.

Ah. Dawn asked it proof questions like "How old is my father?" and "When was I born?" and "What year did my uncle die?" Asked everything. Answered everything right. But mine were like "How are you Pop? I miss you so," right. Stupid little questions. But Dawn wanted proof and I, she got it at most times, right. Sometimes it was off, but, ah, yeah cause it's *all* the numbers on the board as well as the letters and stuff (Peddle personal interview).

Margaret figured that the best way to prove that the Ouija board was real was to ask it something that no one else in the room would know. If she got the right answer then she could be sure that no one else was moving the board.

I know I specifically asked something that they wouldn't have known, whoever was on the board with me. I think it was Tracey, come to think of it. Tracey T.. And she didn't, like Tracey was just in town then and she didn't know me and...or Corrette. It was one of them. I think, I don't know. One of them that didn't know me as well as the other girls knew me, right (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

The testing of a spirit did not stop if an informant got a spirit claiming to be a loved one. When Theresa got a spirit purporting to be her boyfriend, she wanted to make sure that it was not an *evil spirit trying to trick her*.

...like it came to "Yes." and I said well, you know, "If it is prove it to me, ah, tell me like, when is your birthday?" And like that would come up and like, you know, just different things like that. Just little things. Like what was your second name and stuff like that, right....Like you're always testing the spirit. Always, like, asking when was its birthday or when was something, something that you knew. And if they fooled up you'd say, "I think you're an evil spirit" (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

*Aside from the proof questions that Dawn would ask, Yvonne also related a couple of stories wherein they were able to check out the validity of what the board had told them.*

*I know one night we were doing it and, ah, my next door neighbors came home. And we asked the board, "Who's that?" And it spelled out its name, my next door neighbor's name and we asked if there's anyone with him. And he said, the board said, "Yes." And spelled out his middle name and his brother's middle name, and it gave us a couple of names. And we asked our neighbor the next day who was with him and his girlfriend was with him and he spelled out his girlfriend's name. And we asked was his middle name James or Ralph or whatever. He said, "No it's not my middle name but it's my other brother's name." So whether the board got confused or not, I don't know. But it's really bizarre. I suppose if you want to believe it (Peddle personal interview).*

Tammy and her friends also tried to get information from the fun spirit "Don" that they could look up for its validity. The information he gave them, however, proved to be incorrect. This did not deter Tammy and her friends from the Ouija board. In fact, Tammy said that once she came to know exactly what type of spirit "Don" was, she really did not expect to get the truth from him about such questions. *Through her communications with "Don," she had come to see him as a prankster spirit.*

There was one time when Tammy got an evil spirit on the board who claimed that he was "Don." *Everything about the session happened according to their regular Ouija board process until they asked the spirit something about a*



previous session with “Don” and the spirit could not answer the question. They knew then that they had gotten an evil spirit who was trying to trick them. The only sort of “proof question” that the girls regularly asked dealt with proving that the spirit claiming to be “Don” was in fact “Don.” Basically, when they got a spirit they would ask it “How are you feeling?” If the spirit answered, “Dead,” then they knew they had the fun spirit, “Don.”

This section illustrates that while we, as folklorists, are not immediately concerned with determining the Ouija board phenomena as true or false, the informants themselves do have an interest in concluding, for themselves, if what they have experienced actually happened. These individuals do their own form of testing in order to determine if their experience was real. Diane Goldstein in her article “Perspectives on Newfoundland Belief Traditions: Narrative Clues to *Concepts of Evidence*” points out that David Hufford has noted<sup>1</sup>

...that the standard accusation of inadequate observation and reality-testing on the part of percipients is often countered in the interview responses by references to specific testing strategies. These strategies range beyond the proverbial “pinch to see if I was dreaming” to references to actual experimentation (35).

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<sup>1</sup>See David Hufford, *The Terror That Comrs in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1982) xviii.

As seen in the above quotations, all of my informants exhibited a desire to discover if what they had experienced on the Ouija board was real. The most immediate way that they could do this was to ask “proof questions” whereby the spirit was asked questions that had specific answers (date of birth, birthplace, age and so on). The proof consisted of answers that a participant felt no one else in the room could possibly know.

#### **4.2.4 Characterizing the Spirit**

Bill Ellis found from his study on the Ouija board that,

A number of sessions produce a complex dialogue, either between the “spirit” and the users, or among the spirits themselves. Different spirits generally produce messages in different ways, both in the manner that the indicator moves and in the linguistic style of the messages (“Speak” 72).

Throughout various sessions, my informants also acquired some knowledge about the personality type of the spirit with whom they were speaking. Usually the informants characterized the spirits they got on the board as good or evil. They could tell which spirit type they had evoked by the way the session progressed. Theresa said that they always knew when they got an evil spirit on the Ouija board:

The thing would go right mad over the board. Whatever you had like the quarter or whatever, would move back and forth, back and forth and then you’d say, “This is an evil spirit” and it’d go right mad, and you might say,

“Well, okay, we’re going out now. We don’t want to talk to you anymore.” And then you’d have to bring the coin or the button off the board to end it off. And then you could ask too like, “Is this an evil spirit?” And they might say, “yes” or “no” whatever. But basically if it went mad and, you know, it was like somebody that didn’t want to talk to you or somebody, a spirit that was mad or upset or, you know. Something like that (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

As well, Tammy said that she usually knew immediately when they did not get “Don” and an evil one tried to contact them. She could just sense it without the spirit even communicating anything:

And usually you’d feel the vibrations....Tingles would go up my arm like, a hot sensation would go up my arm and down my back, and I knew there was a spirit on the board....And I’d look at Sharon and say, “Okay do we want to go ahead with this, ’Cause did you get a bad feeling or a good feeling?” Because if we got a bad feeling we’d say, “Sorry we got to say goodbye. Something came up. Goodbye.” And we’d move down to goodbye (Power personal interview).

Whether the informant recognized a pattern as representing evil or intuitively knew when an evil spirit had come on to the board, all felt that it was important to stay away from such contact and not encourage communication with an evil spirit.

#### 4.2.5 Goodbye

Ellis said that “to play it safe, some groups included rituals intended to dismiss any spirits” (76). He went on to say that some investigators<sup>2</sup> have suggested that termination of a Ouija board session is seen as very important and useful:

*...all these games focus the dangerous activity onto a set place or object, which can then be discarded or left behind. The mirror, the isolated graveyard, the Dungeons and Dragons game-board, the “haunted house” all are frames of reference that separate uncanny entities from “the real world,” and although participants play at bridging the gap, in fact the gap holds.*

Hence it is significant that most Ouija ritual accounts conclude with some kind of termination, in which the board is destroyed, discarded, or simply not used again. The tradition limits the context in which spirits contact humans, both in terms of location (the board) and of a structured ritual (80).

My informants also felt that a proper closing of the Ouija board was just as important as the opening of the session. Theresa explained that she and her group of friends were always careful to make sure that they said goodbye and that the closing was okay with the spirit.

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<sup>2</sup>For further discussion and explanation see: Bill Ellis, “What Really Happened at Gore Orphanage,” Urban Resources 4 (Spring 1987): 19-20.; Gary Alan Fine, Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds (Chicago:U of Chicago P, 1983) 44.; and Bengt Klintberg, “‘Black Madame, come out!’ On Schoolchildren and Spirits,” ARV: Scandinavian Yearbook of Folklore 44 (1988): 164.

Yeah, that's another thing we did. We used to say "I'm going to go now, okay. Is it okay?" And they'd say "Yes" or "No." And then you'd be there "Okay, goodbye, goodbye." And as you're bringing your hand down you were going a little ways, right. "Goodbye, see ya, bye." You know, like this and edging off the board (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

*Mary-Dawn pointed out that while it is important to say goodbye it is also important that the process is not done quickly.*

...she had her fingers on the board and she just got kind of freaked and pulled the board to "Goodbye" really quick, which is how you end a session. And we're going like, "Shit Ellen. Don't do that." You know, we got back into the board and sort of said, you know, "We're sorry. Did we hurt you?" "Yes." "We're sorry. She didn't know." And we said like, "Ellen apologize," and....Like she forcibly yanked the board down to goodbye and removed her hands really quickly. It was a very sudden jarring, ah, movement (Bennett personal interview).

Sometimes saying goodbye was not as simple as it seemed. Like most of my informants, Tammy often got a spirit on the board who decided that it did not want to say goodbye:

There were times that we'd pull it down to goodbye, and it wouldn't move. We'd want to say goodbye, and it wouldn't let us say goodbye. And that's when we knew we were in trouble. (Power personal interview).

This aspect of saying goodbye, and doing it properly, was very important to all of my informants. They had all heard stories of how people could become possessed by a spirit if it was not dismissed properly--and no one wanted to take any chances.

A couple of times when Tammy and her friends did get an evil spirit they turned to the Bible in order to get rid of the evil spirit. When they did this the spirit got very irritated and upset and often the pointer would fly off the board leaving the girls were wondering what they should do. They were afraid that in such a case the spirit had been freed from the board. Tammy said they knew that it was important to say "goodbye" to the spirit so they would put the pointer back on the board and hope for the best:

But we always used to pick the thing up. If that happened we always pick it up, put it back on the board and say "goodbye" and move it down. And it never stopped us. We always just assumed they were saying "goodbye." I don't know (Power personal interview).

Now that the actual structure of a Ouija board session has been discussed it is time to look closer at what my informants knew, believed and have learned about the Ouija board.

#### **4.3 Analyzing the Narratives**

As mentioned earlier, through an analysis of my informants' narratives one can illustrate some of the popular beliefs surrounding the Ouija board and the supernatural in general. The following 12 sections each look at a specific aspect

of the Ouija board phenomenon and attempt to relate how my informants think, feel, and interpret these aspects.

#### **4.3.1 The Ouija Board Rules: the Do's and Don't's**

According to Mary-Dawn, there are some questions that one should never ask when dealing with the *Ouija* board. She recounted how she and her friends tried to discourage one girl in their group from asking questions about her deceased father.

...she asked questions once and we were telling her "Ellen, don't do this," you know. There's certain things that you don't, you don't want to know to a certain extent. I mean she, when she was asking questions like you know, "Is he happy?" and things like that and that was alright. But she want, at one point she, you could tell she was getting a little more personal sort of, or a little more ah, "Will I be happy?" or things like that or....just asking things, ah, I can't remember specifics unfortunately but things that might potentially upset her as, you know, as she talked about her father and as the board answered these questions you could tell that she was about to ah, not "Why did he die?" but, you know, things like that. She was starting to get a little too, too emotionally unstable or, ah, upset (Bennett personal interview).

While Yvonne had not heard of any particular questions that she should not ask, instinctively she knew that there were certain things that she did not want to know and as a rule, would never ask these questions:

*I didn't want to ask is there anyone going to be here that's not going to be here next year. I didn't want to know that. I didn't want to know, ah, was I*

*going to come down with a fatal disease. I didn't want to know if I was going to run out. I didn't ask it anything that I didn't want to know because that scares me (Peddle personal interview).*

Aside from the type of questions to ask, Gerard emphasized that the way in which a question was asked was also one of the rules to follow:

Ah, you don't ask a question unless you ask could you like, you don't ask a question. Say, for example, you don't go. "Hey Ouija, you know, pal, is it going to rain tomorrow?" You don't do that. In order to initiate a question period from one person you have to say, "Ouija are you willing to answer my questions?" or, "Ouija, will you answer my questions now?" If it goes to "yes" you ask. If it goes to "no" you don't proceed any further because if you do it'll just keep going "no," "no," "no." Even closer, closer. So yeah, that would be ah, that would be I guess...it's a repetition part of it. I mean this was a rule that we had (Flynn personal interview).

Mary-Dawn also said that it was very important that one have the right frame of mind when using the Ouija board. She felt that two girls in her group did not take the Ouija board seriously.

But, ah, you know, she and Wanda were sort of starting to get into the board and I said I don't want, you know. They don't know what they're doing. They don't have, they don't see this as seriously. They have no *idea what they're dealing with and they sort of, in a way they [don't] want to follow the rules. They don't have the proper frame of mind. And it showed because the two of them couldn't start the board by themselves* (Bennett personal interview).

Yvonne also felt that *if someone did not take the Ouija board seriously, or believe in it, then it would not work for them.*



And it seemed . like I remember Jason [W.] tried it with us and, ah, who else, another, someone else anyway. It wouldn't work. And ah, it seems like if you don't believe or if you don't think that this works or that it moves it won't speak to you and it won't move for you. Now whether that's because Jason thinks this is a bunch of crap and doesn't want it to move or his psyche or whatever is not giving off any energy that can move it. I don't know. But it would never talk to Jason. (Peddle personal interview).

Furthermore, Theresa and Margaret suggested that if someone is not open to the possibility that the Ouija board is real then it probably will not work for them.

**Theresa and Margaret:** *You have to believe in it.*

**Theresa:** If you sits there and you're there like "Oh yeah, right."

**Margaret:** This is a game

**Theresa:** Then it's not, not going to work

Gerard also echoed the same thing in his story about the Ouija board. Through his own personal experiences he found that one boy in their group could never get the board to work and that the board appeared to dislike him. Gerard felt that this was due to the fact that this boy was a non-believer.

The spirit was friendly to most of us except one guy. Yeah, it really did not like one guy at the table. And he was the non-believer of the board. And for some reason the Ouija would go mad every time he was around. Like it could actually sense that this guy was around. He'd ask a question, he'd go towards this guy, right...He was a basic non-believer of the group. So he stopped coming because he, I think he said he never believed, but he stopped coming because he became afraid because the Ouija kept coming after him (Flynn personal interview).

*Outside of what type of questions could be asked and the attitude one must*

have, there are also some rules about how many people should be on the board.

But ah, there are sort of basic rules to using the board. Ah, that we sort of, someone had heard this rule and shared it and some we just figured we'd better not or learned it as we, you know, it became our own personal ritual, sort of. But you're not supposed to have any less than two people on the pointer or on the board...You're not supposed to do it by yourself. Ah, the original rationalization for that was fear of possession. Apparently, if you're on the board by yourself you can get possessed by the spirit. Ah, I'm not so sure I believe that...I'm not so afraid of possession as much as, what I would be concerned about is that if you decide you want to end a session and the spirit decides...she doesn't want to, you may not have the strength. I think it'd be too intense a connection and you might get too into it to a certain extent....That was the proper etiquette for starting the board. You know, at least two people and you would start concentrating...(Bennett personal interview).

