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The Hummingbird Takes Off

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In Memoriam Charles Theodore Tart (1937 –2025): The Hummingbird Takes Off¹

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Tart with his doctoral student Etzel Cardeña, circa 1987

A giant in many fields, Charles Tart, has passed away. The subtitle of this *In Memoriam* refers to an homage I wrote earlier comparing him to a hummingbird that rapidly pollinates many fields that had remained mostly barren since the times of William James and F. W. H. Myers (Cardeña, 2023). James was the peerless phrase-maker and philosophical thinker of states of consciousness. Tart supplemented him by being **the** experimentalist and systematizer of states of consciousness. He also made major contributions to other areas including parapsychology, the integration of reflective practices in everyday life, transpersonal psychology, and, central to him, the integration of spiritual beliefs and science, seeking to avoid dogmas from both sides.

To start at the beginning, Charles Theodore Tart (he only used the initial of his middle name) was born April 29, 1937, in Morrisville, Pennsylvania, but grew up in New

¹ This obituary is partly based on: Cardeña, E. (in press). Charles Tart: A noetic pilgrim's progress. Foreword. in J. Mishlove (Ed.), *A science of the soul: Seventy years of exploring consciousness and parapsychology. Conversations with Charles T. Tart*. White Crow. Address correspondence to: Etzel Cardeña, Ph.D., Thorsen Professor of Psychology, Lund University, etzel.cardena@psy.lu.se

Jersey. In his Introduction to an important series of interviews with him (Tart, in press), he talks of his Lutheran upbringing and the unconditional love he received from his religious grandmother, who died when he was eight. From an early age he had a great interest in chemistry and electricity, maintaining a lab in his family's basement. He always had a strong practical side (he secured a radiotelephony license), which he would use later to devise machines to test his learning theory of psi phenomena (Tart, 1976).

Tart started his university studies majoring in electrical engineering at the foremost institution for it, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where he was influenced by lectures on parapsychology and cofounded the MIT Psychic Research Society. He transferred to Duke University, where he was mentored by J. B. Rhine, the most influential parapsychologist of the mid-twentieth century, and got his doctorate in psychology in 1963, at the University of North Carolina. He worked as a postdoc in the Stanford University laboratory of Ernest Hilgard, one of history's foremost learning and hypnosis researchers (e.g., Tart & Hilgard, 1966). I suspect (and heard some comments from him about it) that the more conservative Hilgard found some of Tart's interests far-fetched, a reaction that Tart surely got throughout his career.

He became a professor at the University of California, Davis, where he taught for almost three decades. I can attest that he was a very popular teacher because I was his TA and last doctoral student there. His course on Altered States of Consciousness was always enrolled to capacity and students liked that he did not put on airs and called things as he saw them. One example is when, in what is still the best video on parapsychology, *The Case of ESP* (BBC, 1983), he stated that the fact that many scientists believe there is no scientific evidence for psi phenomena just shows that they are ignorant of the subject.

The photo I chose for this obituary shows him donning a Haitian hat I brought from field work. I chose it because it shows him smiling and playing, something characteristic of him. Here is one instance I recall. My studies at UCDavis were sponsored by Mexican official agencies, and when I would bring him letters from them in Spanish (which I would translate), asking him to report on my progress, he would fake that he could read them in Spanish and use the 5 or so words he knew, laughing all the way through. Tart also taught at other institutions, foremost at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, and was a seeker of different ways of enhancing human potentials, becoming a black belt in Aikido.

He did not initiate research teams at UCDavis (I suspect his shyness for that), but he supervised a foremost researcher in hypnosis, Helen Crawford, and me, enrichen-

ing my education by alerting me to various possibilities, including an extraordinary Summer Research Institute at the Foundation for the Research on the Nature of Man (renamed the Rhine Research Center in 1995), when it was still a professional and high caliber institution.

Tart took early retirement from UC Davis, but continued teaching at the Institute of Noetic Sciences and writing books on practical uses of meditation and related practices, and trying to reconcile the conflict he saw between science and spirituality. Preceded by his beloved wife of decades, Judy, he passed away on March 5, 2025. He is survived by his daughter Lucinda and his son David.

There are many areas to which he is a foundational author, of which I will highlight three:

Altered States of Consciousness

The period of the 1960s and the 1970s brings to mind iconic events, among them Woodstock, Esalen, The Beatles, meditation, and even an academic book, Charles Tart's *Altered States of Consciousness* (1969). It was an anthology of articles on altered states in general, with specific chapters on the hypnagogic state, dreaming, hypnosis, psychedelic drug effects, and related psychophysiology. Anybody interested in the potential expansion of consciousness had now an authoritative tome to initiate an academic or personal search, and academic careers (mine included) were wholly or partly launched under its influence. While that is his most influential book, I think that his masterwork is a conceptual scaffolding of the study of states of consciousness from a systems approach (Tart, 1975), which should be consulted nowadays far more often than it is. Besides those books, Tart proposed state-specific sciences in a paper published by the august journal *Science* (Tart, 1972), and initiated or further developed the study of many altered states or related procedures, among them out-of-body experiences (Tart, 1998), marijuana intoxication (Tart, 1971), and hypnosis (Tart, 1970).

Transpersonal Psychology and Parapsychology

Transpersonal Psychology is a perspective that emphasizes alterations of consciousness and spiritual concerns. Expectably, Tart was one of its founders through his landmark anthology *Transpersonal Psychologies* (Tart, 1975b) and various empirical studies. In a celebratory piece, Cunningham (2023) discusses what he considers to be the most important contributions by Tart to transpersonal psychology: developing a

psychology of mind and spirit, undergirded by a critical view of mainstream reductive materialist psychology and its implications; adopting an empirical, non-dogmatic approach to religions as spiritual psychologies; creating state-specific sciences of extraordinary human experience; reinforcing the scientific bases for parapsychology; and developing a psychology to assist human growth.

Tart was also a major contributor to parapsychology through the empirical investigation of extraordinary claims related to alterations of consciousness such as out-of-body experiences (e.g., Tart, 1998). He also collaborated with Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff on developing *remote viewing* and publishing a symposium under the auspices of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) (Tart et al., 1979). He employed learning theory, particularly immediate feedback, to stabilize and even strengthen psi effects in controlled studies (Tart, 1976).

In addition to his experimental ingenuity (e.g., he tested the consensual replicability of perceptions of auras with the help of a doorway, see Tart & Palmer, 1979), he was very successful at publishing parapsychological and other “fringe” work in mainstream fora including *Science*, the University of Chicago Press, and the IEEE. He was not intimidated by the bulwarks of mainstream science and worked to systematize and normalize “fringe fields.” A justified normalization of such fields unfortunately happens too rarely, partly because of the bias against them but also by the fact that, as Tart recommended in a letter he sent to me when I expressed my interest to get a Ph. D. with him, a researcher needs to first establish one’s competence and reputation in a mainstream area before trying to expand its limits. Even then, one should expect and be able to withstand unfair personal and professional persecution from dogmatic critics (see Cardeña, 2015, for various examples).

Charles Tart died on March 5, 2025. *In Memoriams* of great scholars and people are unavoidably exercises in frustration, as the writer soon realizes how insufficient are one’s skills when trying to convey their qualities and uniqueness. This one is no exception. I will just close by saying that besides his extraordinary talents, courage, and ingenuity, I will miss not seeing Charley smile again.

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