The Big Bird, the Big Lie, God, and Science

A young man claims to have amazing distant-healing powers, but a skeptical look at the facts raises serious questions.

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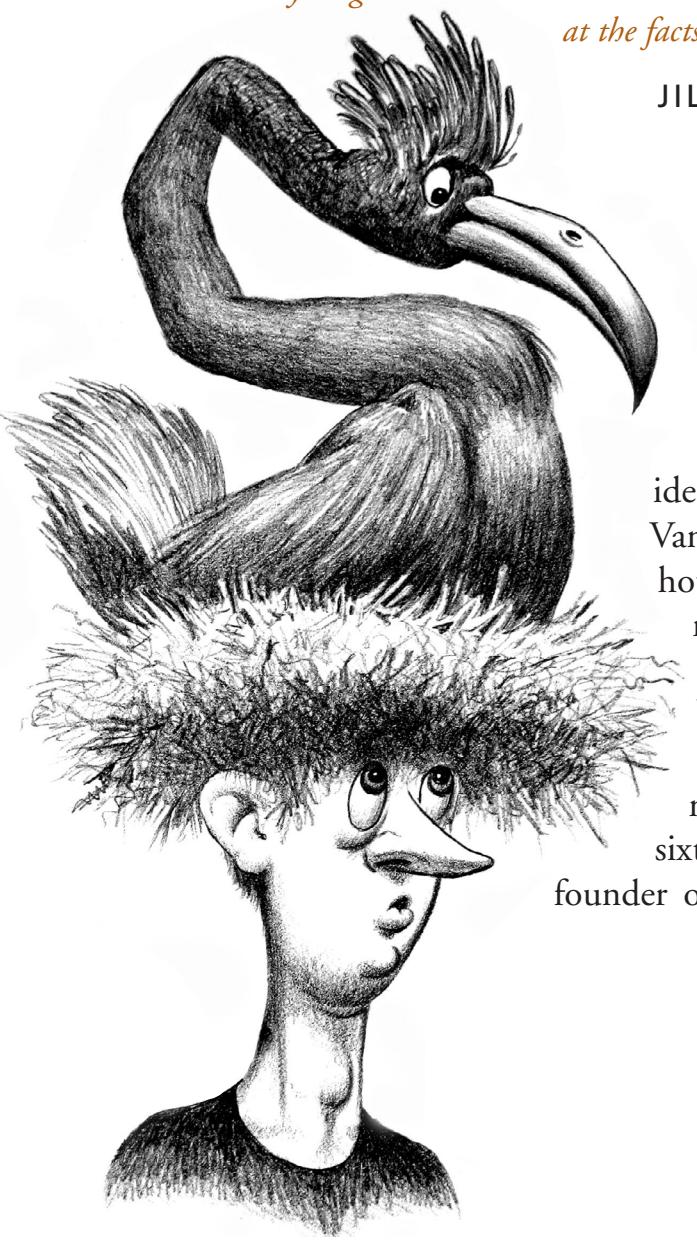

There was a time in the spring of 2004 when I was willing to entertain the idea that a nineteen-year-old kid in Vancouver, Canada, could, with a few hours' effort and from thousands of miles away, subvert the laws of biology and physics, and heal me of Lyme disease. I had some outsize claims to hang my hopes upon: former astronaut Edgar Mitchell, the sixth man to walk on the moon, and founder of the Institute of Noetic Sciences,

claimed that Adam had helped heal him of kidney cancer at a distance; aging rock icon Ronnie Hawkins was also, according to a 2003 feature article in *Rolling Stone* magazine, healed at a distance by Adam of pancreatic cancer. Gi-gong master Effie Chow, who was formerly a member of the White House's commission on complementary and alternative medicine, said this kid was the real deal, and had written a foreword to one of Adam's two books—available on his Web site, www.dreamhealer.com. In May 2004, medical doctors invited Adam to demonstrate his healing methods at the annual convention of the Association of Complementary Physicians of British Columbia. According to a July 10 article in the *Toronto Star* by writer John Goddard, Adam claimed that a bird he encountered "telepathically downloaded all the information of the universe into his brain. Ever since," the article reports, "he has been able to see baseball-size orbs of energy and light moving through the air."

Then there was the lure of his youth and anonymity—a kind of cloaked Leonardo diCaprio of healing, a teen whose photo magazines and newspapers respectfully refrained from publishing, a boy whose real name was never revealed. It seemed either bold or deeply cynical that he'd donned as his pseudonym the name of God's first human creation.

