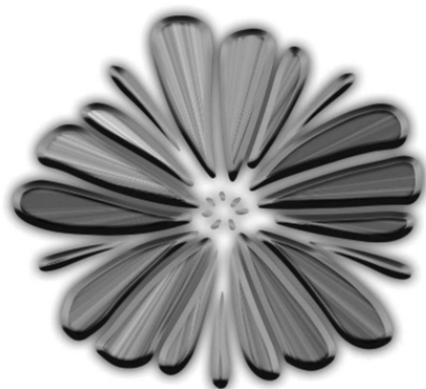


The Homes of the Soul

A Short Guide to the Real Possibility
of Life After Death

Jennifer Vanbergen

THE HOMES OF THE SOUL



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Possibility of Life After Death

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For my mother, Beatrice Hale Vanbergen
1924–1998

And for my children, Tom and Caroline



“Why, after all, should there not be ghosts?”¹
Carl Gustav Jung²

¹Carl Gustav Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections (MDR)*, (London: Fontana Press, 1995), 120.

²Born in Switzerland in 1875, Carl Gustav Jung went on to study medicine and later psychiatry, a subject which was at that time held in contempt by the rest of the medical establishment. Jung was greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud until the two great men fell out in 1913. Among other things, he is famous for elaborating on Freud’s overall theory of the unconscious and sub-dividing it into two main tranches, namely the personal and the collective unconscious. He died—or did he?—in 1961.

“Six weeks after his death my father appeared to me in a dream. Suddenly he stood before me and said that he was coming back from his holiday. He had made a good recovery and was now coming home. Two days later the dream was repeated. Later I kept asking myself: ‘What does it mean that my father returns in dreams and that he seems so real?’ It was an unforgettable experience, and it forced me for the first time to think about life after death.”³

³Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 117.

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FOREWORD

At some time during the 1980's while a programme about mediums played on TV, my mother looked up from her sewing, turned to me, and said, "Do *you* believe people can talk to the dead?" She waited for a response. I can see her hopeful face looking at me now—eyes twinkling behind her enormous 70's glasses with a faint amusement at my obvious scepticism. I laughed, affectionately.

"Don't be so ridiculous, Mum!"

A decade or so later, at lunchtime on 24 March 1998, she suddenly died. She was 74, and had spent her last few years consumed in a downward spiral. Having smoked cigarettes all her life, her breathing was laboured—panicky—and she could no longer enjoy what had once been a fulfilling life. We had been very close, my mother and I, but we had unfinished business to attend to, not least because my last words to her that morning had been an impatient "What's the matter with you *now*?"

Calling a few hours later to apologise, I was devastated to learn that she had just suffered a stroke and that the paramedics were attending to her at that very moment. I raced to be at her side and, just missing her at home, proceeded to chase after the ambulance. But it was too late.

As I stared, in a state of utter disbelief, at her strange, lifeless body in a side room at Kent & Sussex hospital, I began to wonder hopelessly where she had gone. There were her legs, to be sure, outlined under the hospital blanket. So why wasn't she in her face? How could she disappear in a one-minute-you're-there, next-minute-you're-not sort of way? What about her shopping list in the kitchen?

Above all, how could I possibly leave my mother, this mother who had loved me for thirty-nine years, on these bad-tempered terms? I think I actually prodded her. We left the hospital in a daze; the finality was awful. My elder sister had been given her wedding ring and, in a little polythene bag, I carried her teeth.⁴

A few hours later, the guilt set in for real; for weeks, I could neither eat nor sleep. Life seemed to me unendurable; how could we possibly part on such a sour note? My mother's death was to mark the beginning of an exceptionally fraught four-year period which culminated in a major depressive episode and the end of my marriage. Yet this four-year period was also a time of the most extraordinary insight and numinous awareness, which began during that wretched summer of 1998.

How could I possibly have said "What's the matter with you now"? to my dying mother? This single reproach tormented me night and day. I had to say sorry, you understand. But in the face of the icy, silent stillness of death there was nothing I could do except rage at God and pray for my own sanity; big, deep prayers that I had never prayed before and have never prayed since.

