

Archives of the Impossible oral history interviews

Subject: Whitley Strieber

Interviewer: Thomas Millary

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Thomas Millary: All right, we are recording. So, for those listening or watching, my name is Thomas Millary. I am presently a PhD student in the Rice University Department of Religion, and I am among those working on the Archives of the Impossible, a series of collections of materials related to the paranormal, the fantastic, the anomalous, and I'm here right now with Whitley Strieber, one of our donors, and we're going to have a conversation about his life, his work, and this collection. Whitley is a prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction and among the world's most famous experiencers of the kind of paranormal and spiritual phenomena that the Archives of Impossible are all about and we're very excited to have his collection as part of the archives. Before we go on, Whitley, would you like to introduce yourself further at all?

Whitley Strieber: I'm most recently the author of A New World. Prior to that The Afterlife Revolution. I am working on a book about Jesus, which should be out and about 6 months from now in the summer of 2020, August of 2020. That's about it.

Thomas Millary: Excellent. We'll be looking forward to that. So, starting with the collection itself. The collection that you have donated, it entails a stunning amount of letters that you had received, related to your experiences. So, could you just begin with that, and talk about the scope of the response that you've received to Communion, your communion experiences, and then the history of that collection and the process of maintaining it and organizing it? Could you talk about the letters themselves?

Whitley Strieber: All right. The letters began to come in immediately after Communion was published in 1987 and there were many, many more letters than anyone ever dreamed. When we published the book, the general thinking was that 25 or 30 people in the world had had this bizarre experience and nobody really knew what it was. Some of them thought it was alien abduction, but I was, I still am indeed, keeping an open mind. And then the letters began to pour in and they represented the most extraordinary, collection of unusual human experience that's ever been assembled anywhere, in the end. After the first week or so, my wife, Anne, realized what was happening, fortunately, and we started collecting the letters; she hired a secretary and the two of them worked on the letters for years, and we got hundreds of thousands of letters and I think she saved out about 30,000, 25 or 30,000, that had a rich, full account of some kind of an experience in them. She boiled that down to a group of 115 and published that as The Communion Letters and we kept the others in a file, in a storage space for years, because there was no interest in them whatsoever. But we felt like they were a human testament of an unusual sort to say the least, and so fortunately, Rice came along; the archive was created and I immediately said to Jeff Kripal, you can have the letters, and there they are.

Thomas Millary: Here they are. Yes, yes, that's great. And since you mentioned Jeff Kripal just now, so several years ago you and Dr. Kripal co-authored a book called *The Super Natural*, could you say a little bit more about how you initially met and would come to work with Jeff Kripal in that way?

Whitley Strieber: I believe in about 2009, Jeff contacted me, wanting me to read some pages from *Authors of the Impossible* which he had written about me. And so I read the pages and I thought they were quite well done and very even handed, and we got into an email correspondence and it developed into a friendship that is a close friendship now. And sooner or later, it occurred to one or both of us, I'm not sure which one, that we should try doing a collaboration. Because, I basically here, I have experiences, and Jeff has a very highly developed interpretive skill, and an excellent mind, and a very open mind. And so it was a perfect combination, I thought. And what I would do would be to write experiences out and then Jeff would write commentary and we'd go back and forth, and the book consists of experience commentary, experience commentary, and it's the only book of its kind in the world. And it's the only time someone who has been kind of dismissed as an alien abductee, nobody really thinks about that, is being addressed, his experiences are being addressed by someone with a much broader perspective than that. And that's what I think makes the book so valuable. Because there's something going on in the human world and has been for a long time. We've never been able to put a really effective name on it. We've never been able to dimensionalize it. And the book, *Super Natural*, it's two words, is a step in that direction.

Thomas Millary: Right, right. Now in addition to books like *The Super Natural* and *Communion*, you're a novelist and you've written quite a bit of fiction throughout your life starting from before your *Communion* experiences up until now. I would be curious to hear a little bit about that aspect of your work and how your writing of fiction interfaces with your life as an experiencer who also writes about that.