When I spoke with his mother, Liz, she said that when Adam works on someone "it looks like he's holding X-rays up to the light. His hands are outstretched, and he starts with his fingers manipulating stuff, and sometimes he uses his hands to move from screen to screen, as if he's pulling something from one side to the center. I suppose that's when he's getting a different holographic level." Adam himself said to me that when he goes into a trance, "I see three-dimensional images of the person in front of me, and I can go into different layers physically and energetically. Where it lights up, is where the problem is."

I was curious to have Adam work on me, and his parents told me he was willing (most communication to and from Adam comes through his parents, Liz and Frank, often by e-mail.) I let his family know I had Lyme disease, and told them that I was also interested in attending an upcoming workshop in Toronto—where, supposedly, Adam worked on a group of hundreds at once. His mother asked for a photo, which I sent by e-mail. Adam told me, "I can get information from a name, but as far as a strong connection I need a picture. From a picture I get whatever I want. I look at the picture once and I go into the other room and go into a trance when I do a healing. Everything around me goes dark and I see these images in front of me."

After a few distant healing sessions, where I dutifully lay on my bed in the dark and relaxed for about twenty minutes, Adam had little to report to me except that my nervous system looked foggy, I needed to alter my diet, and I had emotional issues. I had equally little news to report, at least about my health status, and e-mails between me and Adam's parents—Liz and Frank—became almost acriminous; his mother in particular contended I was not participating actively in my own self-healing, and I admitted I was not doing the daily visualizations recommended in Adam's books. These visualizations included exercises like imagining a lightning bolt coming down through the top of your head, and did not appeal to me. Adam could give me a few treatments, his parents explained, but what ultimately happened was apparently up to me and my participation.

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While being a seemingly truant patient, I had, however, been asking questions. Edgar Mitchell, one of Adam's strongest proponents, told me quite openly on the phone that he never had biopsy-proven cancer. "I had a sonogram and MRI that was consistent with renal carcinoma," Mitchell recalled when I interviewed him, "which is about the best they can do without a biopsy. I didn't have the biopsy." Adam worked on Mitchell from December of 2003 until June, when the "irregularity was gone and we haven't seen it since." But he didn't have the biopsy. Is Mitchell convinced it was cancer? Sure. Is there any definitive proof? No.

Ronnie Hawkins's story also raised questions: Bryce Taylor, chief of surgery at the University Health Network in Toronto, opened Hawkins up in 2002 and discovered a hard lump at the head of the pancreas, entangled with major veins and arteries, too difficult to remove. The lump kept growing—consistent with malignancy but still, three biopsies failed to turn up cancer cells. Adam worked on Hawkins from a distance; in addition, the rocker told the *Toronto Sun* in 2003, "I'd have to go into hours to tell you about all the Indian recipes and stuff that was sent to me . . . plus I doubled up on the whisky and dope. . . . I don't know which one cured me, but it might have been a combination of all of it." Not exactly a proven cancer cure. As for other, less famous individuals, there was the typical range of anecdotes—some with cancer had died, others were still alive; a woman with fibromyalgia told me she'd been cured of it by Adam

Researching Adam a little further, I used a neat search engine, waybackmachine, to view his earlier, archived Web

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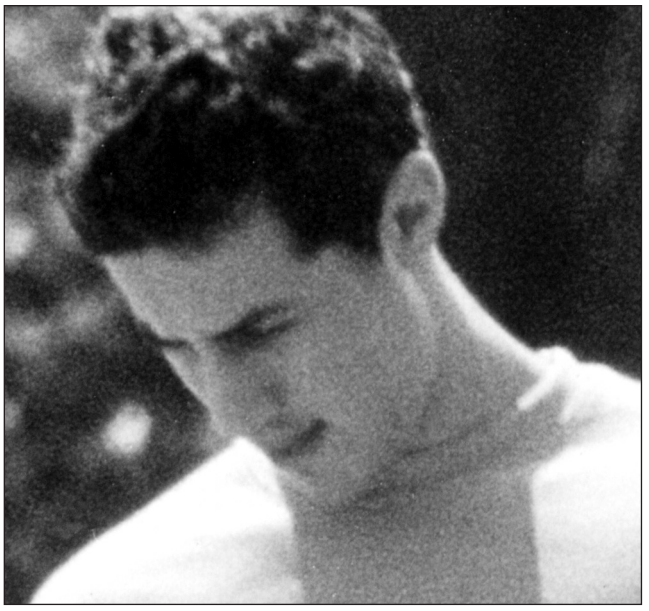

Adam Dreamhealer (Photo by Daniel Loxton.)

pages, which included other domain names, such as distanthealing.com and energyhealer.com. In three years the healer had blossomed remarkably. His homepage of June 2002 was headlined in all capitals: "LONG DISTANCE XRAY VISION AND HEALING." Further down the page: "Please do not confuse this site with all the phoney healers on the net. This is a very real ability." In a June 2002 FAQ on the Web page, Adam explained: "The healer possesses a gift, which allows him to have x-ray vision and the ability to remove the energy blocks . . . he energetically enters your body and removes the blockages . . . the same process seems to work whether the person is sitting next to the healer or on the other side of the world." The FAQ also noted that "To save time and increase the healing please let us know the exact problem you are having. This allows us to concentrate on that area of the body, rather than doing a complete body scan which takes more energy. If you are interested in just witnessing the ability he has at determining where you have problems then feel free to keep your ailments to yourself."