Yvonne said that they also made sure that there was more than one person on the board and that there were several other people in the room with them.

Sometimes it wouldn't work. Sometimes it wouldn't talk to us. And other times it would. Usually when we'd get off work sometimes. Like three in the morning we'd take it out. I guess that's atmosphere enough. Late in the morning and really dark out and no one around. But we'd always make sure there were at least three or four of us in the room, right....I think you need at least two. *The energy from two or whatever it is from two...*I think they say actually not to play it by yourself...I've heard that you're not supposed to play a Ouija board by yourself. "Cause I think it's a kind of one-to-one thing and he's probably strong enough to overcome you, whoever is you're talking to. Umm...but that's what I heard, yeah. So I don't think I went handy by myself (Peddle personal interview).

Theresa said that she also heard that you are not supposed to work the

Ouija by yourself.

...we weren't allowed to do it by ourselves. Because the evil spirits could possess you if you went at it by yourself. You get possessed by them (Murray. Theresa personal interview).

Tammy said that while certain things had to be done during a seance, she felt that the Ouija board was different and that there were no set rules to follow.

In fact, if anything, Tammy broke a lot of the commonly accepted rules.

No, there's no real rules. With a seance there's rules. There's more rules. *And not that it's a game, just there's certain things need to be done before the spirit is going to allow itself to come into a room full of people. You know. I don't think a spirit is just going to pop down any minute and say, "How's it going?" You know. They want things to be a certain way, like peaceful and quiet and everyone thinking good and not evil and, you know, things like that....You're not supposed to [take your fingers off the board] but I did. Supposedly if you take your fingers off the board, according to what I've been told and what I've read, then you break the connection with the spirit world and the spirit will be in the room until you get on the board and that spirit goes back into the board to say goodbye to you. So if you've taken your hand off the board you've broken the connection and offended the spirit....I used to sit up nighttime, by myself, and try to get on the board, right. Yeah, I used to try it all the time....It never worked when I was alone, but if Sharon woke up and talked to me and they knew there was another person in the room, like she was going to come over and get on the board with me, right before she'd put her hand on, it would start to move. It just wouldn't get on alone with me. I don't know why. I used to, ah, I used to pray for it to happen. I used to chuck the Bible out the hallway. "I don't care, give me someone evil. Just move the board," right. Sure, what odds, what odds if a spirit went through me. A bit of excitement, adventure (Power personal interview).*

Most would say that Tammy was tempting fate when trying to use the Ouija board by herself--maybe "Don" was looking out for her.

#### **4.3.2 Descriptions of Different Types of Ouija Boards and/or Beliefs**

##### **Surrounding Them**

Even though Phonse had heard of several different types of Ouija boards he, himself, had only used one.

It was a, a board, ah, about...20 inches long and maybe 13 or 14 inches wide...It was a cardboard, yeah, folded. And ah, like Parker Brothers or someone had made it. It was bought in a mall. And we had a little glass about...two and a half inches high, like a three ounce glass or something (Hann personal interview).

Figure 1 and 2 show the type of Ouija board that Phone referred to as being from Parker Brothers.

The first board that Mary Dawn Bennett used as a young child was “an actual wooden board with the little heart shaped, ah, pointer” (personal interview).

The second one she came across was at a MUN residence:

One of the girls in the house owned a board and this board had somehow acquired a reputation of, ah, I'm not exactly sure what the reputation was but this board was said to be either possessed or haunted or particularly efficient. That it had a spirit, ah, sort of speak because I think I've heard it said that each board has a spirit, or deals or contacts ah, one spirit...I think *the way it worked is you could contact other spirits, sort of through the, through this one spirit. Sort of the board contacted her, his or her spirit...*(Bennett personal interview).

As Yvonne, Theresa and Margaret belonged to the same group of friends who were using the Ouija board, they often played on the same one, or at least the



Figure 4.1 A large version of Parker Brothers' Ouija board measuring 55cm x 37.5cm (22" x 15"). This Ouija board, as well as the one in figure 4.2 was borrowed from Dr. Barbara Rieti. She purchased them at a flea market.



Figure 4.2 A small version of the Parker Brothers's Ouija board measuring 44.5cm x 29.5cm (17.5" x 11.5"). This board also has a heart-shaped pointer that glides over the board on three small legs. The letters are made visible through a small, round window.

same type. All three girls describe their Ouija board as “homemade.” While Yvonne knew how to make one up herself, the first one she ever tried was made by her younger sister.

Well, we got a piece of cardboard, well she did and she drew out all the letters, the sun and the moon and “Yes,” “No” and “Goodbye” in the center of the board. So there were symbols, I forget now what they were. I used to know how to make one up....I’ve heard that people that have used like the actual true Ouija board and have become engulfed in it have disappeared like off the face of the map, right....Well like we made one up. But you can get, you can buy the ones in the toy stores and stuff, right. But ah, the true ones, like they’re actually made by witches or something. Or someone takes the time to carve them and make them. Someone that’s involved in occult or in, ah, whatever, right. But like ours wasn’t real but to me it worked. Like even though it wasn’t real, it frightened me (Peddle personal interview).

Yvonne also said that instead of a glass, they would use the one dollar coin, “the loonie,” as a pointer. Theresa described the same board by saying,

...this wasn’t like the one you buy in a store either. This was a homemade one. It’s made out of, ah, just two sheets of paper, like taped together and it had all the alphabet spelled out. And then it had, like, a “Yes” and a “No” ....The alphabet was spelled out across the top of it and on the bottom was a “Yes” and a “No” and, ah, then there was “good” and “evil” signs and if you were, you know. It used to go to a certain spot if it was evil (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

When asked about the type of Ouija board she had, Margaret said that she had “a made one” and that “it’s the one that Dawn and them had actually, on the back of an Abba record--sure we made them out of everything down at the club then after” (personal interview). Margaret agreed to re-construct the design of the

“homemade” Ouija board that she, Theresa and Yvonne used and this can be seen in figure 4.3.

In speaking of a friend’s Ouija board, the first one she ever saw, Margaret said that, “He had a real one though. He bought a real one.” This comment led into a discussion with Margaret and Theresa about what constitutes a “real” Ouija board.

**Theresa:** Like you can buy them at Leisure World and...

**Margaret:** Yeah.

**Theresa:** They’re already made. Like you know how you can go in and buy the, buy the kit, right...

**Margaret:** And actually I think that this one [her friend’s] was brown plastic if I can remember right and ah, you know, you were saying we used a quarter, right. Well this one was like it had a triangle about the size of a saucer. Almost as big as a saucer. It was a triangle and it was up on legs. It was up on little legs like that, right. About one half of an inch. The three corners, right. And you would put your hands on it. I mean as many hands as you wanted could go on it. You know what I mean. You could play with like, however many people. And whatever the, one of the corners would point to that would be your answer, right. Like it would work that way *on the legs*.

A few days after the “official” interview with Yvonne, she came to me and said that she had remembered something else about the Ouija board. She said that she had heard that there were only a few true “real” Ouija boards in the world, that they were hard to dispose of and that no one knows exactly where they are in the world today--just that they are out there.

The issue of a “real” Ouija board came up again in conversation with



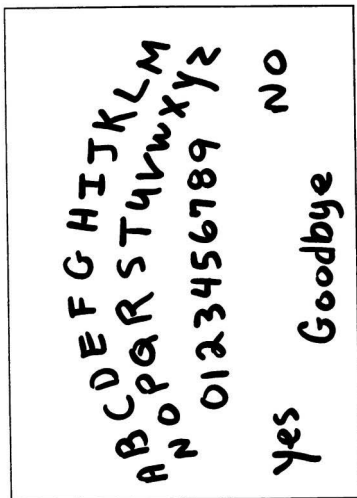


Figure 4.3 This "homemade" Ouija board was made by my informant Margaret Murray. She created it from memory and said that it reflected the same design that she and her friends (including my informants Yvonne and Theresa) would draw when they decided to have a Ouija board session..

Tammy. In her opinion the only “real” Ouija boards come from occult shops that have been made by people involved with the occult.

I know there's fake and there's real....Well, you could make your own, off the back ah, a drawer from a dresser or something or you can buy one in an occult shop. I consider one to be just for a good time and the other one to be serious. The one you buy in a store from the proper people, I find is serious. I don't believe in [Parker Brothers Ouija board]....It's too common. That's like a monopoly board. You may as well use a monopoly board (Power personal interview).

Tammy remembered that the very first Ouija board she ever used was made from wood and that her friends had made it. They had actually carved out, with a pen, the alphabet and “yes” and “no” but they had not included numbers or “hello” and “goodbye.” While Tammy and her friends often used Ouija boards made from the back of a dresser in college, they preferred to use one belonging to a guy who had bought his in an occult shop on the mainland. She said that his was “more professional looking” than the ones they had made.

It was just the bottom of a drawer and it was flipped over and it was marked on the back with black marker. the alphabet across the top in an arc. “yes” in one corner. “no” in the other. Ah, numbers listed at the bottom and “goodbye” written right at the bottom of the board....The drawers in the bed were about as wide as your arm and about as long as your leg...(Power personal interview).

Even store-bought Ouija boards have variations to them. In describing the Ouija board that he used when he contacted his father, Gerard said that

It was a different type of Ouija board though. The board was the same. The board, itself, but the configuration, the little ah, plastic thing that we used before that was in the shape of a heart was still shaped like a heart but it had a hole in the middle of it. It was a circular hole, around a half of an inch by a half of an inch in width. Ah, I have no idea. I think actually what it was there for I think, I think this was a newer model because for the simple fact that you, it would go over the letters. Instead of pointing it would go over the letter so you could see the letter (Flynn personal interview).

It is interesting to note that while several informants had said that there are “real” Ouija boards, often their description of a “real” Ouija board differed. Some considered the Parker Brothers version as “real” while others saw the wooden (perhaps occult-made) board as being “real” and considered it to be more powerful.

#### **4.3.3 Defining the Spirit(s) of the Ouija Board and/or Where They Reside**

Mary-Dawn felt that the Ouija board spirit may have been different things to different people.

I think it was seen more as a ghost. More as a spirit. I don't think it was seen as a, any kind of Divine sort of force. Especially when she says stuff like, “What God do you worship?” and it gives an answer like “Satan,” you know. Ah, I can't really speak for the other girls because I think everybody has their own interpretation of what it might be. Ah, Michelle may have viewed it as a bit of a fairy godmother or a protector spirit because it kept trying to warn her....I couldn't describe to you what it was we were talking to. I don't know if I'd call it a spirit or if it's ah, you know, if it's a spirit of someone that died. I guess that's the most logical explanation, you know. A tormented dark spirit that haunts their, you know, is restless and that's why you can contact it (Bennett personal interview).

Even though Yvonne wanted the spirit to be her grandfather, she is doubtful that it was him. Sometimes she is more inclined to think that it was just an evil spirit trying to upset her.

Oh my God. I was like, oh. This is my grandfather talking to us, right. So we thought. Now whether it's really him or this evil, like I think it's just an evil thing and these evil spirits are making me think that its talking to my grandfather....It seemed like to be a main spirit that would kind of let these other little people come in and talk but when he wanted it to stop, he'd come in. Right. And stop everything.

Cause we'd often say, "Can I talk to Pop again?" "No." "Can we talk to, whatever the little boy's name is, again?" "No." Right, it was just adamant about it. But I think they're all evil. I think there was this evil spirit trying to be my grandfather. Knew I'd get emotional or upset. Well, I mean what else but evil would tell Dawn that her father was just dead and he wasn't, right. It's just pure evil....Ah man. Ah...I think I, I don't know. When it comes to, it's just an evil spirit.

Ah, just, maybe I watched too many movies, right. But I think it's, like it's something with a deep voice. And something really, not a, not ghostly look and not so much deformed looking but ugly looking. Just deep voiced, ugly. Ah, I don't know what kind of shape it would be. I don't think it would take any shape. It seems like its kind a, shapeless. I don't know but its, with the evil eyes and just...[sort of a demon spirit?] Yeah! Demon!...A demon. Yeah that's the way I look at it. I don't think it's a human being spirit. Like in the shape of a human or in the shape of a ghost. But in the shape of a demon like with tails and you know just ugly looking faces. That's what I think is talking back to us. And it's probably in control of all these other little people, like saying "Okay you be her grandfather's spirit and talk to her for awhile. And you be the little boy got killed on the bike," and when he says "Stop it," it stops talking. Yeah I think it's a demon (Peddle personal interview).

Theresa is uncertain but, in general, felt that the spirits that were contacted

on the Ouija board were those who had not found peace.

Some, some seems like, ah, people that just like haven't found a resting place. Like, ah, the people that were ah, killed or weren't finished living or something like that, right. It's like they weren't, they had no resting place. Like that, ah, that guy that was hit. I think it was a guy. Whoever it was that was hit by a drunk driver. Like he stuck in my mind as being somebody that wasn't at ease. But like others too, like seemed like they were. Now I don't know if it's because I wanted to, like wanted to believe that Mick was happy or not but like he seemed like he was happy. It's hard to say (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

Margaret did not think that each Ouija board had just one spirit but that any and many spirits could have contacted them.

Well, see it's not just one spirit. Like there was Yvonne and my father's there right....I don't think the board has an identity itself. I think the board is just a medium that something's coming through. It's not an active entity. Is that the word I used before? Like it's not, that's just a channel that's all. That this is coming through and you can call. Like, my belief is that you call different spirits. Sometimes you get the one you want, sometimes you'll get somebody else (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

Originally when Gerard heard about the Ouija board he heard that it was some sort of Chinese deity or spirit that was trapped in the heart-shaped pointer. During his first stint with the Ouija board, however, they asked the Ouija board to reveal its identity but the spirit would not give them one.

