

George T. Dexter (1819-1863)

Like so many other educated people, Dr. George T. Dexter (c 1819 – c 1863), a New York physician, looked askance at the many stories he had heard about mediumship phenomena. The stories began just a few years earlier with the so-called “Rochester Knockings,” involving the Fox family of Hydesville, NY. Dexter decided to investigate.

Not only did he witness genuine mediumship, but he became a medium himself. Collaborating with Judge John Edmonds of the New York State Supreme Court, Dexter co-authored *Spiritualism, volumes I and II*, explaining the phenomena.



“It should be understood that I was not only conservative in regard to this question of spirit communication when it was first presented to my consideration, but I was positively opposed to it, and regarded the whole matter as either a foolish delusion or an absolute, outrageous deception, and that this opposition continued long after such proof had been offered,” Dexter explained in the introduction of volume I of the book.¹

He went on to explain that around September 10, 1851, he made arrangement with a friend to invite to his house “a medium of considerable powers” so that they could observe him under conditions where there would be no possibility of collusion or deception. Until then, he had never witnessed any spiritual manifestation and was entirely ignorant of the whole subject. At that first sitting, Dexter and his friend heard “spirit raps” and put questions to the unseen communicator, to which correct answers were given. Dexter was not satisfied, however, and asked the medium to remain over night and give another demonstration the next morning.

Immediately after breakfast, Dexter, his wife, two daughters, ages 14 and 9, and two friends formed a circle with the medium. After singing at the medium’s request, they experienced abundant manifestations before the communicating entity rapped out a message that “Mr. G.” (the medium) should go into the next room. His younger daughter then appeared visibly agitated and began trembling. Her arms and hands were violently shaken and thrown in every direction. “This effect of the magnetic influences was so sudden, so strange, so entirely unexpected by the child, that she became very much alarmed, and running to her mother, who was also deeply moved at this unlooked for manifestation, she said, while her voice trembled with fear, ‘Oh, mother! Take me away, take me away;’ but her arms were forcibly wrested, as it were, from her mother’s neck, and thrown violently up and down, and yet while they were so rapidly and forcibly moving in all directions, every fiber of the textures quivered as if trembling with palsy.”²

The young girl then began writing. "Her hand was made to write legibly and in bold, large letters, not in the least resembling her ordinary handwriting, full answers to all our questions, both mental and oral," Dexter continued the account. "And what was yet more remarkable, she wrote rapidly and easily, and the style of the composition and the spelling far excelled what we know was the character of her original attempts at composition, or her spelling, previous to this time."

Many correct answers were given to questions put by the sitters to the invisible communicators. At about one o'clock, the communicating spirits ordered the young girl to leave the room as she appeared fatigued. When she did not immediately comply, her chair was pulled out from under her by invisible forces and she fell to the floor. "She arose to go into the next room, and as she was passing a sofa she was taken up bodily, by the same unseen force, and deposited upon it, as gently as if laid there by her parents," Dexter went on.

But Dexter refused to believe that spirits had anything to do with it. He preferred to believe it was some kind of mind over matter action or the power of magnetic motion. "The idea that the spirits of our deceased friends could hold communion with ourselves on earth, could impart their feelings to us, give us a description of the various stages and conditions of their progress in the spheres above us, that they are constantly with those to whom they are attached, except when called away by the duties they are required to perform, that they have the power, through this new discovery, to explain to us every act of their spirit life, and receive from us the ordinary ideas which characterize our existence and connection here, was so strange, wonderful, and extraordinary, so incompatible with my education, so much opposed to all my preconceived opinions, conflicted so much with my religious belief, and with all that I had been instructed the Bible revealed to us, when compared with all that I had

seen at this circle, bewildered me. But I could not understand – I did not believe."³

Not long thereafter, Dexter was sitting alone in his office late at night, leaning back in a rocking chair with his right hand resting on the arm of the chair. "I was not, neither had I been thinking of spiritualism, for my thoughts were occupied in the subject I had been reading upon a few moments before," Dexter related. "As my hand lay on the arm of the chair I felt a singular sensation in the whole limb, as if the arm were grasped by two hands at the upper part. I attempted to raise it, but was unable to do so, and as soon as I made the effort to move it, the fingers were bent down tightly on the arm of the chair and grasped it firmly. Immediately the hand began to tremble, and as I watched the movement the whole limb was shaken violently. At this moment I distinctly heard two loud raps on the upper part of the side wall of the room, and it then occurred to me that this unseen power, whose manifestation I had so often witnessed, was in some way operating on me. To satisfy myself, I asked in an audible voice, 'Did the spirits just rap?' There were three distinct raps in reply. I then asked, 'Are the spirits trying to influence me?' Again, there were three distinct raps. At this I arose from my chair, arranged my books, and retired."⁴

Dexter explained that he initially resisted the impulses and stopped sitting in the circle. "During the time I abstained from sitting in the circle, I was twice lifted bodily from my bed, moved off its edge, and thus suspended in the air," he wrote. "The first time I was so dealt with, I had retired to a different room from the one I usually occupied. I had not been asleep, and was conscious of everything around me. As I lay composing myself for sleep, I discovered my whole body was slightly trembling in every fiber."⁵

The spirits persisted and Dexter eventually gave into the impulses, developing into an automatic writing medium. He met Judge Edmonds

in April 1852 and they formed a circle that met twice a week at Dexter's house. Profound messages purportedly coming from Emanuel Swedenborg, the 18th Century Swedish scientist turned mystic, and Francis Bacon, the late 16th and early 17th Century English philosopher, began flowing from his hand.

"I know nothing of what is written until after it is read to me, and frequently, when asked to read what has been communicated, I have found it utterly impossible to decipher it," Dexter explained. "Not only is the thought concealed, but after it has been read to me I lose all recollection of the subject, until again my memory is refreshed by the reading. This peculiar effect on my recollection occurred more frequently when the spirits commenced writing, and I have been told by them that it was produced by their efforts to separate the action of my own mind from their thoughts, when teaching on a subject which required several sittings to finish."⁶

Dexter stressed that many of the teachings were inconsistent with his own beliefs. He also

pointed out that the style and expressions of Swedenborg were unlike those of Bacon. Also, they came through in different handwriting.

Volume I of *Spiritualism*, setting forth many of the teachings of Swedenborg and Bacon from the spirit world in 505 pages, was published in 1853, while a second volume, consisting of 542 pages, was published in 1855, offering even more wisdom from Swedenborg and Bacon. The two spirit communicators eloquently explained the nature of reality and the meaning of life in a manner that appeals to reason, but it obviously was too much for orthodox religion and mainstream science to accept.

It is known that Edmonds came under attack by religionists and materialists alike and was forced to resign from the Supreme Court of New York and return to the practice of law. Historians have not recorded how Dexter fared after the publication of the books or what became of him thereafter.

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Notes:

¹ Edmonds, John W. and George T. Dexter, *Spiritualism – Vol. I*, Partridge & Brittan, 1853, p. 81.

² _____, p. 84.

³ _____, p. 85.

⁴ _____, pp. 89-90.

⁵ _____, p. 91.

⁶ _____, p. 93.