Back then the cost of a brief report was $20, removing energy blockages another $25. By November of 2002, the front page had a map of the world, and captions noting that "Adam is a sixteen-year-old healer. . . . Recently helped people with pancreatic cancer, tumors, asthma and breast cancer. . . ." By the time Adam published his first book, *Dreamhealer*, X-ray vision had shape-shifted into "quantum holographic healing." Adam cited Edgar Mitchell as inspiration for this new interpretation; indeed, says Mitchell, "My role has been largely to explain to him how I see him getting the information." By 2005, Adam's weekend workshops were selling out months in advance, with 300–500 people gathering to pay $99 Canadian for a day of wisdom and group healing. A requirement of the workshop: read both of Adam's self-published books, priced at $15, distributed by Hampton Roads Publishers. In addition, a book deal was in the works with Penguin Canada, for the first two books along with a new one, for a substantial sum. So, you do the math.

The Big Bird and the Big Lie

There is a theory in psychology called the "Big Lie"—if you tell a colossal lie often enough, people tend to believe it's at least partly true. And yet who, if they pause for just a moment to reconsider, can believe the story that a bird downloaded all the information in the universe into one teenager's brain? How exactly was this feat performed? And what does it even mean? Can Adam explain string theory, tell us what happened before the Big Bang, and verify whether panspermia is a valid theory? Does he know what tubeworms at the sea vents are made of, and the elements at Earth's core? Does he have information about the torque of DNA and how it changes enzyme reactions? What *is* all the information in the universe?

Adam likes to tell the story of this bird at his workshops, and when I interviewed him last spring, and asked his mother to remain on the phone line with us, I asked him to recount the story for me personally. At age sixteen, he told me, he dreamed about a huge black bird that told him to go to "Nootka." "I had this vision in my sleep," said Adam, "it was such a vivid dream there was no way I could ignore it," he told me. "I was soaring across the ocean, then running through the woods, and all of a sudden I stopped and a big black bird was sitting in front of me, and it told me I had to go to Nootka. I didn't know where Nootka was, never heard of it before." Adam told his family, they did a bit of research, and discovered it was an island west of Vancouver island with water access only, and that a boat went there twice a week. The entire family went to visit, and, said Adam, "I knew exactly where it was, I had this whole place memorized yet I'd never been there before in my life. I was walking along the main path for a bit and knew I had to turn off and go through the bushes . . . I saw the big black bird just like in my dreams, 100 yards away. It was massive, four feet tall, we all saw it." They took photos; the ornithologists at local bird stores, however, could not identify it. At workshops, Adam will flash a photo of the bird on a screen via projector.

I asked Adam if he would send me a few photos. I'd bring them to the American Museum of Natural History, where experts could surely tell me if he'd discovered a new species. That would certainly be news. Without missing a beat, he said, "We're negotiating with a major book distributor and we don't want any pictures out there before then." When I asked him why, since his book and lectures suggest that he sees in such detail into the human body, he had only seen that my nervous system was foggy, he replied, "There are no other major issues that stand out at all, it's a fog throughout the whole thing. I don't know what you're expecting. That's pretty much all I can describe. Usually there's a lot more little things here and there that I could describe but with you it's just the nervous system."

Not everybody believes the Big Bird Story; on a newsgroup called alt.slack in 2003, there were some witty comments about Adam's claims. Someone by the *nom de plume* of "ghost" asked, "Quantum healing ability? Does that mean he comes in little packets?"; another fellow answered, "No, it means if the healing doesn't work, it actually did work, you're just looking

at the wrong cat." I laughed out loud at that one, and hope that if Schrödinger were alive, he would too.

But what is most interesting about Adam may be the phenomenon of distant healing itself—a field which the NIH's Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine has spent $2.2 million funding in the last five years. I wonder whether the surge of interest in this particular form of healing is, in large part, the result of our global community—one where airplanes, television, cellphones, satellite, and the internet connect us at a distance anyway. In this cyber-soaked, science-savvy world, distant healing may be the latest battleground over God. As Anne Harrington, Ph.D., co-director of the Harvard University Mind, Brain and Behavior Initiative, bluntly states: "If prayer works—in ways that cannot be attributed to the placebo effect, social support, or stress reduction—then medical science has apparently obtained evidence for God's existence."