We would ask it what it was. It would never answer us... "Who are you?" Spell out who you are?" And it would go to "No," it would go and point to "No" every time. And we'd ask for initials. It would point to "No" every time. We'd ask if it was evil, it would go to "Yes." So there went the Chinese spirit in my mind. You know. It's like if he was evil well

obviously he's not a good spirit, he's a bad spirit....I thought it was the devil, myself. Yes, some kind of evil son of a you know what, you know...a devil cloaked in a heart. Which I find kind of funny. You know, a heart represented love and this was not love going on here boy. This was some evil son of a you know what (Flynn personal interview).

Tammy said that she and her friends usually only got a few spirits on the Ouija board. As mentioned earlier, one spirit contacted was named "Don." She felt that "Don" was a good spirit and referred to him as her own special spirit. When "Don" did not come to the board it would usually be an incoherent spirit or an evil one and Tammy said she always knew the difference by the way the board acted.

But usually you could tell because it would take your hand in circles or in an "S" shape like this before it would say anything...just to let you know that. "I'm in control." So we'd just say goodbye then. But sometimes he wouldn't let us say goodbye....We had one that, ah, it said it was the devil. Like *the* devil, like *the* devil, like *the* king of all evil and I don't believe it because the devil, as far as I'm concerned, if he does indeed exist and if he does indeed go through Ouija boards, you'll damn well know you had him. He wouldn't have to tell you who he was right....But Don was just crazy. He was a fun spirit and he was ours only. He didn't go in any other rooms, he didn't go to any other person in the building, and he followed me to my home in Carbonear....It's just like having a friend that you haven't seen in a long time. Because he was always there, right. He's the best thing that I remember about college, was Don, and how playful he was and what a good feeling he gave me about something that everyone else says is so evil (Power personal interview).

In general, my informants felt that it was possible to contact spirits on the Ouija board who were evil and they felt that these evil spirits were associated with

the devil. While some of my informants maintained that some of the spirits they had contacted were also good, no one ever suggested the possibility or belief that these good spirits were acting on God's behalf.

#### **4.3.4 Dangers Associated with the Ouija Board**

Most of my informants had heard warnings about the Ouija board and knew about some of the dangers. Some of them just thought that they were exaggerations while others were curious enough to forsake the warnings. Nevertheless, all of them eventually had an experience that they thought was dangerous.

Mary-Dawn came to realize that she was probably in danger when she started to spend a lot of time on the Ouija board.

Ah, and it started to get addictive. It's the only way I can describe it. Ah, you know, we'd, somebody would go get the board about. I don't know, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock and the first thing you knew it was like two o'clock in the morning. You know, you'd been on this thing for three hours and it seemed like ten minutes or twenty minutes. And it was like every night for a two or three week stretch (Bennett personal interview).

Yvonne felt that one of the *great dangers in using the Ouija board* is that you are branded as being evil and that evil spirits are waiting for their chance to take control of you.

I'd like to try it again but I'm afraid, like you say like if you don't say

goodbye to the spirits they'll [live]. What I think is that these spirits are evil. They know I'm using the board so they've got their eye on me, right. That's what I'm thinking....So I think, I'd like to use it again and kind ah, reassure me whether its, because I think I was probably caught up in the moment too "Oh my God it's moving. This is the Ouija board. It's real. I shouldn't be." I'd like to just kind of settle down and use it and not be afraid and not intimidated and insecure about it and kind of reassure me whether it's true or not. Maybe a couple of times more but like I said I'm afraid they're watching me. They know I'm at it. They're going to know that I'm evil and they're going to come and get me. I ain't going to heaven when I die. I'm going down bottom 'cause I talked to the Ouija board in my lifetime (Peddle personal interview).

Yvonne, Theresa and Margaret all heard that it was possible for a spirit to *escape from the board if they did not say goodbye to it.*

And they say if you don't say goodbye to the spirits they could linger in your home. So we were always, "Goodbye. Goodbye! Get lost! Go away!" Right. "Get out of here." But they say if you don't say goodbye they could stay and linger around, yeah (Peddle personal interview).

...like if it, somebody was at it for a joke and if they never said "Goodbye" then the spirit was in your house supposedly right. But that's how the evil part about it comes about. "Cause like you know, if you're talking to a spirit and he says "Goodbye," well that's it, the spirit's gone wherever (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

...if one person's hands is left on it the spirit is supposed to enter that person's body....Possess you (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

Sometimes certain beliefs about the dangers of the Ouija board appear to be contradictory. While both Theresa and Margaret basically played the Ouija board *within the same group they had heard different things pertaining to the power of*



the Ouija board, that is, the board itself.

...well I was after hearing a lot of things like if you had a Ouija board in your house it was *bad luck* and, you know, *houses after burning down* and all that kind of stuff (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

I kept [the homemade Ouija board] in the house because it's supposed to be bad luck to throw it away. Once you make one you're not supposed to....Now I heard it was bad luck to destroy a Ouija board once it's been made. (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

Gerard had also heard about what happened when someone threw away a Ouija board. The first Ouija board that he had ever used, for instance, was thought to be indestructible.

A friend of mine ah, went up to his house one afternoon and he said, "We got a board in there." And I said, "Oh yeah." He said, "A Ouija board." And I said, "What in the Jesus is a Oui?" I'm only 15..."What's a Ouija board? I don't know what a Ouija board is." And he said, "It's a board." he said, "for telling the future and that, you know. For telling, for prophesying." I'm like, "Yeah, okay Ken, alright Ken, yeah sure it is."

And so anyway he got it out and he said ah, I said, "How'd you get it?" Like you know, "How did you get it?" He said, "Well," he said, "the lady across the road, her daughter had it. She didn't like the daughter having it so she was going to throw it out. Instead of throwing it out, my father said 'Hey I'll take it'."

Now this is where he said it came from. This is where this particular Ouija board came from. This is what he told me. That a few people from wherever were coming across from Nova Scotia or New Brunswick, wherever the hell they come from to get here. Ah, they threw the Ouija board overboard and when they docked, when they went in with their suitcases the Ouija board was in their suitcase. Now this is what he heard. And eventually got to this lady and then to him (Flynn personal interview).

Although Tammy knew about all of the possible dangers associated with the Ouija board, she admitted that there was a time when she let what the Ouija board said affect her so much that it disrupted her life.

But this one spelled out "Evil, evil, evil," and kept saying, "[Tammy], baby." And he gave me the number of how many weeks or months or whatever...and ah, he kept saying, spelling out "kill" and I was, I couldn't even get on the board. I just sat on the bed and said, "Sure, sure."

And when Sharon took control of the board she was asking questions and she wanted to know, "Kill what?" And it spelled out "Baby," "Why?" "Good." "What do you mean good? The baby is going to be good?" And it spelled, go up to "Yes," and then spelled "Kill" again.

And after about two weeks of this I was to the point of where I wasn't sleeping well. I was so involved in the board, right. I mean it really took over our lives for awhile and I was so involved in the board that I didn't have a period and I thought I was pregnant. Well, that was it. Sharon was on the board every minute she had, "What's going on?" talking to the board. Anyway, it ended up what the spirit was saying was that I was going to have a son who was going to be pure good and he had to kill him because he was going to undo all of Satan's doings. And well all I could do was laugh, yeah, I'm going to have the second Jesus. Yeah, no doubt. So after that Sharon said, "I'm not even talking to it" (Power personal interview).

Even after experiencing a few bad sessions on the Ouija board and admitting to herself that it was addictive, Tammy still would like to use it again.

....If you pulled one out of the bag now I'd be on it so quick...it's addictive. It is. It's addictive. It's like smoking. You're kind of iffy about doing it the first time and when you get away with it the first time, you do it the second time and then you get addicted to it and you can't stop. And you got to quit cold turkey. There's no such thing as a bit. At least not with me. I wouldn't be able to use the Ouija board now, just today and not use

it tomorrow if I knew I had access to one.

...Like anything it can control your life. Almost draw you to the brink of insanity. I mean there was times in college that I used to almost *FEEL* the board calling out to me. I had to get up out of bed and go find a Ouija board and get on it. Someone wants to talk to me. I knows it. I can feel it. Sharon said, "You're losing it. Get off the board. You're really losing it." And I don't know if I was losing it, or if I was just so excited about when it did work that I wanted it to always be working, you know. Maybe that was it.

But I always wanted to be on it. Twenty-four hours a day I'd be on that, become an occult...oh, oh I would have. Just to be on that board. So when we cracked it up we wouldn't be on it anymore. I haven't been on it since. So it's three years now. Almost three years. It'll be three years April. (Power personal interview).

Although "Don" often played tricks on her and her roommate, Tammy felt that he was a good spirit. "Don" would often tell Tammy that he loved her and would want her to say the same to him, but she felt that this was a line that should not be crossed. Tammy also felt that sometimes the danger surrounding the use of the Ouija could be directed toward the spirit as well as the user. Once when Tammy got mad at "Don" she said something she should have not said and thought that she had sent him to a bad place.

Oh, we were on the board one day. Jean. I thought I was going to die. We were talking to Don and he was tormenting me again, ah, "I love you." Ah. "Yeah, okay I love you too now Don answer our questions," right. "No." "Don don't play, come on." "No." "Don!" All he ever wanted me to do was spell "I love you" back on the board and I wouldn't spell it. I'd say it, but I wouldn't spell it because I was afraid he'd show himself to me or something. Show up in a tux holding a gown. Ah, "no! I just didn't want to cross that line but I'll tell you. I loves ya, ah, loves ya." And he'd spell.

"I love you." "Yeah okay. I loves you too." right.

I would never write it and ah, Don was tormenting me and he was getting on my nerves and I finally said, "Oh go to hell!" And I realized what I'd said and I said, "No. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." And there was nothing on the board. I said "Don, please jingle jingle the 'corns. Please jingle the unicorns." No jingle. I said, "Oh blessed God! I'm going to die! I've sent Don to hell! And I love him! I've sent Don to hell! I can't believe I've sent Don to hell!" I was so, I didn't know what I was going to do. So we read every book we could get our hands and, on Ouija boards and spirits and hell and how to get a spirit out and how to save a spirit and blah, blah, blah.

And we found out about some sort of stupid little ceremony that you could hold with black candles and white candles and the pentagram. We did it all. We had, ah, we didn't have any animal blood or anything like that but I went down to the kitchen and they were cooking that night, whatever they had for supper, and I got a cup full of the blood out of the beef or whatever it was and I ran upstairs with it. I said, "We're doing this right. I'm getting Don back. I can't believe I sent Don to hell." I could have, I was so upset.

It was like I'd lost a friend. I didn't know what to do with myself. And we did the ceremony. We did everything and the spirit, if it worked, was supposed to come up out of the fire. We had a fire in one of the rooms in the residence....Sat around the fire now and in the middle of a bedroom in a college residence with the fire alarm disconnected all together, right. The fire going in this big metal ashtray. You know, big metal ashtrays. And I said, "Sharon, if this works, I'm probably going to die," because I don't want to see him, right. So after the ceremony was over there was no Don. I didn't see him. She didn't see him. I said, "It didn't work." I cried. I cried, I actually cried because I really thought I had sent a good spirit to hell (Power personal interview).

Much to Tammy's delight, and fury, "Don" did come back the next time they were on the board and told them that he had played a trick on them and that he had only been hiding. *He had not been sent to hell after all.*

#### **4.3.5 The Issue of Control**

Regardless of the situation, everyone likes to feel and know that they have some element of control over what happens. When we begin to feel that we do not have control over a situation then it is easy to let fear creep in. When Mary-Dawn started to play the Ouija board the spirit tried to intimidate her and her friends. She was not willing to put up with this, however, and she let the spirit know who was the boss.

I put my foot down with this spirit and said "Look, we don't want to be lied to. You're not being very nice to us." Or, you know, "We know you're very lonely. If you don't stop telling us lies we're not going to talk to you. We won't like you. Alright?" You know and sort of thing and then at one point we'd start saying, ah, stuff like "Who's in control here" You know that we're in control and if you don't do, you know, if you don't behave, basically, we will end this. You know that." "Yes." "Alright, lets go on from there." And it behaved from then on after strangely enough (Bennett personal interview).

*Yvonne felt that the Ouija board actually acted as a controller of the spirit.*

That is, it set limitations for how close it could get to the user.

...like the board is like a go-between. Maybe if the spirit could come through like they say if you don't say goodbye, it's left with you. Now maybe that's not true. I don't know. But I think it limits the spirit to come to you and frighten the shit out of you like come face to face with you. Maybe it's the board that holds him back. I don't know maybe it's just not, he doesn't have the power to come through the other way. I don't know. Maybe it's the board. Maybe that's the reason for the board to keep them at bay. Keeps them where they are, for us to talk to them like through the board (Peddle personal interview).

*Theresa and Margaret differed on their opinion as to who was in control.*

Theresa felt that the spirits were in control while Margaret always felt that she was in control.

**Theresa:** The spirit...yeah, the board was just a means to communicate.

**Margaret:** I always felt I was in control.

**Theresa:** Did you? No.

**Margaret:** Because I could leave it whenever I wanted to, right. There's no problem getting off the board, I found.

**Theresa:** No but like the spirit sort of like control how much information you were going to be given. That's how I looked at the spirit being in control.

Gerard felt that the more involved he became with the board the more control he lost. Unlike most things where the more you do something the more *confidence and control you acquire*, with the Ouija board the exact opposite appeared to be true:

I guess towards the end of it, I felt that the board had more control than what I did because even though I could stop it at any time, I became wary that there was something going on. And I started to become afraid at times. So I felt in a way, yeah, I was losing control over what was going on and this thing had a mind of its own. And yeah, I think that it was in control. Although we controlled *IT* when it was on the board. *I shouldn't say, no* we did not control *IT*. We controlled whether it came, like the, call it spirit for use of a better word, came to the Ouija or not. We controlled that aspect of it. We had nothing else to do with it. Whatever it wanted to do *after that*, it would do on its own whether we liked it or not....We wanted to leave and it said "no." And it kept going "no." "no." "no." "no." "no." We became very afraid and hopped off the board (Flynn personal interview).