Whitley Strieber: Well, I have been writing fiction since I was 6. When I was a boy, I would write stories and we didn't have a typewriter, so my mother would recopy them in her own hand so they wouldn't look like they were written by a child, then we'd send them off to magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly* and, unbelievably, we got back more than one note, not just a rejection slip, but more than one note saying, this is interesting, please send us more. Finally, we managed to get a typewriter, but by that time my teenage years had arrived and with them all the storms of those years and I didn't ever follow up and didn't get back to writing again until I was in college. My fiction work is really important to me. It feels different from non-fiction, very different, because it's a chance to explore character and to use my imagination in story. Interesting thing about three of the early novels is that the first one, *The Wolfen*, they're curiously like the sort of stories of the gray aliens, they have big arresting eyes, they're gray in color; they're predatory. It's just kind of uncanny. Of course, they're wolves, not aliens. There was no suggestion of anything else. And then this next book *Hunger*, which is about a female vampire who is a tall blonde woman, and that fits into the sort of folklore of *The Blondes* as well. Which was odd, and I didn't recognize that until fans begin mentioning it to me years after I published *Communion*. And then the next book, or not the next book but a later book, excuse me, is called *Cat Magic* and it's a deep dive into the fairy faith. Which of course, is an integral part of the close encounter experience and this book came, it was the last fiction I wrote before

Communion and so this was in my psyche in some way before it emerged onto the page as the Communion experience which strangely enough was extremely physical. I was injured so badly that I'm actually still scarred from it. The scars will be with me all my life. So it was an intense experience. And how this all interfaces between the physical, the imaginary, the imaginal and so forth, is the great question that I'm hoping we will continue to deal with in a rational manner that didn't happen when I went out on the Communion tour because I went from show to show to the tune of The Twilight Zone or The X Files music and, so, "you were abducted by aliens," no that may not be what happened, I said, but I was swept away.

Thomas Millary: And since you're talking about how some of your earlier writings would prefigure some of these later experiences, something I'm also interested in is the theme of your childhood. Your early life experience is something that comes up in your writing from time to time in books like *The Secret School* and others. So, I was just curious if you could talk a little bit about some of those early life experiences whether anomalous or otherwise and the significance of them for your later life as a writer and as an experiencer.

Whitley Strieber: I had a lucky childhood. I was just an inherently wild child and born to parents to whom that was fine. They were very permissive from even a very early age, and they didn't mind that they had a little boy who burned down the house trying to build an anti-gravity machine. I was still welcome in the home after that, after it was repaired. And they were very much always kind of rolling with it. Something apparently happened early on that kind of cracked the cosmic egg and when I say apparently, my childhood memories are too strange to say, oh I'm sure this happened because, and this is true in *The Secret School*, in the book I say, most of it, I constantly say this could be my childhood imagination trying to interpret extremely strange memories that as a child I couldn't even begin to make sense of. But anyway, back in 1952, between August and October, I believe that I was in a program at Randolph Air Force Base in San Antonio, I can't be sure that's even where it was, but it involved the use of a Skinner box and being trapped in this box and sort of a forced learning experience that was so stressful that my immune system broke down and I ended up isolated at Brooke General Hospital for about 6 weeks in 1952 and taken out of school. My parents took me out of the program. I always had the sense that it had a very imaginary feel to it, but then, it turned out that my closest friend in the world was also recruited for it, but he's 2 years older than I. I was recruited at 7 and I was not present when the recruiting took place; he was recruited at 9 and he was present. And his parents when they heard about the Skinner box used in enhanced learning, an enhanced learning program, they wouldn't have anything to do with it. So it existed in other words. It was real. Now here's another thing that happened; I begin to think, began, my mind began to go back to my childhood and because, in one of the hypnosis sessions I did with Dr. Donald Klein prior to actually writing *Communion*, I spontaneously regress, regressed to the age of 11 and he told me, and he was a very distinguished professional in his field as the head of the Department of Psychiatry of the State of New York, you couldn't get a much better credential than that. He said, you know, Whitley, what happened just now is what happens in abuse cases, when someone spontaneously connects with earlier abuse. And we were very curious as to whether or not I was remembering abuse experiences or exactly what these things were. So I eventually, a few years later, went back to San Antonio and began to explore my past as that had sort of come back to mind, and I had, in *The Secret School*, very specifically mentioned a certain place in the Almas Basin which where I thought I had gone as a child in the night, but when I actually went

there, went to the Basin and went and rode around the area, I couldn't imagine bicycling over there in the middle of the night at the age of 9 and 10. It was inconceivable. But then, I was out with Edward Conroy and a man taking videos, and I was explaining to them, I'd been out in the Basin looking for the place many times, and I was explaining to them how it must be imaginal, etcetera and so forth, and then I saw the tree, the very tree that I had described in *The Secret School* so carefully. And I walked and it was all there. There were benches that had been, we had been sitting on were now in ruins, but they were still there. And I was completely flabbergasted, because there was some element of this very fantastical experience that was real. And it's just like the Communion experience; you think well this can't be physically real, and then I end up in a doctor's office being told I was raped. So remarkable. Fortunately, I'm a person who loves questions like this. I'm not gonna jump to quick answers. I mean, obviously after 30 years of this, I'm certainly not going to jump to quick answers.