Finally, as I felt my grip slipping, unusual 'things' began to happen. It all started in the garden when one day I came upon a fox. It stood stock still, and simply stared at me. I took a couple of steps towards it, fully expecting it to slope off quickly into the hedge, but to my surprise it maintained its position,

⁴Otherwise known as middle child syndrome.

its eyes never leaving mine for a second. Then our terrier dog, Rusty, appeared on the scene. What excitement! Here we have a stationary fox, plain for all to see! Rusty circled in a frenzy of barking, occasionally darting in nervously for a brief, brave nip but then retreating just in time, just in case. Round and round he went, but the fox took no notice at all. It did not look at the dog once, not for one second, but continued to stare calmly at me.

What was the meaning of such an extraordinary episode? Such was the commotion that my husband arrived on the scene and eventually managed to call Rusty off. Back he went to his basket to calm down and mull over the highlight of his year. It was not until peace reigned once more in the garden that the fox, still taking its time, finally broke eye contact, turned its back and quietly took its leave. Was it ill, I wondered? To my untrained eye it looked in perfect health and I could detect no limp as I watched it exit my field of vision. It was an experience I shall never forget.

Same week, wandering round the same garden at dusk, I became aware that a robin was following me. It flew from shrub to shrub, tree to tree, round the back garden, round the front garden and round the orchard with me, facing me all the while, twittering so constantly and urgently that it finally caught my attention. As a gardener, I was used to having a robin perch quietly nearby, waiting to pick off a juicy worm. But this, at least in my experience, was *unusual robin behaviour*. I had the distinct impression that it was trying to communicate with me.

Not long after, there was the “pasta incident”. I was about to strain the pasta when, inexplicably, a glass seemed to fly⁵ off the draining board beside me whilst I was washing something in the adjacent sink.

⁵“Let the light of your madness shine, and it will suddenly dawn on you.” Carl Gustav Jung, *The Red Book*, (New York: W W Norton & Co, 2009). Published in conjunction with the Foundation of the Works of C.G. Jung, Zurich.

In my experience of dropping the occasional thing over the years, there is always that split second in which you realise what you've done—that there's no going back, and that the object is about to shatter into a thousand pieces. On this occasion, however, my split second thought was one of disbelief. How could that glass possibly have fallen off the draining board? It had long been sitting in the plastic drainer—probably for days—and my hands in the sink had been nowhere near it. Furthermore, it seemed to fall in slow motion; I watched in astonishment as it appeared to arc past my left shoulder before it finally came to crash on the hard kitchen floor tiles. I shrugged, and set gingerly to work on hands and knees with the dustpan and brush. Somehow, I suppose, I must have nudged the plastic drainer.

As I swept, an idle thought crossed my mind. 'It's extraordinary how far these glittering shards of glass will travel! They've gone everywhere!' All of a sudden I sat up on my haunches like an alert rabbit. Was I sure I had properly cleared up the glass that I had dropped a few days earlier? (And that one I really did drop, the other side of the kitchen close to the cupboard where all of the Pyrex oven dishes were kept). What if the cupboard door had been open at the time? Could any pieces of glass have landed in one of the dishes on the bottom shelf?

I went over to the cupboard in question, opened the door and took out my favourite, the one balanced on top of a couple of others—the one I had been about to use to make a pasta bake for my children. Suddenly I knew with total certainty, even before looking, that I would find broken glass. Sure enough, there in the right hand corner of the dish were two large splinters—camouflaged by the glassy appearance of the dish. Easy to miss, but difficult to swallow. For the first time, I seriously wondered whether my mother had a hand in it all.

Then one afternoon that same summer, in one of many attempts to redeem myself and be a good and loving daughter, I went round to my father's house to drop him off some milk. He had just started watching an old film, *Carousel*,

and although I had seen it a couple of times before, I decided I would keep him company and watch the beginning scenes. Of course, I ended up watching the whole thing and by the end I had such a lump in my throat that I was quite unable to speak. The cause of my sentimental trouble was the late Billy, a character who followed his wife and daughter around the screen but found himself unable to communicate properly across the dividing line of death.

By the end of the film I was beset by waves of longing for my mother. Nevertheless, I hurried to leave, for by now I was late. When I got to the car, parked directly outside in the driveway, I found to my astonishment that it had locked me out. All four doors were well and truly barred. Through the driver's side window I could see my keys dangling tantalisingly in the ignition where I had left them.

'How could this have happened?' I wondered. The only way to lock the car was to take the keys out of the ignition and press the remote button or use the key from outside the car. Luckily I had left my window an inch or so open. With great dexterity, my father and I managed to fashion a wire coat hanger such that we could poke it through the gap and use the curved bit to fish the keys out of the ignition. As I drove away, the remote mechanism began to clunk, spontaneously and unbidden, on and off—open and shut—as if it were showing me how it had done it.