Tammy looked upon her experiences in a totally different light. Tammy

had spent a lot of time reading and researching the spirit world. She felt that she could handle anything that the Ouija board session unearthed:

Oh we were in control. If we went into the room...I read a few books on spirits and how to talk to spirits and stuff just in case this was real....And ah, in one of those books...it said that if you have a spirit in the room that's throwing things or you want this to stop like a poltergeist thing, you stand in the center of the room and you say very clearly, "I want you to leave now" to each wall in the room and that lets the spirit know that this isn't *fun anymore, it's over*. So every now and then you'd see me and Sharon in the middle of the room "Go away! go away!" looking at the walls and people walking by going "My God, they're cracked." Everybody must have thought we were doing drugs or something...but it was fun (Power personal interview).

In trying to identify "who" was in control during a Ouija board session, a lot depended upon the informants' own definitions of "control" and their knowledge of interpreting the point at which they felt that they were no longer in control. For some of the informants, control simply meant being able to manipulate questions and answers. For some of my other informants, however, control was recognized as something that was lost when their lives began to revolve around the Ouija board to the point of addiction.

#### **4.3.6 Mediumship**

For some reason, it appears that the Ouija board takes a "liking" to some people more so than others. Mary-Dawn said that while she was fairly good on the board, her friend Michelle had a better connection.

Through playing with the board or using the board we discovered that some of us, either the board liked us better or that we were, we believed more strongly or we had just more psychic energy, however you want to look at it. But some of us were stronger....Ah Michelle would get on the board and it would go spastic like zip, zip, zip (makes fast sound). I mean it would spell out, sometimes in an almost frantic, ah, way and we'd have to say, you know, slow down so we can read....And there was one or two girls with whom it would just die, you know, that could not move it. Ah, could not get it to move by themselves at all (Bennett personal interview).

Gerard felt that he never did have a very good working relationship with the board. His friend Ken, however, had no problem with it and often if Ken was not around the board would not work for anyone else.

Most times, if anyone else did it, if anybody but Ken did it, it had to be two of us at all times. But if Ken did it, he could do it with us or without us. It didn't really matter...He was always the controller of the board whenever he was sat down there. Yeah, and he wouldn't answer questions from anybody. Like, he wouldn't, ah, like say if I said to him, if I was sat down with Ken and I'd say, "Ken," if I said, "Ouija, will you answer my questions?" He'd go "No." And if Ken said, "Ouija, will you answer [Gerard's] questions?" He'd go to "Yes." Ken would have to be the one, if he was at the board, to initiate a question period. I could ask after that but Ken had to be the one to say, "can I" (Flynn personal interview).

Tammy considered herself to be a medium. She did not know why she was one, just that she seemed to have the ability. When she was a teenager she would often read books about the spirit world and how one could be a medium. She admitted that she always wanted to be a medium because she felt that people just don't die. Tammy said that she believed that these spirits have a lot of



information that we can use to educate ourselves.

I read everything I could get my hands on, on spirits and how to talk to them and how to have a proper seance because I mean when you grow up everyone has seances their own little way. But I read up on it and read up on being a medium and then finally we decided, okay, lets do it. Then that covered our lives for awhile....

I guess because I believe it, because I want to believe it. I can't believe that this is it. God if this is it, what the hell are we here for. I think there's, think of all the old people that have died over the years, all the knowledge. And they, oh I don't know. They're just so full of information that we could use now but they're gone. So, just because they're gone doesn't mean we can't use that information if we can reach them, you know. And what about all the people who died unknowingly, didn't get a chance to say this and say that. I'd want to say it....

I truly believe that at some point in my life I'm either going to do something that's going to change something or I'm going to have a child that's going to do something that's going to change something. There's a very, very big purpose to my being here somehow. And the fact that I can talk to spirits is ah, just going to help me do what I'm here to do. I can't explain it because it sounds so [coulkie] and far fetched and, but, that's what I think. I don't know, why else would I be able to sit down in a room full of people and everybody else that wants to go under but I'm the one who goes under. And why else would I see a spirit at the age of 12 (Power personal interview).

While several of my informants noted that some people had better connections with the Ouija board than others, they never offered any possible explanation as to why this was so. Tammy, on the other hand, was the only one who thought that she had this special connection because she was a medium. She did not know why she was a medium but believed that she had been chosen to be one and experience all of the supernatural encounters that she had had in her life.

#### 4.3.7 Religious Influences

When it comes to looking at whether or not a person's religious affiliations, beliefs or influences may have affected their view of the Ouija board, one has to tread carefully. When asked directly, more often than not, the informants said that they could see no direct connection. In retrospect, one has to wonder exactly how that question may have been perceived by the informant.

Basically, the reason I asked such a question was that I felt that, generally, if people already believed in a supernatural entity (be it God, the devil or some other divine entity) then they would easily accept the notion that a spirit could communicate with them.<sup>3</sup> As well, I felt that because of this system of belief, the informants could rationally explain their belief in the Ouija board phenomena.

As mentioned earlier, Phonse Hann said that he does not believe in the Ouija board. In fact, he stated that it is not possible because, "...I just don't believe that dead people are alive, you know. I mean when you're dead, you're dead" (personal interview). As a young man (18 or 19) Phonse said that he would often listen to a Christian radio program hosted by Garnet Ted Armstrong and/or his father Herbert W. Armstrong. On one of the shows the host warned that

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<sup>3</sup>This assumption is derived from David Hufford's discussion on belief systems and how new beliefs are accepted or rejected. For a closer explanation of this theory look at Chapter 2 under the section "Folklore and the Ouija Board" or see Hufford's article "Folk Medicine in Contemporary America" p.23.

"when you have a Ouija board it really works and, ah, it works because it goes directly to the devil and all his archdevils or archdemons or whatever" (Hann personal interview). While he may have been aware of this fundamentalist Christian view when he used the Ouija board, he does not feel that it influenced his ideas/beliefs about it. In fact he says,

...I don't have any kind of religious or supernatural associations with it really....See I've always had a kind of intellectual interest in religion and its supernatural beliefs and all that and, ah, I still get off on watching channel four these, you know, these real loopy guys, you know. I could sit and watch it for hours and hours 'cause I think it's crazy (Hann personal interview).

While Mary-Dawn, said that she does not believe in Christian beliefs about life and death, she did notice that some of her friends did hold strong beliefs.

...at one point ah, I remember it was starting to play all these tricks and pretend that it was all these other people. And some of the girls started asking it alright, like "Helen, are you good?" or "Are you evil?" ah, do you believe in God?" "Yes" "Which God?" "Satan." You know, and which...some of the girls just freaked. Ah, especially since, ah, I shouldn't say this but a lot of the girls were believing Christians and you know brought up on that. Ah, Patty and I were a little more, ah, I'm not Christian in my beliefs at all. So this didn't freak me out, ah, half as much (Bennett personal interview).

Yvonne felt that when she was on the Ouija board it would be a good idea to have a little extra protection. The spirits for some unknown reason seemed to dislike her and kept calling her "bitch." She felt that the best way to do this was to hold the rosary beads while at the board.

And sometimes when it, when the board would get really upset like if you *mentioned something*. I remember one time I took rosary beads in my hands while I was at it. And it just went ballistic. The loonie it, like, it usually does the figure eight thing when it's upset. Oh and it went mad. And the loonie lifts off the board and just goes cracked, right. It was unreal (Peddle personal interview).

Yvonne also believed that because she was playing the *ouija* board that this made her a bad person who would be punished for her actions.

Well I guess when I associate evil spirits I think of well the devil, he. I think the devil is a guy....Actually it was a girl Nora. Nora was the one that called me a bitch. But yeah, he-why? The devil is he and all his following spirits is he's. Now they could be very well she's. I'll be one of them I suppose for playing the *Ouija* board (Peddle personal interview).

Perhaps due to her own upbringing in a Catholic family, Theresa had grown to believe that when our loved ones died they did not leave us. She felt that they were still with us and looked over us, somewhat like a guardian angel. In speaking to the spirit of her boyfriend, however, the answers she got somewhat contradicted what she had always thought to be true.

...I asked him ah, like sort of where, you know, was he always with us. And ah, he says ah, "No." And I was like...I said "Are you with us like when I go home? Are you with me?" And he said "Yes." Its like, sort of like, I don't know, I was getting the impression that he couldn't follow. Like everywhere that you went, or something. And that was, I found that really strange (Murray personal interview).

Gerard felt that when he was younger he was probably more easily influenced by his religion and the beliefs of his parents. It was largely due to his

mother's and his friend's mother's warnings of evil that the boys gave up using the Ouija board.

I think she just became creepy. My mom actually told her that we were doing it.... "Don't go at that. That's the devil's curse." That's this, that's that. Ah. "you're never bringing that down here." Blah, blah, blah. Being the good Roman Catholic that she is. She said, "That's never coming here." She said, "You shouldn't be at that," she said, "That's evil." I'm like, "Ah, come on mom. Its only a bit of fun, you know. Jeeze, what's going to happen to us? What, are we going to die?...What, it's going to cause a plague or something?" And she said, "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter." She said, "It goes against the church." So obviously, right there, by my parents, by my mother saying it goes against the church, then obviously it reinforced the evil aspect of it in my mind at that age. That hey, you know, this probably, it is an evil entity (Flynn personal interview).

Later on in his life, however, Gerard felt that he was no longer influenced by his religion when it came to his own beliefs about the Ouija board.

No, my religious life has changed, a tremendous amount over the last say, six years. Ah, my belief in church, in God has changed. How? No longer do I believe in the Roman Catholic church to be the be all, end all, of all religions. To me it's just one big conglomerate. It's just a big business. I think that every major religion is a big business. I believe that so, Roman Catholic influence? No. Christian influence? Maybe. I think I would have to put it that way. Because I consider myself a Christian, not a Roman Catholic....For that fact I believe in God. I mean I believe in God. I believe in an entity known as God. Do I believe that it goes against moral, some moral aspect of religion? No, I don't think it does. Not at all. Not at all (Flynn, personal interview).

Tammy and her friends also turned to their religious beliefs when they got evil spirits on the board and they would not say goodbye,

...and a friend of mine had ah, a Bible that had been blessed by the bishop

in, for her Catholic wherever or whatever. And she brought it in and demanded that we have it in the room when we were on the board....You'd have to read from the Bible, the last verse, the last ten verses of Revelations. Read it, over and over and over again before he'd let go...I don't know why. Its something about the end of the world and God will rein. There's something about it in there, I don't remember all the words to it but if you get an old testament, read the last ten verses of revelations. Ah, from the very last big capital letter to the end of it. That's what we used to have to read. And I don't know where one of the girls got that but she came in and said ah, "I was reading in this book that this would get the evil spirit off. Because we had him on the board for four days. We couldn't get him off the board, he wouldn't say goodbye so we had to leave the board in our bedroom but we wouldn't sleep there (Power, personal interview).

Tammy related that even when she was a child she would often question the order of the world that her church taught her. When an adequate explanation was not supplied, Tammy said that she sort of rebelled against what she had been told and taught about the Roman Catholic religion.

...when I was going to school, the nuns used to tell us that when you die, your spirit went to heaven. You watched over your family. And I said well if that's the case "Where did the bad people go?" And they said, "Well, if they ask for forgiveness, they go to heaven too." And I said, "Well, what if they didn't ask for forgiveness?" And, "Well, then they go to hell with the devil." And I said, "Well, who do they watch over." And they would never come right out and say, well, "The same people," right. I never got any answers so I just said, "Screw ye all" (Power personal interview).

While initially Tammy felt that there was no real connection between her religious beliefs and those that she held about the Ouija board and the spirit world, she did conclude that there may be some influences that she is not consciously aware of.

*When I was 15, 14 and 15, well from 13-15 I guess, I was at the convent everyday, church everyday. I was going to be a nun. I went to the convent. I went through the initiation process. I did it all. I was going to be a nun....The introductory, like I sat in on an initiation process. Like just a bunch of nuns took me under their wing and, you know, they were going to keep me there, so to speak. You know, "We can't lose her. We got her." right. Well boy you lost me! But ah, I was going to the convent and the church.*

And the things that they taught me didn't even occur to me when I was doing the Ouija board. No, when someone mentioned Ouija board I said, "Right on, but what if we get the devil?" So I guess the idea of the devil came from the church and my parents. You know, mom is a staunch Catholic. She's not as bad now....I guess her beliefs and the Church's beliefs sort of made you picture what the devil looked like. According to the pictures in the Bible. And you pictured God according to the pictures in the Bible. And Jesus looks like this because that's the way he is in the Bible.

But that's it. Anything else is based on experiences. My beliefs changed according to what happened to me....No that's it. That's the only Catholic overtone I can think of. That would be it, how you picture the devil and how you picture God and when you're talking to someone good, they're in heaven and you picture heaven. But they're just childish images that go away, you know, they go away with age (Power personal interview).

As this section exemplifies, when my informants were asked if their *religious affiliations or influences had influenced their perception and beliefs* about the Ouija board, most said "no." Once they began to really think about this question, however, some did realize that there may be a connection.

#### 4.3.8 Group Loyalty/Dynamics

Upon first hearing Phonse's narrative in section 1 in which he related how he had tricked his friend into believing that he had reached his father on the Ouija board, one would assume that Phonse must be a very cruel person. Quite contrary to this impression, however, Phonse would not intentionally hurt one of his friends. He was only doing what his group actually expected someone in the group to do. In describing his group of friends he said,

We had a tradition in that group of bullshit stories. We used to try to pull the wool over everybody's eyes so you'd start a story and you'd....a bunch of us anyway learned how to tell stories in such a way so that people believed it. You know, you'd throw in these weird little details and all sorts of stuff. So, you know, what I'd done that night was a species of bullshit story and it was, you know, admired by some and "Oh Jesus" that sort of thing by others (Hann personal interview).

Mary-Dawn felt that who you were using the board with played a big part in the success of the session as well as one's overall impression of the experience.

...I mean it's trust too, ah, between the girls, you know, that they were not pushing it. And I did it with a variety of different girls so if one had been pushing it wouldn't have worked with the other girl but it did work all the time to varying degrees (Bennett personal interview).