Thomas Millary: Sure, and speaking of which, so you mentioned *A New World*, your most recent work of non-fiction, which is your most updated statement on how you're thinking about the significance of these experiences. Could you elaborate a little bit more on that, on that book, on *A New World*, and what you're trying to accomplish through that one?

Whitley Strieber: Well, my experience is an ongoing life experience, it's part of my life. It's not something that happened and then didn't happen anymore. The Visitors as I call them, are very much in my life. And they interface with me in a lot of different ways. Not generally overtly, physically, in other words, I'm not often sitting face to face with something that looks like a non-human being; that happens, it's happened maybe five times in the past 20 years and usually it's just so little time involved that I can't be sure even happened, or what happened important. But there began to be contacts that involved me being touched or awakened physically, in fact, Jeff was present during one of those experiences at Esalen and they're physical, but there's no being, you don't see anyone, but you certainly are aware of there being a presence. And I began to work toward the idea of a new book, and we sort of planned it together and then one of the most remarkable things in my life happened. While I was actually writing the book, I ended up at a conference on the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux Reservation in South Dakota and to my mind-bending astonishment, I was riding along in a car, it's a big reservation and I closed my eyes and I saw a completely different world, it was like a different reality imposed, superimposed on this one. But it was entirely clear and very detailed and is, in other words, we were riding along a road and it was a graded road, but when I closed my eyes it wasn't a graded road anymore, it was an old, old country road that followed the contours of the land with the result that, when my eyes were closed and I was looking into this other reality and the graded road went straight, the old road went down a hill, it felt like the car had taken flight, I wasn't driving obviously. It felt like the car had taken flight and then I found that I could look at this at any time. I could lean down in a field and look at the flowers and the grasses and close my eyes and see other versions of the same flowers and grasses. I was privileged to be invited to a family ceremony all right, they're quite secretive and I'm not going to go into any detail about it for that reason, but this was a powerful, powerful ceremony. I'd never actually experienced anything like it. It was the most powerful religious ceremony I'd ever witnessed. And I've been in some Vodun ceremonies which can be very powerful, but this was, this was the most extraordinary. And so I thought while I was watching it and, and participating to an extent, I would close my eyes and see what, if anything unusual happened. And I closed my eyes, and when I did that, the music, the

drumming and the chanting, suddenly clicked off and a distance away, and where the clearing, where the ceremony had been taking place was now empty. It was just an empty field. And I opened my eyes, everything changed back again. And I could do it like this. It was just fantastic. Then a UFO showed up over the thing and was there for about an hour, occasionally shooting out these little flashes of, little sparks and hanging there above the thing, everyone watching it. What a life! I'm not going to try to explain any of this, although I do go, in the book, into the possibility of the existence of a mirror universe, which has got a lot of surprising scientific validity as physics is gradually going beyond the many worlds theory and into a rather different space in terms of understanding where we are. And it turns out that this mirror universe could be quite real and there's even a substantial amount of evidence of this physical evidence. There was an experiment in Antarctica in 2016 which was measuring and numbering neutrinos, it was a neutrino experiment carried out on a balloon. And about a year and a half ago to the amazement of the experimenters, they discovered a high energy neutrino had been captured by the system coming up from below. Now this seems, oh well, who knows, who cares about physics, it's all too complicated. This is terribly important, because high energy neutrinos cannot pass through the planet. There will be impact, they will stop in the planet. Low energy neutrinos, which are the bulk of neutrinos in the universe, can go through anything. But not these. So how is it that it came up from the ground? The only explanation so far that anyone's come up with is that for that neutrino, Earth was not there. Therefore, it was in a parallel universe, in another universe. And there are many other sort of signs, I wouldn't say definitive proof, but signs, strong signs that this may be real. Back to my own experience, the strangest part of it was that it also affected other people. I was at the Wounded Knee Burial Ground with people and looking over the graves and thinking about my own feelings about the Native peoples and their suffering and, frankly, mourning, because it's a terrible story and we're all part of it. And a man kept walking up to me and then walking away and walking up and walking away, and I thought, what's he doing, but I didn't think much about it. And then he walked up and said, Mr. Strieber, I wanted to ask you a question. Can you see the bones, when I look down at the grave when I'm standing beside you, I can see down into the ground and I can see the bones of the people in the graves. Can you see that? And I said, no, I can't. And he said, but when I step away from you, I can't see it anymore. It's only right beside you. Well, I have no idea what to say about that except that it happened. Witness to the impossible, author of the impossible, archives of the impossible. I'm in the right place, my friend.