Like Billy in the film, of course, I had been feeling keenly the icy stillness of death, the great divide that separated me from my mother. And now the car was trying to shut me out too, when all I had done was to go round with a pint of milk!

Later that year, we embarked upon our summer holiday which was to be spent in a country cottage in Norfolk. The weather was kind to us, and we were able to enjoy a few evenings outdoors. One late sunset was particularly beautiful; as I lingered over my coffee I couldn't help thinking how much my mother would have appreciated it. If only we could talk, I thought to myself. Just ten minutes would do!

All of a sudden my reverie was interrupted by a blast of hot air on the back of my neck. This was no vague sensation of a warm breeze on a summer's evening; it was a powerful rush of heat! I whipped round, fully expecting to see some sort of hot air vent set in the stone wall behind me. But there was no such thing. Why would there be? There was no central heating or tumble dryer in the cottage to cause such a phenomenon. As I settled back in my chair to finish my coffee, it happened once again. And then she was gone.

Finally, towards the end of August 1998, I had The Dream that changed my life. All of my dreams since my mother's death had been nightmares. There she was, night after night, smoking, gasping for breath, unhappy. But The Dream was different, and even then I knew that it did not emanate from me; my frame of mind at the time was such that I could not possibly have hit upon it of my own accord.

In it, I came upon an old woman whose back was turned to me. At once, I thought, Here is an old lady. I had better be nice to her, in case she dies!⁶ All of a sudden she turned round, and there she was! My mother in resplendent pose! Her face was still wrinkled, indeed she was probably still seventy four, but I could see instantly that she was in perfect health. Her face was glowing with an energy that was scarcely comprehensible. She exuded well-being. In some kind of mute exchange of thought, I was overwhelmed by her unconditional love and forgiveness; my pathetic apology suddenly seemed earthly, irrelevant and unnecessary. At last we could communicate as we never had before, either in life or death.

I sat up in bed. It was 2.30am or so, but I was completely awake and my spine was tingling. I realised instantly that this was a significant dream such as I had never had before, and I pondered over the details. An important aspect of it was that she had been wearing a burgundy-coloured, thin

⁶The moral of the story is: don't be rude to your mother ...

knitwear sweater. I do not normally dream in colour, much less so in intricate detail, yet I could envisage this sweater down to the last stitch, including the ‘granny’ stitching at the shoulder seams. It was not something I ever recall her wearing in life, but I resolved to look for it just the same.

So the following morning I set off, hotfoot, to my father’s house in order to search through her wardrobe. Imagine my shock and dismay when I discovered that he and my aunt had finally sorted through her clothes only a week or so earlier and had donated them, without even consulting me, to charity.

“We kept a couple of her best dresses, though. Go up and have a look.” My father nodded sheepishly towards the stairs, belatedly realising that he had been really thoughtless.

There were indeed a couple of dresses hanging in the wardrobe, but her huge, old fashioned chest of drawers was horribly empty. I was about to go back downstairs, when something made me check again.

And that’s when I saw it; all alone, and practically imperceptible in the gloomy shadows at the back of one of the echoey mahogany drawers, was a knitted burgundy sweater with ‘granny’ stitching at the shoulder seams, identical to the one I had seen in *The Dream*.

It was the *only thing* left in a chest of drawers that I *didn’t know* had just been emptied. The exact same sweater. A coincidence? Really? The hairs on the back of my neck started to tingle; I snatched it up and hugged it as the implication of my find began to sink in.

The Dream forced me, like Carl Jung, to consider the possibility of life after death. Until 1998 I had been hugely sceptical of any such thing, but by the end of that summer my dogmatic convictions were shaken to the core; my mother appeared to have communicated with me, and had proved it wasn’t ‘just a dream’ (born of wishful thinking) by drawing my attention to something in the ‘real’ world that I could not possibly have known—namely that my father had given away her clothes

without telling me and that this particular sweater was the only item that had been left behind.

The burning question now became, how? How could such communication possibly be explained by the 'rational' world that I experienced all around me? Could it really, *really* be so? For my own sake, I felt compelled to answer this question. Only a proper explanation would suffice; no airy-fairy waffle for me!

A new phase began in my life. I began to read in earnest and was amazed to discover that there is indeed a potential 'rational', albeit extraordinary explanation involving a whole new world of which I had no previous knowledge.