Just as Mary-Dawn thought that trust among the group was important so too did Yvonne. In fact if she had not been among friends whom she knew to be honest, she may never have tried it. As she explained,



...I wouldn't go near it. "Cause I figured if it moved I might flip....So Dawn said "[Yvonne], you try it with me." And I said "no." And she said, "Come on because," she said, "I won't move it because I don't believe in it. And you won't move it because you don't want it to move anyway." So we tried it and it moved (Peddle personal interview).

As with any investigation, it is important to understand the people or group involved. The above quotations show that my informants felt that it was important to use the Ouija board with people they could trust. Because Phonse knew how his friends would take his joke, for instance, he felt that there was no harm in tricking them. On the other hand, knowing that you can trust the person you are with *not* to move the pointer is also an important factor for some of my other informants.

#### **4.3.9 Other Encounters with the Supernatural**

All of the informants, even Phonse, told stories about other encounters they had had with the supernatural or the unexplained. Phonse, in fact, told a very interesting story about when he was a young child and saw the ghost of an old woman who had just died in the neighborhood. Her property had the best chestnut trees, but she did not like Phonse and his friends to come on her property to take them. Once she died the boys thought that this was their perfect chance to get some good chestnuts.

...when I was a real small kid, this is a story I still tell, you know, a lot...even though I don't believe it. You know, even though it happened to me I don't believe it. I still tell it. When I was seven, I guess, I'd just turned seven. I lived over here on Elizabeth Ave., right across from ah, the Blackall school, the Ingstad building. And, ah, just down here the property is still there but they've torn down the old house and there's a new house over there. Ah, right where Westerland Road meets Elizabeth Ave., there's a big property with big trees....Anyway, when I was a kid there was an old woman who lived in there. And, ah, she had the best chestnut trees in the whole neighborhood.

....Anyway, one day in the fall she died or one night she died and I heard the next morning from my mother that she'd died the night before. And so I spread the word around "Hey look now, now is the time to go down and get those chestnuts," right. And so a crowd of us, probably five maybe six or seven of us went down, went to the very best tree which was just outside her kitchen window. And, ah, we all got up in the tree and we were all tossing chestnuts down on the ground or filling our pockets with them or whatever.

And then, it was me who looked over first, looked into her window and there she was just like she was alive pulling the curtain back, tapping on the window...you couldn't hear her of course but you could see her. Flipped! And, and what I saw and what I remember seeing was her. I mean it wasn't her sister. I knew what her sister looked like. I mean she was real old-fashioned, the old woman, you know, she, and you know this was 1958 or something, you know. And she really looked like something out of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and something. There weren't very many people even in 1958 who looked like that, and I'm sure that, ah, what I saw wasn't anybody else. But anyway, I said to the boys "Ah, look. There she is"....we took off, we ran. We ran all the way from there down past my house or down through some of the yards....And ah, we sat around talking about it. And everyone of the boys said they'd seen the ghost (Hann personal interview).

Looking back on that experience Phonse did not believe that what he saw was a ghost. He concluded that he had been expecting something strange to

happen so when he saw the wind shift the curtain on the window, he naturally assumed he had seen the old lady. Phonse's disclaimer to his own story reminds me of another story that Maxine Miska recounted in her article "Aftermath of a Failed Seance: The Functions of Skepticism in Traditional Society." In this article Miska said,

I remember hearing a story once about an atheist riding on a bus who said, "God, if you really exist, make a rainbow appear in the sky right now." Suddenly, a rainbow appeared. The atheist remarked, "What a coincidence! A rainbow!" (90).

I see Phonse's story in much the same light as the one Miska told because, like the atheist, it did not matter to him if he had actually seen a ghost. His underlying belief was that there is no such thing as a ghost because when we die, we just die. Even though Phonse could not explain exactly what he had seen and claimed that he saw the old woman, he still would not give up on his basic belief.

Phonse, in fact, is not much different than his friend Jerry. While these friends are obviously at opposite ends of the belief spectrum, they have both been faced with evidence contrary to their beliefs and, nevertheless, they both maintained what they believe. Miska explained this by saying that,

Belief in the supernatural or the transcendent is clearly not simply the result of one's experience. Belief systems provide the *a priori* for experience. The belief system persists, as though carried along by its own inertia, even if events occur which appear to subvert it (90).

While Mary-Dawn did not relate any other type of paranormal activity that she herself had encountered she did relate a common supernatural belief to which she and her friends were exposed:

...this particular residence house [Burke] is very rich in legends. Ah, there's a ghost that supposedly haunts it. A closet where one of the maids committed suicide...There's a slew of narratives around this house....But the board never made reference to any of that. Like at first the girls thought it must be the ghost of the little girl that is said to haunt this house. But no, the board made no link, made no references whatsoever to any of the traditional lore of the house which is the one belief that we were all, the one common belief system that we were exposed to whether we believed it or not. It was the one \_\_\_\_\_ common paranormal knowledge that we all shared. And it never made any reference to any of that (Bennett personal interview).

Such an example goes against some of the theories mentioned in Chapter 3 which state that messages received from the board are actually products of the subconscious mind. Mary-Dawn stated that she had expected that she and her friends would have gotten the ghost of the girl because they all knew about it. Instead, the opposite occurred. They never did get her.

Another area that some informants explored was that of fortune telling. One informant, Margaret, felt that the Ouija board was more believable than fortune telling. She has had her fortune told several times by different people and said,

Ah, well your fortune, getting your fortune told is like, to me every time I got mine told it was so general it could....It was really general. Like that

could apply to me or you or anybody, right....They didn't tell me nothing about my past, see, in my fortune (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

Unlike Margaret, Theresa felt that her fortune telling experiences were worth the effort. One experience, in particular, was very profound for her.

Yeah, I asked, I said, "Okay, you can tell me everything good, bad, whatever. Tell me anything about the past and future." And ah, missus said "Well." She went on and told me the fortune, you know, how many youngsters and all this stuff that could be just general. And ah, then she said, "But now this card," she said, "Several times now this one has come up," you through \_\_\_\_ and all this. She said this shows that somewhere in *your past you've been hurt deeply. And she said ah, she said, "There's two people on it. You've lost two people."* She said, "Male people that have meant a lot to you." She said, "I'd go so far to say that you loved them," you know. "They meant a lot." And she said, "They're no longer with you." And I was like, blew away. Totally blew away. Couldn't believe it. I walked out of there and I was like, you know, *I felt like I was, I wasn't even. You know, I was in shock like in, I don't know some kind of state of mind* (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

Typically speaking, most people do ask the Ouija board a few "future" questions such as "who will I marry?" and "how many children will I have?" When asked, Margaret and Theresa said that they had never even thought about asking such questions. Both thought, however, that if they ever did try the Ouija board again they would like to ask a loved one about their future. Even though asking such questions could be scary, Margaret said, "You still have the choice. You can still chose to believe it or not" (Murray, Margaret personal interview). Both girls said that they believed in messages resulting from psychic powers more

so than in what the Ouija board would tell them.

Aside from her fortune telling experiences, Theresa also had a dream which she felt was something more than just a regular dream. She felt that she had actually been talking to the spirit of her cousin.

...feeling that it gave you. Like a peace, really peaceful feeling but I was dreaming and I was talking to Georgie and ah, I was asking him about ah, like what happened. And he said, "Well girl, you know, we started to drift," he said, "that's what happened." Now I don't know if this is my mind wanting to think this or what but it seemed just like I was talking to him.

And ah, I said to him I said, you know, "Did it happen fast?" And he said "Yes." He said it happened really fast. And ah, now like I don't even know if I should tell you this 'cause it's like, I mean it could be just a dream for me, right....And ah, he said like how they, they started to drift and like they just went over and like it happened so fast that you know, there's no suffering or anything like that and it was just, I don't know if it was your mind just wondering like if they were happy and all this.

But I never forget the feeling I had it was just like. Nearly like, you knows how like you're floating....Well there was, it was only voices. It was no scene....I had this like, you knows how like, you're often after describing, one of you like how you often leave your body....Well it had this kind of feeling. It's just like you were floating. Like you didn't, I don't know where it was. Just this feeling and just talking. Couldn't, I couldn't see anything, anything like that.

It was just a voice and such a peaceful feeling. It's wicked. And like I woke up right after the dream and I was like, you know, like "God." You just, you felt just totally overcome and everything. It's wicked (Murray, Theresa personal interview).

Gerard revealed that aside from his experiences with the Ouija board, he

has also tried tarot cards and palm reading. He felt, however, that his palm readings were too general and that it would be difficult to conclude that the predictions were true. While he felt that tarot cards were more accurate, he preferred the Ouija board because he felt that with the Ouija board he could maintain some form of control and ascertain its validity.

*So ah, the tarot card is another way of contacting different spirits. But she has her own guide. Like my main informant, who shall remain nameless, she has her own guide that she can actually see the pictures in the tarot....Tarot, it's just another way of telling the future, the past and the present. It can be used for either one.*

To try to determine the validity of the person who's reading the tarot you will ask them like, like you want them to tell you something about your past that only you would know. This particular person did, did mention things about my past which I would only know....So that's what I would do but I never actually contact the spirit. Because I think, the thing you have to remember see about the tarot, how it differs from the Ouija is that, for one these people charge you money. You know, 20 dollars. It's a money market. It's a way of making a little bit of extra cash for yourself. Is that wrong? Is that right? Who am I to say what's ethical, what's not right. It's entertainment.

It's related to the Ouija in the fact that ah, you can use it as a, it can be a powerful weapon. It could be a powerful tool. Because it will tell you stuff that you're always watching out for. And well see, the two, the Ouija and this lady that was reading the tarot told me two different things. Who am I going to marry? The Ouija said M.S. as I said earlier, the tarot said I was going to meet someone beginning with the letter C. So, there you go. So that got me thinking too, you know. Okay, well all right now, what do I believe? You know, is the tarot telling me the truth, is the Ouija telling me the truth?

Ah, I believe that ah, to tell you the truth, to be honest with you, I would

believe the Ouija board before I'd believe the tarot....for the simple fact that they're controlling what you're doing. The tarot readers are, they're controlling what you're doing. But when you're doing the Ouija, when you're at the Ouija board, you're controlling what you're doing. That's why I would put more credence, you can't challenge the tarot reader. Like you can't say to the tarot reader, for example, you can't ask specific questions....She'll take the cards and she'll lay them out in whatever order. There are many different orders....You could choose the cards. I got to point that out.

So ah, in a way you were controlling exactly what was going on but ah, jeeze...it's predestined. Like there's no real, like with the Ouija you ask what you want. You can't ask with the tarot. I'll tell you whether you *want to know it or not*. So *maybe that's why I would rather the Ouija...*I can keep control of what's going on here. But with the tarot it's going to happen whether I like it or not....

Back in January, ah, when I first had them read by her she said, "Somebody close to you is sick." I said, "Jesus, nobody close to me is sick." I didn't know. But here my father had cancer and nobody knew. So there you go. So, I mean, you know. Like who's to say that the tarot is more, is better than the Ouija but I think what I'm harping back to is that I would rather the Ouija board for myself. For my own personal interests....It's the controlling aspect. I think that's what it is. It's more you control what's happening on the Ouija board. Not control the Ouija itself but I can stop anytime I want and ask the questions I want to ask (Flynn personal interview).

As the interview progressed with Tammy it became apparent that this woman not only had extensive experience with the Ouija board but, for some reason, *was like a magnet for supernatural encounters*. One realm of the supernatural that Tammy had become involved with was the seance. During one of her first seances Tammy said that she saw a demon. This seance took place



when she was in high school and she and her friends were just starting to get involved with it.

We really didn't know what we were getting in to. Ah, have you ever heard of the three knocks of hell? Just three solid knocks, usually on a wall, really up high where nobody else could reach or on the roof *inside the house*. Like not up on the roof and not tapping the ceiling. In the roof. I can't explain it. It's just like someone banging the whole house with three knocks. I'd never heard tell of it.

I mean, you know, we were just getting in to it then. We just wanted to see if Elvis really dead, you know. That was my reason. I wanted to see Elvis. That's the truth. I was an Elvis \_\_\_\_ then and I wanted to know if Elvis was really dead because I thought he was alive, right. Probably living in Newfoundland because nobody knows about Newfoundland...half way through...I remember the way we relaxed was to listen to the fish tank, the whirl of the motor in the fish tank. And we were babysitting. And it was only a little baby so, long asleep. And we never thought that anything would ever happen to the baby or anything, you know. We're not doing anything bad or evil. We were just having a seance wanting to know if Elvis was alive.

So we're sat down and my friend Mary was a medium and she, I'd never been to a seance with her but she used to tell me stories about things that she had seen and done and heard and all this. And she can remember the spirits she talks to. Now I can't so that upset me because I'd like to, right. But ah, so she was going to be our medium and there was only four of us. We sat around on the floor, we didn't bother with the candle bull crap. We *left a little tiny light on in the hallway, like over there somewhere* and we all sat down in the room listening to the fish tank which had its own little greenish light.

So we sat down in the glow of that and I remember getting so relaxed I thought I was going to fall asleep and all of a sudden, "Bang! Bang! Bang!" And when I opened my eyes Mary wasn't Mary. Mary had, oh my. She had, her cheeks were, I, I can't even draw it much less describe it. Her cheeks were like she had about 15 golf balls inside of her cheeks and the

horns on, like a bull, but it's more like a boar. They come out of the top of your cheeks and curl up. Well hers were eye level and they curled up and they sort of came down a bit towards the side almost like a ram's do that little spiral curl. Her eyes were. I can't even describe her eyes but her body was the same. It was just her face and it was just for an instant. When I opened my eyes it was there.