No wonder this field is so hotly contested and folks like Adam so revered by some. Research into distant healing is now regularly conducted by scientists at universities as respectable as Columbia and Harvard and Duke. A survey of 31,000 adults by the CDC last year found that 43 percent pray for their own health, while 24 percent ask others to pray for their health—that means one quarter of Americans are, in essence, involved in distance healing. Emotions run hot and high: "It's an outrage that the NIH is funding this kind of research," says Dr. Richard Sloan, a professor of behavioral medicine at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University in New York. "It's just horrible science and represents a rise in irrationality which is very dangerous to all the scientific accomplishments of the last three hundred years." In turn, says Larry Dossey, M.D., executive editor of the journal *Explore*, author of *Prayer Is Good Medicine*, and well-known for his interest in all aspects of what he calls non-local consciousness, including distant healing: "I believe the fact that a shift happens, period, means the interaction of consciousness with the so-called material world, which has been denied in modern science. Whether one moves quanta or mountains is not the point. That either happens is what's significant."

I agree with Larry Dossey—if consciousness can interact at all with "matter," something interesting is going on—and on the spectrum of mysticism and skepticism, I find myself exactly like the double helix: wound of one strand of rationalist science, and one strand of pure mystic. As Robert Provine wrote in a recent essay on John Brockman's The Edge forum, "There is not any 'blue' in electromagnetic radiation, pitch of B-flat in pressure changes in the air, or sweetness in sucrose. All are neurological derivatives of the physical world, not the thing itself." We're all in search of the thing itself. Few of us, even the most supremely rational folk, don't in some corner of ourselves hold open a door for mystery, for the "thing" that is ultimately platonic in its nature—whether it's math, a unified field theory, or a personal God. As William James wrote, "The deepest thing in our nature is the region of the heart in which we dwell alone with our faiths and fears." Whether we're inclined to make a Pascalian wager, or argue against miracles as Hume did, we all live in a world influenced by deeply held beliefs—and not all those beliefs can be wholly accurate or objective.

But when considering someone like Adam, or in attempting to study distant healing, we should take extraordinary care. What constitutes a dose of prayer, anyway? These studies are exceedingly hard to design, and no study follows exactly the same protocol, rendering meta-analysis very slippery. What of all the unknown sources of prayer? As Richard Sloan points out, "When you conduct one of these studies, you have no control over friends, family, colleagues, neighbors, and members of religious congregations praying for someone who is ill. And that's not to mention the members of religious orders who pray daily for all the sick around the world. It's likely that all this supplemental prayer vastly exceeds the distant healing from designated intercessors in the studies."

Whether you are a theist, deist, nontheist, atheist, or pantheist, distant healing and its close relative, petitionary prayer, are questionable. "The problem with distant healing and petitionary prayer is that they don't accept that the universe is beyond our control," says bioethicist Stephen Post of Case Western University, head of the Institute for Unlimited Love. "Even if you're a theist you cannot presume God will answer your prayers. There's a certain human arrogance in thinking that somehow I can impose my will on the divine, and that I can actually measure prayer's effect."

Perhaps the most practical studies in distant healing are the ones that narrow their band of influence to a very precise and specific marker. In 1990, for example, William Braud, M.D., placed red blood cells in test tubes of hypotonic saline—which usually causes hemolysis, where the cells swell and burst. He reported that distant intention significantly slowed this process, protecting the cells. Why aren't there more studies like this? Why don't institutions like Harvard and Duke, instead of studying prayer on far-flung humans, follow the traditional arc that biotechs and pharmaceuticals do when attempting to test a new drug: start with in vitro studies. Why not see if healers—in the same room, the next room, the next town, or the next country—can significantly impact hemolysis or bacterial growth in a petri dish? Then move on to animal studies, which can be conducted in controlled conditions. Leave humans for the "clinical" trials, *if* the drug proves effective and safe.

When we hope that a kid like Adam is real (particularly when he borrows the language of quantum mechanics, even in a very crude way), or design studies to see if distant healers can impact the outcome of cardiac patients, it's because, as Anne Harrington pointed out, we really *are* arguing over God. The problem is, we are attempting to use science to win the argument—and in a sloppy fashion. We don't study healing on blood cells and bacteria much because they aren't the stuff of theology (except of course, to biologists, who marvel at them under the microscope). Slowing bacterial growth just won't suffice for a Pascalian wager. We need a four-foot black bird on the island of Nootka for that. □