Thomas Millary: That's right, that's right, that's right. And since we've covered some earlier instances of your work and experiences and more recent stuff, which, as I mentioned, you have such a large output, both your fiction and non-fiction, one thing that I wonder, is there a facet of your work that you wish received more attention? Since you've written about so many things over the years, in these different kinds of writings that you've done. Is there something that you wish people paid more attention to, or you got to talk about more in terms of your writing?

Whitley Strieber: Well, I'm also a poet, but I don't publish my poetry, not because it's bad, it's not bad, I'm fairly deep into, into poetry; I understand how to write poetry, and I've always thought I'd like to publish my poetry, but I hesitate, and I suppose I'll leave that to my kids. But in terms of my books, I can't get like reviews in magazines or New York Times or anything. I'm a pariah. And I'm sick and tired of being a pariah, frankly. I don't deserve to be a pariah. But for example, just recently I was trying to get permission from, from a songwriter to use some lines

from one of her songs in one of my books. She wouldn't do it because I was Whitley Strieber. And you know I'm the alien abduction man, Mr. UFO, the rectal probe man, har. And that's kind of what I would like to leave behind. I don't think I will. I think I'm going to die that and I haven't been reviewed in, for example in the New York Times in 20 years. And they would never review me, I'm, as I say, I'm a pariah.

Thomas Millary: Hmm. I see. I see. Now, among the other collections in the archives of the impossible, which as you point out is a very fitting place for you and your work, there are other ufologists, people like Jacques Vallée and his materials are part of these collections as well and so, being as prominent of an experimenter of the phenomena as you are, one thing that I wonder is, whether it's Jacques Vallée or other ufologists, are there other people who have written prominently about this who you find particularly insightful, or found helpful over the years in thinking about conceptualizing and interpreting your own experiences of the phenomenon?

Whitley Strieber: Well, you bring up Jacques, who has been a friend for, oh gosh, 30 years. He has been an enormous influence on me and my thinking. My wife Anne just thought he was absolutely brilliant and since she herself was absolutely brilliant, I certainly respected that. And I've written some forewords for his books and he's written blurbs for some of my books. We don't necessarily agree on everything, but what would be the point if we did? I mean there's no exploration if you're both on the same path. I think that the, one of the most interesting thing, things about Jacques is it goes down two roads at the same time. One is the road of the imaginal and the other is the road of the physical. And he manages to do research into the area, into very physical areas of UFO encounters and also make sense of it all in the context of the imaginal without pushing the one or the other aside. And I think, I'm very impressed with that. Jeff, of course, is a tremendous influence on me because of the perspective he brings of contextualizing it in terms of religion and beliefs and so forth and so on. I think that's very valuable and again, Jacques' book *Passport to Magonia* about the relationship between the old fairy faith and the modern UFO lore was seminal in my life. My wife as soon as she heard about it, she said we're going out and getting that book right away. It was already out of print and we got it from The Strand Bookstore in New York and just absolutely devoured it. It was life changing, mind changing. And so, Jacques was a tremendously important influence. Other influences, Hal Puthoff from SRI and now TTSA has been a great influence. He's much more on the physical side of it but we are good friends and we've debated and talked about this sort of thing endlessly. As to where it actually lies. And look, there are many, many others. I just mentioned the three because there are so many others as well.

Thomas Millary: Absolutely. You mentioned the afterlife book earlier and I was just curious, could you speak a little bit more to this emphasis on the afterlife that has appeared in your work in recent years?

Whitley Strieber: Well, not actually in recent years. It goes back a while. When Annie was first reading the letters, one day she came out of her office with some letters in her hand and she said, Whitley, you know this has something to do with what we call death. And I said, what do you mean? And she said, she said, well look, and letter after letter, people are meeting their dead with the supposed aliens. And that actually happened at our cabin. It happened quite frequently that people would, in one room, would meet a dead friend, would walk into the room and in