*What I remember is I felt like I was falling asleep. I felt really, really warm like, like someone had a, you know, when someone lights a lighter under your butt trying to burn your jeans. I got that warm, kind of icky, sweaty, this isn't good feeling. And all I could hear is fire crackling. Like if you ever heard fire crackling, not like a fireplace but like a building burning down. All around you fire crackling. I couldn't see it but I could smell it, I could hear it, I could almost feel it on me.*

And when we heard the three knocks Mary said, "Oh my God that's the three knocks of hell. Get out, get out, get out! Come on get up this is it turn on the lights." *Everyone was freaking out. and when I opened my eyes I saw Mary's face as a demon for a split second and then it was gone. And five minutes later I had a glass of water threw on my face. I had passed out. I never pass out. I don't faint. Sunstroke once but I don't faint. And when I came to the first person over me, of course, Mary, my best friend, "Are you okay, are you okay?" And I was petrified over it for a minute. I was really afraid of her. I don't know if I fainted from fright or if I fainted from exhaustion or if, you know, your first time doing a seance you faint. I don't know. But she was the medium, not me. I don't know why I went under. I never thought that would ever happen to me (Power personal interview).*

Much earlier in her life, Tammy, and her younger sister, experienced something that Tammy said they would never forget and never deny. At age 12 she had seen a spirit in her home and even though her mother had tried to explain it away by saying that it must have been a dream, Tammy firmly believed that what she saw was a ghost.

*I was twelve and she was seven. We were in bed asleep. It was about, I don't know what time. It might have been twelve o'clock that night or it might have been four in the morning. It was dark and we had been in bed... She and my other sister Tanya shared a bedroom and, so their bedroom was at the end of the hallway. I was in the middle bedroom and mom and dad's bedroom was at the furthest end up. But it was a short hallway, just that was the way it was situated. So when you came upstairs it was the bathroom, turn right Tanya and Tina's room, my room, mom and dad's room. And I woke up out of a dead sleep. Just woke up, sat up, got out of bed, opened the door and when I opened the door, well okay. I was about twelve so I was shorter than I am now so I say it was about this high (indicated about two feet) off the floor. And it was the full length of like a 14 year old child, 15 year old. Adolescent, it wasn't an adult and it wasn't a child. You know it was in there. And it just sort of glided. There was no face, there was no male or female form. It was just bright white and I remember like it was almost blinding bright, bright white.*

*And it came out of mom and dad's bedroom. Out of the door, like they always slept with their door closed. It just came out of the door. I thought I was dreaming. I didn't think anything of it. I mean mom and dad's door was to my left and Tanya and Tina's room was to my right. Now Tina is seven years old in her own bedroom so, there's no way, even, I don't care what anyone says. There's no way this could have been concocted by anybody. It was just two children, right. When I opened the door and saw it, I just watched it go and when I watched it turn to the right, here's Tina, looking out her bedroom door watching it walk down the hallway with me. And when it turned and went downstairs, 'cause the stairway was right in front of our bedroom, we could jump over the stair rail and slide down the banister, right. And when it went down the stairs I looked at Tina and she *looked at me and the two of us closed our doors and went back to bed.**

*And then the next day when I got up I kept saying, "I had the queerest dream last night mom. I saw a ghost coming out of your room." And Tina, seven years old, a little child said, "So did I." And Tina idolized me so nobody believed that she really saw it. But I saw Tina, right. And I saw her. Well we've dreamt the same dreams but to see the same thing was a bit spooky. That's why I started to get into seances, see. I said well if I can see a ghost I bet you I can see Elvis (Power personal interview).*

While that may have been the first time Tammy saw a ghost, it was not the last. When she was about 16 she also saw the ghosts of three of her relatives at the foot of her bed.

When one of my relatives died and I couldn't go to the funeral and I was really upset. And ah, I went to bed and when I woke up that night two other relatives that had died belonged to me, my great-grandfather and my great-aunt Julia and my great-aunt Margaret. I could see the three of them, on dad's side had died within like a year of each other.

I couldn't go to great-aunt Margaret's funeral and I couldn't go to great-grandfather's funeral. So, I really wanted to go to great-aunt Julia's funeral. And ah, I don't know why because we weren't close. No, great-aunt Julia died first. It was great-aunt Margaret who died last. And anyway, I couldn't go to the funeral so I was really upset when I went to bed and *through that night at some point, I sat up and woke up like I just sat up in the bed and the three of them were at the foot of my bed.* And great-grandfather said, "We love you." Great-aunt Margaret said, "We're watching over you." And Aunt Julia said, "Please take care of yourself." And poof! They were gone.

Well I was paralyzed, I cried for mom. I ran out and got in bed with her and dad, 16 years old. I wouldn't go back into my room. Now mom thought I was nuts, told me I was dreaming. "Go back to bed. Don't be so foolish." You know that, but they were there. I mean I'm not stupid. It wasn't a dream. I was awake. *I didn't. I didn't think I saw them and then open my eyes and be laid down in bed.* I was up with my eyes open in my room, right. So, you know damn well when you're awake no matter what *anybody, but everybody else makes it out to be you're cracked or it was just* ah, lights from a car or no, its just a reflection or shadow. Well that's fine if you want to believe that but I know there's something out there (Power personal interview).

Tammy's experiences with the supernatural did not end there. Throughout her life she has also been able to foretell the future. Once she had a dream about a

terrible train wreck in which she could see people trying to get out and others drowning in the water. About six months after her dream, she heard about a major train accident in the United States (around 1984) and it was so similar to her dream that she knew she had foreseen it. Tammy not only foresaw things in her dreams. She was also able to tell someone their fortune with a deck of cards. She would not do her own fortune telling, however, and preferred to go to an old man nicknamed Poppy McCain every three months or so. She said his predictions for her were usually correct.

As well, on several occasions, Tammy had experienced what she describes as "a whisper" that forewarns her of danger. Once when she and her friends were gathered at a house, she nearly got shot. The boys had been fooling around with a shotgun and without meaning to, had fired it.

I was watching t.v. and the boys were getting louder and louder and I couldn't hear the t.v. and I said to the boys, "Shut up! I can't hear the show." I was lying down and I went to get up and something said, "Lie down!" I got up to turn up the t.v. Something said, "lie down!" As soon as I put my head on the pillow, "BANG!" Darren accidentally shot the gun off and the hair on top of my head was singed....And it cut the hair on my head right to my scalp. Like my scalp had a mark. Right across the top of my head. It went through the couch and through the wall and landed down in his uncle's garden about 100 yards, 200 yards away....I mean if I hadn't lay back down it would have went through my head. So to me, that was, there was a spirit or an angel watching me and said, "Lie down!" (Power personal interview).

From hearing Tammy's narratives about her other supernatural experiences, it is not surprising that she developed a keen interest in the Ouija board. Throughout her life there have been several incidences in which the supernatural has played an integral part. For her, and perhaps my other informants who had experimented with milder forms of the supernatural, the Ouija board simply represented another chapter to be explored.

#### **4.3.10 General Overall Belief or Feeling about the Ouija Board**

When it comes to belief in the Ouija board, Phonse Hann simply stated that to him it was just "a game...a way to pass the time." He knew when he and his friends had played the game that he was the one who had moved it and, therefore, he had no reason to conclude otherwise. With regard to his experience where he thought he had seen a ghost<sup>4</sup> Phonse maintained that,

I think that I was expecting something or, you know, half thinking I was going to see her. And ah, I looked up and some kind of, you know, autosuggestion brought it about in my mind and, you know, maybe I saw, you know, *the wind blow the curtain or something. You know, imagine* that she might be there and then my head filled in the details. And I think everyone of them was affected the same way, you know, by some kind of autosuggestion. I don't think everyone of us saw some ghost. I don't believe in it (Hann personal interview).

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<sup>4</sup>See description in preceding section, p. 163-164

*Mary-Dawn said that even though she had her doubts about the Ouija*

board, through her own personal experience she eventually came to realize that it was real. This realization made her feel that she had to be careful when using the Ouija board.

*...you have no idea what it is you've reached. Ah, so I was a little weary. I don't say I was afraid but there was some instinct in me that was telling me "You don't know what you're dealing with, ah, exercise some caution and some respect." Because obviously this is real. Something is happening so be care, not be careful but be careful and have some respect. It was ah, it was really a mixed feeling ....In a way I have no choice but to believe because I know what I experienced. I didn't make it up. And like I said, I would hesitate, I'm incapable of defining what it was or explaining it but something happened. Something very real that I can't deny (Bennett personal interview).*

While Yvonne admitted that she was uncertain about the Ouija board phenomenon, she knew that it was evil and that people should stay away from it. She asked her father what he thought about the Ouija board and in relating their conversation she said,

*Now it could be just our energy. That's what dad says, right. Its your energy or something in your, what do you call it, your ah, psycho, your subliminal psyche or whatever, that makes it move. But ah, I half think that it's evil and not to go near it (Peddle personal interview).*

Yvonne said that if she decided to accept her father's point of view there would still be some unanswered questions left in her mind.

What I don't understand is when Dawn closed her eyes and Corrette had her hands on the loonie, how can Dawn with her eyes closed spell out her

uncle's name. And there was no way of knowing. Corrette to know what her uncle's name was that died 20 years ago when Dawn was an infant. But it spelled out the name so...(Peddle personal interview).

Regardless of what her father told her, Yvonne was reluctant to totally accept his explanation. Part of her felt that the powers of the Ouija board were real and that it was evil. Perhaps one indication of how Yvonne really felt about the Ouija board is seen in her recurrent comment that she would somehow be punished for using it.

It's evil. It's serious. I think it's serious. I think not being too involved, like we had a made up Ouija board. I'd never go out and buy a real one. I'd be too afraid. I think it's real and I think its something not to be messed with. That there's something out there beyond us that we know nothing about and it's probably better off that we didn't. Like not to use the Ouija board as a means of finding out like, ah. I don't even know if it's okay to kind of try it every once in a while like we did. That's probably really bad. Maybe there's something in store for us because we did it. I don't know. But ah, I think it's really evil (Peddle personal interview).

At first, Theresa thought that the Ouija board was just a game. After trying it a couple of times, however, she began to believe that it was real. Theresa, felt, however, that the Ouija board should not be used to contact random spirits. It was her opinion that the Ouija board should only be used to contact someone you love and with whom you feel you need to speak.

I thought it was just a game and I was going for the laugh of it, the first night, until I realized when I watched it, like you know, "Oh my God this seems, like serious, like not really a game." And then the next night then I said, you know, I wanted to try and really find out for myself. 'Cause you



*don't really know. 'Cause you can watch it and say, "well, you know, somebody is pushing it." But when you do it yourself you realize then....I still. I think it's spooky and it's scary and it's not something that I'd want to do everyday.*

*But like to, to reach somebody that you loved, that, you know, I think is fine. But not to go trying to call upon all spirits and people that you don't know and people that could be evil spirits and, so I don't see anything wrong with it just for, you know, trying to get in touch with people that you loved....Like to talk to him, but not for the fact of like reaching spirits. That to me is, like you know, why, why would anybody just want to sit down and call upon the spirits or ghosts just to talk to them. That to me is sick. You know. If you have somebody that you want to talk to or somebody that you knew or loved, it's different (Murray, Theresa personal interview).*

As well, for Theresa, the notion that this phenomenon was actually her mind playing tricks on her, or that her mind was somehow responsible for the board working, just did not seem possible.

*But sure how can it be like, I know I didn't push it. Right. Like, you know, if, if ah, like say there were a couple of people doing it that knew or something you could probably like feel it leading or whatever. But I mean, okay, the other person on the other side, if I was pushing it, they'd feel me pushing it. Or if they, you know, they were pushing it and they didn't know the answers so how could they, you know. Or how could I push it. You'd feel it (Murray, Theresa personal interview).*

Margaret said that from the very beginning she had had some doubts about the powers of the Ouija board but that she had always wanted it to be real. Like Theresa, she wanted to use the Ouija board to contact deceased loved ones. Looking back on her experiences, Margaret admitted that she had mixed feelings

about the validity of the Ouija board.

Well according to Carmelo it was like, it was a game. He treated it as a game. As a kick, as a charge, right. You know, something to do rather than go watch a movie or something. Like that's, that was his, so I suppose I had that for, sort of initial kind of thought about it.

And ah, after, I started to take it more seriously and probably because I wanted to believe in it more when the girls were telling me like what was happening *with them with the board, right. I wanted to be able to talk to my father. I wanted to be able to talk to Yvonne. You know what I mean....*

Well I suppose starting off I just, you know, I was skeptical about it right until that happened. Until that like it sort of proved to me. But then, I, even then I didn't know if it was \_\_\_\_\_. Skeptical in that, you know, this is all a bit of a game and we are subconsciously moving this ourselves. Maybe I'm possibly moving it and I don't even realize it or the same with her, you know, kind of thing. Just the moving back and forth of it. But I don't know. I still really don't know. I don't know if its us, subconscious, in our minds we want to talk to these people so bad that we subconsciously move it ourselves to the answers that we want or, I don't know (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

Gerard also had mixed feelings about the Ouija board. He explained that he would like to believe that his father had been contacted but he still wondered if the communication was an evil spirit trying to hurt him emotionally.

Do I believe it was dad? Probably. I don't know. I'd like to think it was. How do that sound. I'd like to think that yeah, it did, his spirit somehow got into the Ouija and contacted me. Ah, is the sane side of me going to say yes? No. The sane side of me is saying, "No [Gerard] ah, this was *some spirit saying, having a little, playing a joke with you.* This is the same evil spirit that was in to it ten years ago having a joke. Ah, but the insane side of me, I guess you want to call it that, or the, or the ah, wishful side or

the sympathetic or whatever you want to call it, side of me want to believe that it was him contacting...All rational went out the window that night darling. Emotional took over (Flynn personal interview).

At the time of the interview, Gerard had recently acquired an interest in Tarot cards. Due to this recent interest, Gerard felt that his attitude toward the Ouija board had changed. While part of him believed in it, another part did not and he no longer felt that the Ouija board was purely evil.

[It's a] terrific way to pass the time. A realm of belief mixed with a realm of doubt. There's still. I think even though I believe to a point, there's still a realm of doubt there with me. I still doubt some of it. I think it's not evil. I don't think right now at this point it's evil. I think it's just like any type of, like anything. Like any type of way of telling the future. I think it's the same as tea leaves. I think it's the same as palm reading. I think it's the same as tarot card reading. Because each person that you talk to who've ever read the tarot cards will say that some spirit are guiding them. So who's to say that that spirit is evil, non-evil. So I think the Ouija board is another, is linked with every other fortune telling, every other way of telling somebody's future or somebody's past or somebody's present. It's another tool. It's another medium (Flynn personal interview).

