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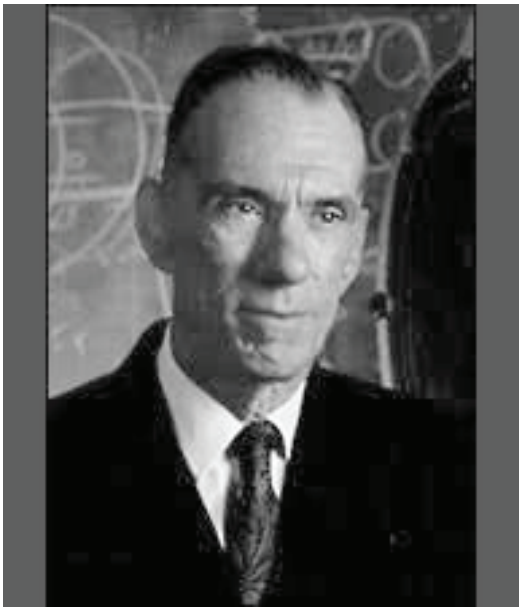
In Memoriam: Robert G. Jahn, Scientist, Mentor, Friend[1]

Roger Nelson



We have lost a major figure in consciousness research with the passing of Professor Robert G. Jahn, the founder and director of the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research laboratory (PEAR). PEAR was Bob's longest running research program and capped a career that touched and influenced the farthest reaches of science, from the physics of electric propulsion for spacecraft to the extended capacities of human consciousness. Bob was born April 1 1930, and died Nov 15 2017 at his home in Princeton, surrounded by family and loved ones. He had a broadly influential role in psi research, and the PEAR lab became a home for many and a beacon for yet more people looking for inspiration and models that could help understand the extraordinary capacities of human consciousness. He was known around the world as a seminal figure in consciousness research.

Bob was Dean of the School of Engineering and Applied Science at Princeton University from 1971 to 1986. He was a Fellow of the American Physical Society and of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, and an influential member of numerous other technical organizations. He was a founder and long time Vice President of the Society for Scientific Exploration, and Chairman of the Board of the International Consciousness Research Laboratories consortium. He was a member of the Board of Directors of Hercules, Inc. and Chairman of its Technology Committee, and Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Associated Universities. This is a small sample of the long list of Bob's achievements, but it is safe to say

1 Editor's note: As this issue was going into press news came of the death of Professor Robert Jahn. Roger Nelson was kind enough to write an obituary right away and we plan to have more about Jahn's work in future issues.

that with all his extraordinary contributions in science and technology, his deepest feelings of accomplishment were for the study of consciousness at the frontiers of our understanding.

Bob Jahn, besides being one of the top tier officers of a major ivy league university, was a world class physicist running a NASA-funded plasma propulsion laboratory. But he was also a creative and broad-spectrum thinker who somehow escaped the dogmas of "scientific" education far enough to consider with equanimity the mysteries of mind as a part of the physical world. Bob also had a wicked sense of humor, along with an extraordinary memory, which might help explain why he knew all the lyrics of Gilbert and Sullivan. He combined high seriousness with unfettered creativity, resulting in sometimes whimsical reflections on the conundrums science is designed to untangle. I recall Bob's charming sketch of two ducks, evidently engaged in a difficult scientific discussion. He labeled it simply "Paradox".

A few far-seeing individuals with impeccable credentials in the sciences make room in their research agenda for questions linking consciousness and physical systems, mind and matter. Precisely these questions led Bob to create the PEAR laboratory in 1979. He was impelled to do so after seeing results from an independent research project he sponsored for a student in electrical engineering and computer science. The student had asked him for help when she found none of her professors would monitor her work attempting to replicate Helmut Schmidt's psychokinesis experiments using an electronic random number generator and experimental protocols she had developed. He encouraged her to study the relevant professional literature and organizations.

Ultimately Bob decided the reports and the serious engagement by a small cadre of dedicated researchers in parapsychology justified a substantial high-technology look at the possibility that consciousness might interact directly with physical systems. Was there some fundamental error in what looked like good, though sparsely supported research? Or was there a possibility that the surprising indicators from PK experiments and the remarkable results of remote viewing work might point to fundamental processes and aspects of the world that were not accounted for in standard scientific models? The next step was to find support for a solid research program and Bob turned to friends in the engineering and technology community and in the ranks of Princeton alumni. One of the major sources of support in the early years of the PEAR lab was James S. McDonnell, a fellow Princeton alumnus and the founder of McDonnell Douglas Aircraft. He had both personal and professional interests in the topic and provided funding through the McDonnell Foundation.

PEAR soon became one of the most productive psi research centers in the history of the field. Together with Brenda Dunne, who managed the lab, and a team of scientists from several fields, Bob broke new ground while also confirming and replicating research from many other sources. News of the Princeton group's experiments spread quickly worldwide, among people interested in paranormal phenomena, including psychokinesis and various forms of extrasensory perception. Notable figures from Europe and Asia stopped by. Keith Jarrett, the jazz pianist, paid a visit. For a time, the philanthropist Laurance Rockefeller visited regularly and donated money for research.

The PEAR lab had three major aspects, one assessing mind-machine interaction (MMI), one looking at remote viewing, most notably precognitive remote perception (PRP), and a third focused on theory and modeling. Over nearly three decades until closing in 2007, the lab built and used highly refined physical experiments including a classic random event generator (REG)

whose behavior participants attempted to influence by intention alone. The REG instruments developed through three generations, eventually allowed expansion into the field for "natural" experiments looking at group consciousness. Bob's aesthetic sense ensured that the physical experiments were not only precise, but beautiful. The "pinball machine" was worthy of a place in a technology museum and the "linear pendulum" would be at home in a great modern art gallery. He also wanted the place where people would be asked to attempt "impossible" tasks to be a comfortable, warm and human environment. He understood that useful mind-machine experiments would have to be a mutually respectful combination of the aesthetic and the scientific.

Bob Jahn was a thought leader, and a careful scientist who knew that only the highest quality, most rigorous protocols would be able to overcome biases against the study of the subtle interactions of consciousness with its environment. He knew that though supported by the research results, conclusions would not be easy to defend against skepticism. But it was equally clear that the implications of the remote perception and mind-machine experiments were important for both science and society. They were important to Bob personally as well, as he colorfully suggested early on: "I have accumulated a substantial pile of blue chips as a high technologist, and I am planning to spend them in research that matters deeply on the human scale". That he did, and it was a worthy investment.