another room there would be aliens waking people up. So, what could be going on? It was, just, it, so that kind of started it. And then after, sometime in the 90s, I'm not certain of this, but I think Anne and I discussed, when we decided, I came to this, and pretty much so did she, a very secular person. I was interested in things like the the Gurdjieff Work, but in terms of intensifying and expanding consciousness, not from a spiritual standpoint so much. But when we began to see these letters and began to have these other people at our house having experiences with the dead and the Visitors, we became aware of the fact that realm must actually exist. And then I had experiences, extraordinary experiences with the dead at the cabin as well, so at some point we had a discussion, I'm not gonna say we made a pact, that the one of us who died first, which we always assumed would be me, would come back if possible, but not directly, but to friends, whom we never told anything about, we never told anyone a word of it. We never spoke a word of it to anyone, in fact. In fact, we more or less dropped it after a brief conversation sometime in the mid-90s. Then Annie passes away, 7:45 on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2015 and at 9:30 the phone rings and it's a friend with no idea that Anne's died. And the friend says, Whitley, I just had the strangest thing happen. I heard Anne say to me in my ear to call you. And I said, and then she says, is she all right? And I said, Belle, Anne died an hour and a half ago. I almost didn't pick up the phone, I was so grief stricken and I thought the last thing I want is a call now. But I took it anyway. This continued to happen over the next couple of weeks. At least half a dozen times or more, and Anne, after that, after I realized she still existed, she taught me how to communicate with her, which the last time I did it was about half an hour before this conversation. And it is part of my life now. And it's extraordinary, because not only does she communicate with me, you want a good researcher, try one from the other side. We're writing a book together that is unusual, let me put it that way. In fact, since Annie passed away, my research skills have skyrocketed. I wrote a big novel called In Hitler's House right after she passed away, which is a faux memoir of a young American German who kind of falls in with Hitler at the age of 19 in 1931, before Hitler is, a big, big horror that he ends up as a friend of Hitler's but, obviously, he's also an ethical human being and he winds up as being a spy in Hitler's immediate entourage of people, in his most intimate inner circle. And to write a book like that, you need to be able to write as if you were there and as if you lived in the 30s, as if it was simply part of your life, because it's a memoir. And then it was amazing how the research worked. I learned all kinds of things about how to ask for things, and where to get them and things would fall together in what people call synchronicities constantly, and if you read the public reviews of the book (it went to reviewers, but they wouldn't review it), they say it's as if it was written by someone who was really there and one of them even wrote me an email saying, you know, I was inspired to really try to look into Hitler's life to see if this man existed, and I don't think he did, but if you have any idea that he might have existed, please let me know. And I said, I made him up. Taking that skill forward into the next books that were written, The Afterlife Revolution, A New World, and now the new book about Jesus has been a wonderful life experience. I mean, I'm lucky to have this relationship across the bridge between the worlds. And in a world where 90 percent of the people don't even believe a thing like that could exist. I don't care. It does.

Thomas Millary: Yeah, that's extraordinary. The last question that I have for you here - you've written and spoken so extensively about your experiences, over these years, and like you said, it's been a continuous thing not just something that happened to you with the initial Communion events. But I just have to ask, how has writing and speaking about these things for so long, how

has this changed your relationship to these events, both how you deal with them in this ongoing way and how you relate to these initial events that happened a few decades ago?

Whitley Strieber: Well, I know a lot of things now and not all of them are pretty. This is a difficult, complex, extremely complex experience. I think that anyone approaching it has to be really very careful, because it can, it can turn on you. It can turn on you mentally. I think it can destabilize you mentally. I think it can be physically dangerous at times. Two things have happened simultaneously over the years in terms of the public. The first one is that quite a few people who now flock to my website have become very sophisticated about this. You know, my website is [unknowncountry.com](http://unknowncountry.com) and if you go on there, you don't see a bunch of people, believing in UFO abductions, you see a lot of people with very sophisticated questions about what happened to them, and that's a huge change. At the same time, as this is kind of focused in the world in a way, uh, there's been a real hardening against me in the intellectual community. I'm a pariah in PEN, the PEN organization, and there was a time when I was welcome in Elaine's and all of the literary haunts in New York. No more. And it's worse now than it was, much worse now than it was right after the *Communion* book was written. People were willing to entertain it then, because they thought in some way it's not real. Now, they think that in some way it is real and they don't want to face that. Because it says to them, this is quite wrong, but they fear that my, their intellectual content is superseded by this intellectual content of this mysterious presence. That happens to be profoundly untrue, but they don't know that, so they're fearful.

Thomas Millary: Right, right. Now, would you like to add anything else for people listening or watching about yourself, your work, the collection?

Whitley Strieber: I would like to add something about them. Keep your mind open. One of the smartest things my wife ever said was the human species is too young to have beliefs. What we need are good questions. And she said that after death. So there you go. That's it.

Thomas Millary: Excellent. Excellent. Well thank you so much, Whitley. I really appreciate your time. Thank you for talking with me and answering these questions.

Whitley Strieber: Well, thank you. It's a great pleasure and I am so appreciative of Rice and the archive. It is such a great blessing.