Tammy did not see the Ouija board, itself, as being evil. She felt that the board reflected those who played it:

I think it depends on who's controlling it. If you're an evil person and you get on the board then I think you'll get evil. Yeah, I don't know. I just think that if you're a good person you're only doing it for fun, you're not doing it to harm anyone or for anything bad, you know. And if you get on the board because you want to get a spirit that's going to hurt one of your enemies, you know damn well you're going to get evil out of it.

...I'm not nuts. That's, that's my big thing. Ah, people would say, "Sure

you saw a ghost, sure you've seen ghosts, sure you've talked to ghosts, sure you've had a spirit," and that's fine if you don't believe it. It's totally up to you. But I knew, I know what I saw, boy.... Well see to me we're surrounded by them all the time just we don't have the ability to see them. But they're always there (Power personal interview).

At the time of their Ouija board experiences, the majority of my informants believed that what was happening was real. When I interviewed them, however, it had been a while since any of my informants had touched the Ouija board. It is interesting to note that when they reflected upon the validity of the Ouija board experience, *they began to have more doubts than they originally had at the time of the experience*. Perhaps now they were a little more emotionally detached from the experience and were not looking at it from the same method of reasoning.

#### **4.3.11 Beliefs About: Life after Death; Angels, Ghosts and Spirits; God and the Devil--Heaven and Hell**

Gerard said that he believes that when we die we go on to another world or life in which we repeat our life until we achieve perfection.

What I truly believe. I truly believe that we are a window of ourselves...I believe, put it this way. This might sound sick, sad, whatever, but I don't believe in donating organs because I believe that we'll need them. So obviously, by saying we'll need them I believe in some kind of afterlife. So if I'm going to be giving away my kidney and my eyes, how am I supposed to see. *I'm not going to be able to if I'm giving away my kidneys or eyes.*

I believe that, to me heaven is just on the other side. That we go ahead and we repeat our life again in a different realm. In a different area in a different space in a different whatever. You often hear of *deja vu*. I believe *deja vu* is a repetition of our lives...I've probably done this 200 years ago, sat in an old rustic bar in Ireland or England. Not so much reincarnation, no. Reincarnation means you come back as something else. You don't necessarily come back as yourself. You come back as somebody else.

I think you come back as yourself. Yes. I think there are different worlds....I think that when you die, you are reborn again but as the same person in a different world. Still the same physical body. I'm going to meet you in God only knows how many years, and we're going to be sat down having a beer down to the BlarneyStone. Explain *deja vu* to me. That's how I explain *deja vu*. We've lived this life before and we're going to keep living it until we get it correct. Then when we get it correct then do we finally be able to go "Pheuu, I can rest." Rest as meaning yes, the eternal orgasm. That's how I describe it. That's how I describe it.

They say heaven is utopia, is supposed to be the garden of Eden. To me its just, the best to me is, to cruelly put it is an, is like people say, you know. Put it this way, when you work out or when you play hockey or whatever your known field is. Whatever sport you do. Don't you feel great after you do it? You feel ah, so euphoric. Well that's what I think heaven is. It's euphoric. It's like one big physical rush....

[Purgatory is where you go] to wait. Yeah, but it seems like only a second has gone by. Yeah to wait 'til we're reborn. Until we try it again. I don't believe in hell, okay. I only believe in heaven and purgatory. Hell is earth. No purgatory is not earth. This is hell...Purgatory to me is where we go to wait until we're born again into our next life which is the same life. We just better get it right this time (Flynn personal interview).

Tammy said that her current beliefs usually depended on what she had recently experienced. While she said that she did believe in heaven and hell, she

did not view them as they are traditionally characterized.

My beliefs change. When I was in high school I believed everything the church taught me. After high school, I didn't believe anything for a few years but now, like right now at this point, I think there is something up there that's good and I do believe that there's something also here that's evil, but that's within ourselves.

I don't believe. I really think the good is trying to lead us but it's that little bit of evil in all of us, and it's our choice to follow one or the other, right. Because, look, people aren't born bad. I don't believe there's anyone born bad. They're born sick or depraved or chemically imbalanced but no one's born bad. It's your choice.

I believe in heaven but I don't think it's the pearly gates with St. Peter giving you your harp and your wings, you know. I don't {envision heaven} to tell you the truth. I just think that if you've lived your life well and you've done more good than bad for people, you know, you haven't been a hurtful person and your conscious is fairly clear when you die, I think that you'll be permitted to roam the spirit world and come back and contact those you want to contact. And if you're evil, I think that the only thing you're going to do after you die, your spirit will do evil.

I don't believe in white, you know. God is up in the white clouds and everyone's so happy and the devil's down underneath the ground. I don't believe that. The middle of the earth is hot but I don't think the devil's there, you know. So, I don't really know how I envision it but I, the devil, I've seen a demon that looked similar to what everyone says the devil's like so. I know that the spirits that are evil are fairly ugly (Power personal interview).

Tammy had seen and witnessed so many different entities of the supernatural world that she took the time to try to define or explain exactly how she viewed them as similar or different.

A spirit, a spirit protects you. Like ah, a dead relative. To me that's a

spirit....A ghost is someone you don't know and you see it. You can see a ghost. A ghost is like a poltergeist. You see a ghost. [The image I saw going down] the hallway, to me was a ghost. When I saw my dead relatives they were ghosts because they showed themselves to me and they spoke to me. But they were bringing me a message which made them an angel to me. To me angels bring messages. That's the only difference.

They're all related, just I got them categorized. If you see it, it's a ghost. If it saved you, it's a spirit....I think angels bring us messages and ghosts are just letting us know that they're there and having a bit of fun with you like. And a spirit would be someone that protects you or watches over you. Well to me they're the same. The only difference is I don't see my dead grandfather as an angel. He's a spirit. An angel is ah, how can I put it. Not someone who died and went to heaven, they were there. When the earth was created, when we were created, angels were created. They never got old, they never age, they never die. They're there to serve a purpose for God. For people who He wants to bring messages to, that's what angels do.

Well my guardian angel, I don't know if it's an angel or a relative. But I know I have one....I just got a feeling that I know him. And I don't know why I say "him" but I do. Like there's no, I can't put my finger on a reason. Unless subconsciously I know something and I just haven't figured it out yet. I know it's a "him" and I know he's always watching me (Power personal interview).

Tammy also looked to the past as a rationale for what she believed to be true. She felt that if our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents all believed that ghosts exist, then, there must be some truth to reported sightings and the existence of a supernatural realm.

#### **4.3.12 No More Ouija Board Sessions--Doing it Again**

*As mentioned earlier, at the time of the interviews, none of my informants were using the Ouija board. Most of them had made a conscious effort to stop doing it, while for others the activity simply faded. Mary-Dawn stopped using the board because she felt that it was becoming addictive for her.*

*...I eventually got scared, ah, not scared I guess concerned would be a better word. Ah, not of the board but of the fact that it was so addictive. Ah, whenever I find myself like that ah, consumed by something I always back away. Yeah, you know, something in me clicks saying "Hmn, something's not right here. Can you walk away?" And the only way to prove can you walk away is by walking away. Ah, so I made a conscious decision that that was enough (Bennett personal interview).*

*Yvonne stopped using the Ouija board because she began to hear a lot of negative comments about it. While she said that she would never touch the Ouija board again, she would really like to have a board that focused on contacting angels.*

*...I became ah, after like they used Dawn's father died and, ah, they started calling me a bitch so much, and then when Dawn told her father and he said, "It's evil get it out of your house now!" He didn't tell us that he had any experiences with it. His opinion was just get it out of the house and he didn't explain anything why. So all of the kind of combined and Dawn coming back so adamant that it's evil and "I don't want to touch it again." I didn't want to touch it again. Because we were getting a lot of negative feedback from other people and from the board as well. So we kind of just left it at that. I don't know if there's a good thing out where you can talk to spirits in heaven or what not like, you know. 'Cause a Ouija board seems*



to be associated with the devil and demons. Spirits and stuff. I don't know if there's something out that you can talk to the angels or you know...(Peddle personal interview)

Margaret did not really want to stop, the Ouija board stopped working for her and eventually she lost interest in it.

...we tried it down at the club numerous times and it wouldn't work for me....Wouldn't work after that. I tried lots of times after that....Like I tried with a lot of different people and I actually wanted to try it with you....'cause I figured two of us together, we would get somebody related to us. And you wouldn't do it with me. But after awhile I just lost interest in it. I just, you know (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

Gerard did not have to think twice when asked if he would consider using the Ouija board again. He said that he would like to try it again to see if he could get his father back. This time, however, he wanted to maintain his control long enough to verify facts.

Would I? Sure in a minute. In a minute. Sure it ah, for me, right now, I'm related in an area. I'm in a related area that I'm also interested in. Which is Tarot. So I would do it for that purpose....And I'd also do it for the ah, I'd like to see if it was really him and to see if I could contact him again....I say I would sit down with it for at least ten, fifteen minutes and ask just general, start off with very general questions. Something like a lie detector. Start it off with very general questions. Try to catch it in lies.

If I couldn't catch it in lies then I'd ask it a little bit harder. Questions probably that me and probably another person in that room would know. I'd make sure that somebody knew the answers though. I'd make sure somebody in the room knew the questions I was going to ask and the answers. So they could account for the validity, before I sat down.

They could, like the person could say to me well. "[Gerard], you're working the board. You can answer these questions." That's fine, you know, but, for example, if I asked it ah, how can I put this. I would tell a person who sat down at the board, for example, I would say to him, "Okay, well, listen, you know. Well you sit down and I'll ask it the questions and you answer it and see how accurate it is." And then I would tell somebody else in the room....I think it would have to be more specific.

Ah, I'd ask it a question, "What hospital I was born in to? What city?" Not very many people know that. I would tell for example, you, ah, "Jeanie, I was born in [Wabanna (?)]. Okay, I was born in [Wabanna (?)]." That's the town I was born in. And the people at the board don't know this...so if this \_\_\_\_\_ and spelled "[Wabanna (?)]", and I said, "Yeah." They, I mean the people would say, "Yeah right. Okay [Gerard]." But then you would know, "No, no, he told me that. This is what, this is exactly where it was to." So that's how I would test the validity of it right now. 'Cause where I am, I think ah, a little bit more knowledgeable of it on different realms. So I would do it, yes, in a minute (Flynn personal interview).

Tammy had an argument with her spirit "Don" just before she left college and she never heard from him since.

When I left Stephenville, we had a falling out with Don. He wouldn't let us get off the board one night. And I said, "We got exams in the a.m. we don't want to talk to you, goodbye." And he said, "No." And I said, "Well, if you don't let us get off this board I'm never talking to you on the board again." And he stayed on "No." And I said "Fine," and I took my hand off the board and when I took my hand off the board Sharon said, "Don't leave me on the board alone!" And it went "poof," and it went on the floor.

And I said, "No need to throw stuff Sharon," and I could tell from her face that she didn't do it. So we got rid of the board, we didn't use the board no more because we figured that Don was, you know...we chucked it into the garbage, cracked it up in about a million and a half pieces and threw it into

the garbage. We wouldn't use it then.

But her chimes were still up but we never heard a thing after. That was in April because school finished in May of our last year and I never heard tell of him after that. When I went out in '93 the chimes didn't move, the heater didn't move. So I don't know if he just left the room or just spitty at me still (Power personal interview).

For most of my informants, the Ouija board proved to be something that they did at one point in their lives. None of them had had terrible, frightening experiences with the Ouija board and, therefore, most said that they would try it again if the opportunity ever arose.

#### **4.4 Summary**

Through this analysis, it is apparent that there are many different beliefs surrounding the Ouija board experience. It is also evident, as I have suggested, that those who had some sort of Christian world view or influence did believe, at least to some extent, that spirits do exist and that they communicate through the Ouija board. Likewise, those who did not have such a foundation of belief did not believe that spirits existed and, therefore, there was no spirit communication. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle seemed to be fitting together nicely. That is, in accordance with Hufford's model of a belief system, new beliefs were accepted or

rejected depending on what previous beliefs were held ("Folk" 23).

More than one informant commented, however, that their own beliefs were the results of their personal experiences and not due to something they had heard or were taught to believe. David Hufford pointed out that.

The conventional expectation has long been that folk belief creates experience (and the illusory appearance of experience) in a self-fulfilling process, as when the believer dreams of a ghost and afterward believes the event to have been real ("Beings" 13).

*In other words, it was assumed that if someone had a supernatural experience it occurred because the believer wanted it to or, due to cultural influences, interpreted it as such.* Through Hufford's work on the "Old Hag," however, he discovered that a supernatural experience would often occur where there was no evidence of any previous belief. It is because of these findings that Hufford introduced his "experience-centered theory." Basically this theory suggested that,

...some spiritual beliefs show not only persistence but remarkable similarity from one tradition to another because they accurately recount observations which are themselves remarkably similar. This is a standard rational technique for assessing the reliability of experiential reports: do the witnesses agree? For the limited set of core experiences, my interpretation holds that independent witnesses do show remarkable agreement. And because that independence extends to individuals from very diverse traditions, *the agreement cannot be explained as mere conformity to cultural expectations* ("Beings" 31).

He was not suggesting that "all" supernatural experiences fall under this theory, just that some do.

As folklorists we do not generally judge whether a belief is true or false. If someone believes in the supernatural they usually do have a reason to do so, a rationale by which they can back up their belief. As Diane Goldstein pointed out,

No matter how strongly a folklorist argues against what we might feel to be false or even dangerous belief, we stand as one opinion in many. It is by knowing about the construction, world-view, and maintenance of belief *that we can truly do some good. If we know about the axioms, the reasoning processes, and the evidence used in belief traditions to create and transmit them we can look at true mediation, based on informed ideas about where belief systems overlap and where they differ. We cannot solve conflict by setting ourselves up as authorities on objective reality. Here, we are only participants in a tradition, a tradition which carries its own cultural baggage* ("Belief" 65-66).

