

Biography of Minot Savage (1841-1918)

Dr. Minot J. Savage (June 10, 1841 to May 22, 1918), a popular Unitarian minister and author, was a member of the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) and served on its committee on mediumistic phenomena. An early Christian leader in the acceptance of evolution, his books included *Christianity, the Science of Mankind* (1873), *The Morals of Evolution* (1880), *Life Beyond Death* (1899) and *Can Telepathy Explain?* (1902).

A graduate of Bangor Theological Seminary with a Doctor of Divinity degree, Savage was ordained a Congregational minister in 1864, serving churches in California, Massachusetts, and Missouri. In 1873, he joined the Unitarian Church, serving in Chicago, Boston, and New York City.

"If there is a great truth here which abolishes death, which wipes away all tears, which heals the broken-hearted, which puts meaning into life, which makes all the long and toilsome process through which we are passing worth while, then surely that is something which ought to be known," he explained his decision to involve himself in joining the ASPR and investigating mediums.¹

Early in his investigations, Savage encountered some physical phenomena, including levitations. "I have seen tables and chairs lifted in a way not to be explained by any ordinary methods, and this a good many times," he wrote. "On one occasion, when seated in a heavy arm chair, I was myself gently and quietly lifted into the air while a skeptical friend looked on and carefully studied what was taking place."²

Savage had several sittings with Leonora Piper, the Boston medium, before she became famous. "At this time, she went into a trance, but

talked instead of writing," Savage recalled, referring to the fact that in her early days of mediumship Piper was primarily a trance-voice medium while in later years information usually came through her by means of automatic writing.³



In his first sitting with Piper, Savage's father was the first to communicate. He had died in Maine at age 90. "He had never lived in Boston, nor, indeed, had he visited there for a great many years, so that there was no possibility that Mrs. Piper should ever have seen him and no likelihood of her having known anything about him," Savage related. "She (or Phinuit, her spirit control, speaking through her vocal cords) described him at once with accuracy, pointing out certain peculiarities which the ordinary observer, even if he had seen him, would not have been likely to notice."⁴

Mrs. Piper then said that "He calls you Judson." Savage considered this quite evidential as his father had called him Judson, his middle name, when he was a boy. "In all my boyhood all the members of the family except my father and my half-brother had always called me Minot," he explained, going on to point out that after he had become an adult his father began calling him Minot.

"Here is somebody else besides your father," Savage further recalled Piper saying. "It is your brother, no your half-brother, and he says his name is John."⁵ Mrs. Piper (or Phinuit) then went on to accurately describe John and tell the method of his death. Savage pointed out that this brother was not consciously on his mind and he was not expecting to hear from him. Moreover, he was certain that Piper knew nothing about him.

On a much later visit to Piper, Savage was told that his son, who had died at age 31 three years earlier, was present. "Papa, I want you go at once to my room," Savage recalled his son communicating with a great deal of earnestness. "Look in my drawer and you will find a lot of loose papers. Among them are some which I would like you to take and destroy at once."⁶ The son had lived with a personal friend in Boston and his personal effects remained there. Savage went to his son's room and searched the drawer, gathering up all the loose papers. "There were things there which he had jotted down and trusted to the privacy of his drawer which he would not have made public for the world," Savage ended the story, commenting that he would not violate his son's privacy by disclosing the contents of the papers.⁷

As reported by Savage and further recorded in the records of the ASPR, the Rev. W. H. Savage, Minot's brother, and a friend of Harvard Professor William James, who had "discovered" Piper, sat with her on Dec. 28, 1888. Phinuit told him that somebody named Robert West was there and wanted to send a message to Minot. The message was in the form of an apology for something West had written about Minot "in advance." W. H. Savage did not understand the message but passed it on to Minot, who understood it and explained that West was editor of a publication called *The Advance* and had criticized his work in an editorial. During the sitting, W. H. Savage asked for a description of West. An accurate description was given along

with the information that West had died of hemorrhage of the kidneys, a fact unknown to Savage but later verified.

In a sitting by W. H. Savage two weeks later, West again communicated, stating that his body was buried at Alton, Illinois. He gave the wording on his tombstone, "Fervent in spirit, serving the Lord." Savage was unaware of either of these facts, but later confirmed them as true.

"Now the striking thing about this lies in the fact that my brother was not thinking of this matter and cared nothing about it," Minot Savage ended the story, feeling that this ruled out mental telepathy on the part of the medium.⁸

"There was no reason for the [apology] unless it be found in simply human feeling on his [West's] part that he had discovered that he had been guilty of an injustice, and wished, as far as possible, to make reparation, and this for peace of his own mind," Minot Savage recorded.⁹

Savage had sittings with a number of other mediums, although for privacy reasons he was reluctant to name them. One day he was visited at his Boston church by a clerk in a business house some 20 miles from Boston. The man explained to Savage that he had found himself under the influence of some power that wished to write through his hand. He was confused and wanted Savage's advice. "We sat down at the table, and immediately his hand was seized and began to write with a good deal of power," Savage reported. The communicating spirit identified himself as George Canning, a name unknown to Savage. "He stated quite a number of facts concerning himself, some of which I was able to look up and [later] verify."¹⁰

Savage then decided to give George Canning a little test. He asked him to go to his house and find out what Mrs. Savage was doing at the time. In fact, Mrs. Savage was not supposed to be home that morning. "We sat in perfect quiet and silence for four or five minutes. At the end of that time, the hand began to write. To my surprise, and of course I believed he was all wrong, he said: 'Mrs.

Savage was at home, and when I was there, she was standing in the front hall saying good-bye to a caller.”¹¹ When Savage went home later, he was told by his wife that she had been paid an unexpected call by a friend and that she was bidding her good-bye at the very time the spirit reported.

In addressing the theory that all mediumistic communication comes from the subconscious and by means of mental telepathy, Savage wondered why the subliminal self was such a liar. “How does it happen that this subconscious self is such an unconscionable, persistent, consistent, and abnormal liar about itself?” he asked. “Why does it not now and then by some sort of accident tell the truth? Has there ever been a case on record in which this subconscious self, which is so wise, so wonderful; which is able to travel the earth over in pursuit of its facts and select the particular one which is needed; which can build up no end of distinct and consistent personalities, and put into

their lips words and expressions and statements of fact and memories which shall come very near to establishing their identity with people who used to live here, – is there, I say, a case on record where this subconscious self has owned up to being a subconscious self?”¹² Savage went on to say that in every case with which he was acquainted, the claim was that the spirit of somebody who had lived on earth was communicating. Moreover, the communications were not in accordance with the law of suggestion. Thus, he opted for “invisible intelligences” over any kind of telepathy. “It seems to me more simple, more natural, nearer to what we really know, and better fitted to explain all the facts,” he concluded. “I am compelled, therefore, to accept it as a provisional hypothesis.”¹³



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Notes:

¹ Savage, Minot, *Can Telepathy Explain?*, G. Putnam and Sons., 1900, p. 224.

² _____, pp. 59-60.

³ _____, p. 73.

⁴ _____, p. 74.

⁵ _____, p. 75.

⁶ _____, p. 106.

⁷ _____, p. 107.

⁸ Holt, Henry, *On the Cosmic Relations*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914, p. 415.

⁹ _____.

¹⁰ Savage, p. 93.

¹¹ _____, p. 94.

¹² _____, pp. 163-164.

¹³ _____, p. 206.