As I began to open my eyes, to question my prejudices, I also began to experience a series of recurrent dreams. These, too, were Big Dreams. In them, I always found myself in a house—my house—when all of a sudden I remembered there existed another wing. How could it have slipped my mind? I opened the hitherto unnoticed door and entered a whole new annex which, in turn, led to more rooms with sumptuous rugs and cosy lamps, wings within wings connected by beautiful stone corridors and round staircases with worn, uneven steps. I felt as if I were a child exploring the multiple secret hideaways of the most magnificent, forgotten castle.

Over-large houses do not normally appeal to me, but for some reason the house in this recurring dream pleased me enormously. I always awoke feeling totally energised; momentarily, I felt indescribably happy. Although there were no outer signs, I felt myself, quite literally, to be connected 'to the source'. Briefly, I felt euphoric.

It was another couple of years before I began reading Carl Jung. The first book of his that I read was his last piece of work, the semi-autobiographical account of his life entitled 'Memories, Dreams, Reflections'. I was thunderstruck when I encountered a series of dreams in it where Jung also came across secret annexes in his own house. Finally he had a dream where he actually

stepped across the threshold of one of them and discovered a wonderful library full of sixteenth and seventeenth century folios bound in pigskin, some containing illustrations and engravings of odd symbols that he had never before encountered. Not until many years later was he to recognise them as being alchemical symbols, alchemy being a subject that would go on to fascinate and preoccupy him for the rest of his life.

“The unknown wing of the house was a part of my personality, an aspect of myself; it represented something that belonged to me but of which I was not yet conscious.”⁷

The unknown wings of my own magnificent castle now made more sense to me. Two years earlier I, too, had been on the brink of embarking on a journey to discover undeveloped, unconscious aspects of myself; the sheer potential extent of the human personality—mine included—was symbolised by the glorious host of rooms and passageways.

And I was also to discover something else. Over the course of the next twenty years or so, I arrived at the tentative understanding that life after death—the survival of this human personality—might truly be real. As real as gravity, in fact. I found that our survival might be written into the very laws of the universe.

The Homes of the Soul brings together a number of ideas, most notably, those of Carl Gustav Jung, Deepak Chopra, Brian Greene, Fritjof Capra, Richard Dawkins, Jeffrey Schwartz, Sam Parnia, David Glantzman, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Max Planck, Niels Bohr, Paul Davies, Michael Talbot, David Bohm, John Bell, Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose. As such, it is an explanation that begins to satisfy me and I give it to you for your consideration.

⁷Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 228.

After all, as Jung put it,

“[A] man should be able to say he has done his best to form a conception of life after death, or to create some image of it—even if he must confess his failure. Not to have done so is a vital loss. For the question that is posed to him is the age-old heritage of humanity”⁸

⁸Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 333.

INTRODUCTION

“Survival means remaining intact at some level—mind,
personality, memory, or soul—that is ‘me’”⁹
Deepak Chopra¹⁰

Carl Gustav Jung devoted his life to the study of the mind, personality, memory, or soul—this thing that is ‘me’; he called it the psyche.

The psyche, he said, has a number of layers; some of the layers are conscious, others not. Some are personal, others collective. The ego, for example, is a conscious, personal layer; it is who we think we are. It is that relentless voice in our heads.

Flashes of insight, on the other hand are probably irruptions of knowledge from a more unconscious level; nevertheless, these unconscious components are just as much a part of the overall ‘me’ and cannot, therefore, be disregarded.

⁹Deepak Chopra, *Life after Death*, (London: The Random House Group Ltd, 2006), 215.

¹⁰Deepak Chopra MD, FACP, and founder of the Chopra Foundation. Born in 1946, Chopra is a prolific writer and speaker on the ancient practice of Ayurvedic medicine, an ancient, holistic, Indian approach to wellbeing which proposes healthy dietary habits, herbal remedies, yoga, meditation, oils and detoxification as all being essential to good health.

“Nowadays, most people identify themselves exclusively with their consciousness, and imagine that they are only what they know about themselves. Yet anyone with even a smattering of psychology can see how limited this knowledge is.”¹¹

Jung wasn't most people, of course. And as such he often felt alienated, on his own, out on a limb; other people, it seemed, did not speak the same language and, worse, didn't seem even to want to.