Just because a non-believer does not adhere to the same rationale as the believer does not make the believer wrong. Neither does it make the disbeliever wrong since they too have a rationale by which they accept or reject beliefs. Simply put, it is our job as folklorists to *report the belief and show how our informant's* rationale or belief system works.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

When embarking upon a study of the Ouija board and other occult phenomena, the student of supernatural belief must struggle with a number of presuppositions and obstacles.<sup>1</sup> Primary among these are:

1. The *a priori* belief that such beliefs have disappeared as people have become more educated
2. The academic assumption that when such beliefs do exist they are necessarily false and.
3. The obstacle created by disciplinary neglect. The scholarly foundation on the subject of Ouija belief is scarce, particularly within the discipline of folklore.

This is not to say, however, that these obstacles are insurmountable. Throughout this thesis these obstacles have been discussed and dealt with in order to show that, while they are important in terms of how past scholarship was conducted, by no means do they need to prove to be limiting in studying the Ouija board and the beliefs and customs surrounding it.

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<sup>1</sup> These obstacles have been deducted/concluded from readings by David Hufford, Diane Goldstein, and Gillian Bennett, to name a few. For further information, consult articles in bibliographies by these scholars.

## **5.1 A Closer Look at Research Obstacles**

In order to see how these obstacles have been overcome and are still being dealt with by scholars today, we will look at each separately.

### **5.1.1 Beliefs Are Disappearing**

*Traditions never die, and superstitions are hard to kill, for we cannot destroy what might be termed an inherent propensity to believe (Kinsella 15).*

When Kinsella wrote about the superstitions of Newfoundland in 1919, it was during a time when other scholars were beginning to proclaim that all superstitions would disappear. The assumption was that once people were educated they would no longer need to keep their old beliefs in order to explain their world. Instead, science could provide more logical or rational explanations. David Hufford explained that,

By the 1950s, intellectuals were broadly claiming the death of spiritual belief. Granting that belief in God was the slowest of these to go, belief in angels, ghosts, and other lesser spirits was thought to be rapidly disappearing....It has been widely assumed that something about modern knowledge, particularly scientific knowledge, is antithetical to spiritual belief (Hufford "Beings" 16).

Diane Goldstein pointed out, however, that one cannot really blame scholars for coming to this conclusion: "Changing economic conditions, schooling, industrialization, increasing mobility and culture contact all led to changes in the nature of folklore" ("Perspectives" 28-29). The fact is that as the world was changing the process by which traditions and customs were related was also changing, giving the appearance that beliefs were disappearing.

Hufford was perhaps among the first of scholars to actually question and critically investigate this "disappearing" theory. In discussing Hufford's research and work on the "Old Hag" in Newfoundland, for instance, Goldstein said that,

It would appear from these findings that Newfoundland is not alone in its retention of traditional beliefs and that a substantial part of at least the British and North American population at all levels and in all social classes shares in these traditions. Supernatural belief then, by all intentions, is not dying out; it is simply going underground. Where Newfoundland is unique is in the extent to which some tradition of open exchange still exists concerning belief. What Hufford observed to be in decline was this tradition of openness about supernatural issues, not the disappearance of belief in or commitment to those issues ("Perspectives" 30).

Kinsella was right to state that superstitions do not die. *Beliefs may change, but they have not disappeared.*



### 5.1.2 Beliefs Are False

Hufford pointed out that some scholars tend to label all supernatural beliefs as falsehoods that arise from some form of error. He claimed that they do not take into consideration how beliefs are rationalized by the people who hold them. In speaking about the approach these scholars take toward the subject of supernatural beliefs, Hufford said that,

This has traditionally been the starting point for most academic work on the subject. The issue is seen *a priori* as concerning the source of error rather than the investigation of the explicit grounds (alleged observations) and processes (interpretations) of belief traditions. The research design begins with the question "Why and how do some people manage to believe things which are so patently false?" ....The interpretations that follow often obtain most or all of their explanatory force from the assumption that the beliefs under study are objectively incorrect....It takes a body of knowledge and considers it to be simply "the way things are" rather than a product of culture. It says over and over again: "What I know I *know*, what you know you only *believe*—to the extent that it conflicts with my knowledge" ("Traditions" 47-48).

Hufford went on to suggest that a more naive point of view should be adopted when studying belief. In this way one can study "traditions of disbelief," such as those noted above, as well as traditions of belief. He suggested that while both traditions have a different set of reasons and rationales behind their beliefs and disbeliefs they are both, nonetheless, valid in their own right ("Traditions" 48).

In following this line of thought, Goldstein in her article "Perspectives on Newfoundland Belief Traditions: Narrative Clues to Concepts of Evidence" tried to demonstrate that,

...evidential criteria are present in supernatural experience narratives through relevance structures, detailing, case differentiation, the relationship of actor to action, duplication and replicability, and credibility....narratives are often well reasoned and concerned with truth (38).

In this way the focus is not on false beliefs, but rather exploring two different traditions which look upon the supernatural in a distinct, yet respectively, logical and reasonable manner.

### **5.1.3 Lack of Folklore Scholarship**

*Supernatural belief should be the most interesting and broadly important subject studied by folklorists. And yet it is in fact the least studied of all topics in the discipline (Hufford "Supernatural" 21).*

There is no doubt that scholarship is scarce in the area of supernatural belief. When researching this area one may only come up with a handful of folklore scholars who have actually written about a particular belief and not just the origins of that belief tradition. For some reason, even today, supernatural belief is a topic that scholars shy away from. Hufford suggested that,

The description of supernatural belief as irrational and non-empirical has been a highly effective instrument of social control....This disincentive to

honest disclosure has caused scholars of belief to unintentionally restrict their activities to the study of the rules of discourse about belief rather than beliefs themselves and the reasons they are held (Hufford "Supernatural" 28).

Gillian Bennett was also perplexed by this situation and has ventured to say that the real problem with the study of supernatural or spiritual beliefs lies within the discipline's own uncertainty about the subject.

The main trouble for folklorists is that we have got ourselves into not one, but no less than three vicious circles. Firstly, no one will tackle the subject because it is disreputable, and it remains disreputable because no one will tackle it. Secondly, because no one does any research into present day supernatural beliefs, occult traditions are generally represented by old legends about *fairies, bogcys and gray ladies*. Furthermore, because published collections of supernatural folklore are thus stuck forever in a time warp, folklorists are rightly wary of printing the modern beliefs they do come across for fear of offending their informants by appearing to put deeply felt beliefs on a par with chain-rattling skeletons and other such absurdities. Thirdly, because no one will talk about his or her experiences of the supernatural there is no evidence for it and because there is no evidence for it no one talks about their experiences of it (Bennett Traditions 13).

These then are the three obstacles that students of folk belief and the supernatural run into on their route to discovering more about this genre. Where does this leave folklore scholars today? Undoubtedly we are still struggling with these circles, and leaping through them whenever we can, in order to delve into a topic which has for so long, been left unattended.

## **5.2 Folklorists and the Ouija Board**

In terms of a Ouija board study, the above mentioned obstacles seem even more predominant. While there is a lot of published work on the Ouija board by academics and nonacademics alike, none of these focus directly upon belief. Most scholars have preferred to pay attention to the truth or falseness of the Ouija board. In fact, Bill Ellis appears to be the only folklore scholar who has actually published anything focusing on the Ouija board. While immeasurably helpful, his article deals more with ritual and play rather than the beliefs surrounding the Ouija board.

At the beginning, this thesis proposed to look at the beliefs surrounding the Ouija board. The intent was not to focus on the truth or falseness of my informant's experiences or even criticize past scholars on their own particular approach or style. The goal was to present all opinions and beliefs in an unbiased manner so that an adequate belief study could be conducted. In this way the thesis looked at traditions of belief as well as traditions of disbelief.

Instead of just looking at the published beliefs about the Ouija board, this study also hoped to take into account what informants had to say about the Ouija board. Some of them believed in it, some did not, and several could not decide definitively if the Ouija board did contact the spirit world. Margaret Murray

perhaps summed up the general overall feeling or belief that the majority of my informants expressed:

I still really don't know. I don't know if it's us, subconscious, in our minds we want to talk to these people so bad that we subconsciously move it ourselves to the answers that we want or. I don't know. I remember that night though, I. I felt like I was like in awe, that it was actually, I believed it that night when I was doing it, right (Murray, Margaret personal interview).

In terms of history, it became important in this study to look not only at the official history of the Ouija board (origins, creator and relatives) but also at the folk history, that is, my informant's beliefs about the board's origins and how it came into existence. Most of my informants did not indicate any in-depth knowledge of the documented origins of the Ouija board. The information they offered as Ouija board history had often come from friends. Gerard Flynn, for instance, heard that it originated in China.

...it was believed, now this is what we heard and it's the only origins I have, was that a Chinese spirit...is trapped in the device used for the Ouija board and this is basically where it came from, a Chinese, it was a Chinese board *first and eventually it became modified into English...*(Flynn personal interview).

The narratives, of course, are the real substance and treasure of this thesis. It is through my informants' stories that one can see where their beliefs or

disbeliefs about the Ouija board stand in relation to other beliefs that they hold and other experiences had by them.

### **5.2.1 Understanding an Informant's Rationale from His or Her Narratives**

As suggested by Hufford, Goldstein, and Bennett, to name a few, when it comes to telling supernatural experience stories the informants display their own rationale for what they believe and this logic rings clear in their narratives. Gillian Bennett found something similar when she interviewed people in Manchester about the supernormal--ESP, psychic powers and the influence of the dead in the world. In her article, "Narrative as Expository Discourse," she said that,

*Narrative is an extremely complex discourse phenomenon....Stories may be told as illustrations, examples or case histories, and be valued for their usefulness as an information-bearing resource as well as for the delight they give to tellers and audience. They are regarded as carrying very important information in very memorable form. Time and again the Manchester informants' conversation makes it clear that for them good evidence of the truth of any concept is primarily empirical and oral. Stories, especially stories based on good authority such as personal experience or family knowledge, are thus a favored device in the discussion of controversial and delicate issues. Speakers expect them to be used as evidence for personal opinion and/or as "discussion documents" to be taken up and co-operatively analyzed in subsequent conversation (430-431).*

*The way in which an informant tells their narrative is also indicative of how they want that narrative to be perceived.* Diane Goldstein in her article

"Perspectives On Newfoundland Belief Traditions: Narrative Clues to Concepts of Evidence" looked at "the role and construction of reasoning and evidence in narratives of supernatural belief and experience" (27). Through her study with one individual, Francis, Goldstein brought to light some potential clues a scholar can look for in trying to determine an informant's method of reasoning or analyzing their own supernatural experience. What follows is a summary of some of these clues:

1. The presence of an extraordinary amount of detail.
2. The actual presentation of the manner, or order, in which the informant constructs his/her method of reasoning.
3. A contrast between what the informant perceives as normal and unusual (supernatural)
4. The introduction of a precedent as evidence--that is, others who have also experienced the same thing and
5. Few, if any, direct interpretative statements by the narrator (34-38).

Perhaps because Tammy Power has experienced a lot of supernatural phenomena, she too seems to display some, if not all, of these clues in the telling of her story. In particular, the story which comes to mind is the one she told me

about seeing a ghost in her house when she was only 12.<sup>2</sup> This story really does have a lot of detail. So much so that one would, at first, assume that it is irrelevant and wonder why the informant would go through such long-winded descriptions. For example, in describing where she was situated and where the ghost was for instance she said the following:

I was in the middle bedroom and mom and dad's bedroom was at the furthest end up. But it was a short hallway, just that was the way it was situated. So when you came upstairs it was the bathroom, turn right Tanya and Tina's room, my room, mom and dad's room....And it came out of mom and dad's bedroom. Out of the door, like they always slept with their door closed. It just came out of the door....I mean mom and dad's door was to my left and Tanya and Tina's room was to my right....And when it turned and went downstairs, 'cause the stairway was right in front of our bedroom, we could jump over the stair rail and slide down the banister, right (personal interview).

*Such detail enables Tammy to explain her normal surroundings amidst a not-so-normal experience.*

*In addition to the above example, Tammy also used herself as an example of what a normal adolescent should look like, and then described how the ghost does not fit this norm:*

I was about twelve so I was shorter than I am now so I say it was about this high off the floor. And it was the full length of like a 14 year old child, 15 year old. Adolescent, it wasn't an adult and it wasn't a child. You know it was in there. And it just sort of glided. There was no face, there was no

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<sup>2</sup> For a complete transcription of this narrative, see Chapter Four under the section "Other Supernatural Encounters."



male or female form. It was just bright white and I remember like it was almost blinding bright, bright white (personal interview).

Tammy also introduced a witness, a person who had the same experience as she had:

When I opened the door and saw it. I just watched it go and when I watched it turn to the right, here's Tina. looking out her bedroom door watching it walk down the hallway with me (personal interview).

Tammy does not give a direct analysis of what happened. In fact she simply states, "It just came out of the door. I thought I was dreaming. I didn't think anything of it" (personal interview). This quotation is helpful in that it shows how Tammy eventually reasoned that she had seen a ghost. The next morning when her sister echoed the same experience she began to think it was more than just a dream.

And then the next day when I got up I kept saying, "I had the queerest dream last night mom. I saw a ghost coming out of your room." And Tina, seven years old, a little child said, "So did I." And Tina idolized me so nobody believed that she really saw it. But I saw Tina, right. And I saw her (personal interview).

Such an analysis could be undertaken with all of Tammy's narratives, as well as those narratives told by my other informants. Supernatural narrative structure, however, is not the primary focus of this thesis. I felt it was necessary to

go through this process, at least once, in order to illustrate that my informants do have a rational and logical process by which they too determine something as true or false.

I must mention, once again, that it was not my intention to place my own biases on these narratives by labeling them as true or false. I merely wanted to illustrate that just as those who adhere to the traditions of disbelief look to science and nature as their rule of reasoning, those adhering to traditions of belief also have their own set of rules, or ways, in which evidence is deducted. As Goldstein stated, all that is required of the folklorist is,

....a recognition that belief can be logical and well reasoned despite the truth of its claim and a recognition that our disbelief may be open to logical flaws. We need not be neutral about agents but we must be neutral about processes if we are to understand why people believe what they believe ("Belief" 66).

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