In fact, sometimes he found his fellow humans really annoying:

“Ah, these good, efficient, healthy-minded people, they always remind of those optimistic tadpoles who bask in a puddle in the sun ... crowding together and amiably wriggling their tails, totally unaware that the next morning the puddle will have dried up and left them stranded.”¹²

Clearly, Jung did not feel at home in the tadpoles' puddle, huddled together with the rest of the godforsaken herd. But nor did he find comradeship amongst his thinking peers:

“In my experience, the most difficult as well as the most ungrateful patients, apart from habitual liars, are the so-called intellectuals.”¹³

He found them as closed minded as the tadpoles. For example, during his university years, Jung read everything he could find about ghosts. But when he attempted to discuss such matters with his peers, he found to his astonishment that they just snorted with derision.

¹¹ Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 330.

¹² Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 29.

¹³ Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 167.

“I, too, was not certain of the absolutely reliability of the reports, but why, after all, should there not be ghosts?”¹⁴

Quantum physicist Brian Greene¹⁵ explains how “the lesson of physics is that our senses and experience don’t tell us how the world really works.”¹⁶ But still we don’t get it! On an intellectual level we may all appreciate that there are sounds we can’t hear, scents we can’t smell and even worlds we can’t see, but deep down most of us secretly believe that if we can’t perceive something, then it doesn’t exist. But this is nonsense! Or, as Jung put it in an address to the Society for Psychical Research in England, “I shall not commit the fashionable stupidity of regarding everything I cannot explain as a fraud.”

Maybe, just maybe, the reason we don’t see ghosts is not because they don’t exist but because we can’t see them—literally, can’t see them. Not, at least, without acquiring some sort of extrasensory perception.

So there is probably much truth in Winston Churchill’s observation that although men occasionally stumble upon the truth, they usually manage to pick themselves up and carry on regardless, ever eager to merge back into the tadpoles’ puddle with the amiable crowd.

Not that we should dismiss the value of ‘herding’; for some, it is a lifeline. Many individuals need the structure of an

¹⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 120.

¹⁵ Brian Greene, BA, DPhil, Harvard University, Magdalen College, Oxford, is an American theoretical physicist, mathematician, string theorist, and professor at Cornell and Columbia University. Born in 1963, he has written a number of books, including *The Elegant Universe*, *The Fabric of the Cosmos* and *The Hidden Reality*.

¹⁶ Brian Greene, quoted in F Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, (Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1999). Born in 1939, Fritjof Capra PhD is an Austrian-American physicist. His book *The Tao of Physics* was published in 23 languages. Of his motivation to write it, Capra famously said, “Science does not need mysticism and mysticism does not need science. But man needs both.”

institution or secret society; if we belong to a tribe, we can at least find our place in the world and feel a sense of purpose.

But belonging to organisations and identifying with ‘-isms’ is no permanent solution; it’s just a port in a storm or a safe fold for temporarily lost sheep. If we are to grow, Jung said, we should avoid bedding down. If we rely on a collective organisation for too long, we run the danger of losing our own identity; in other words, there is a real danger of getting completely lost in the crowd.

“The smaller the personality, the dimmer and more unconscious it becomes, until finally it merges indistinguishably with the surrounding society, thus surrendering its own wholeness and dissolving into the wholeness of the group.”¹⁷

Sooner or later we need to recognise that it is impossible to take shelter with the group if we truly want to become our own person. What we really have to do is differentiate ourselves from the rest of the group, strike out on our own and stand on our own two feet. And so we have a stark choice to make; we have to choose between one or the other.

“Anyone who attempts to do both, to adjust to his group and at the same time pursue his individual goal, becomes neurotic.”¹⁸

As soon as we can, then, let’s ditch the group and carve out our own path. Let’s think for ourselves! That means getting to know all the layers of the mind, personality, memory, or soul—this thing that is “me”—this thing which Jung called

¹⁷Anthony Storr, *The Essential Jung: Selected Writings* (London: Fontana Press, 1983), 200.

¹⁸Carl Gustav Jung, *MDR*, 377.

the psyche. Let's deviate from the collective and simply allow ourselves to be individual—"irrational", even—for a while. Nothing wrong with that.

And so when Richard Dawkins¹⁹ chides theologians in his brilliant book *The God Delusion*, by saying "Who was I to say that rational argument was the only admissible kind of argument?", perhaps we might sympathise with the theologians for a moment.

After all, who is to say that "rational" argument is the only admissible kind of argument? Maybe the "paranormal" will turn out to be entirely normal after all.

¹⁹ Born in 1941, Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist, Emeritus Fellow of New College, Oxford, famous author, and atheist. His other well-known books include *The Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*.