



**W**hat happens after we die? That's the question that has plagued humanity since our ancestors first gained sentience. From stories told by the fireside on dark, moonless nights to cave paintings and renaissance art to books, movies, and TV shows, every form of media has captured our obsession with death. Over the centuries, many great minds have attempted to pull back the veil — from philosophers to scientists. Entire religions have risen (and fallen) on the promises of an afterlife. Despite thousands of years of conjecture, however, no one really, truly knows what happens after we shed this mortal coil.

## MAVERICK OR MOONSTRUCK?

### An Interview with an Afterlife Researcher

By Tonya Fentress

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Except maybe Vera Sadilim.

Dr. Vera Sadilim is a psychiatrist and thanatologist, but, more importantly, she's an afterlife researcher who has dedicated the last decade of her life to delving into topics most shy away from. Her findings have been quietly shaking up the scientific world — though not without controversy. Some have heralded her as a groundbreaking maverick, but others have denounced her as a “moonstruck mother in mourning,” (a epithet infamously lobbed at her from the stage of the World Death and Grief Conference by Dr. Philip Gabriel in 2017).

*Crossing Over Magazine* recently sat down with Dr. Sadilim at her lab at the Maryland Institute for Technology and Science for an interview.

**CROSSING OVER:** You are the world's foremost authority on death and the afterlife. What does that

even mean?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Well, first of all, I don't know if I'd say I'm the foremost authority on anything, and I can think of any number of people who would vehemently disagree with you. *[laughs]* I'm an afterlife researcher, which, in layman's terms, just means that I am interested in what happens to us after we die. Not our corporeal forms; we know what happens there. I'm talking about our nonphysical form, our spirits, if you will, sometimes referred to as our soul.

**CO:** So what do you think happens to our souls?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I still have a long way to go in my research, but let's start with the premise that we're all just consciousness trapped inside a meat suit. But what is consciousness? At its most basic level, it's just electricity, right? Vibrations. Frequencies. These vibrations move through all living things. They never

truly disappear. Some may simply merge with the universe, become part of something else, a plant maybe. But I believe our consciousness can also live on after our bodies cease functioning. I'm trying to discover where that conscious part of us goes, what happens to us after that point of no return, or if it even is a point of no return.

**CO:** Incredible. This isn't the first time I've heard the terminology of electricity, vibrations and frequencies, but it is the first time I've heard it used in context of the afterlife. Let me ask you this: Do you believe in heaven and hell?

**Dr. Sadilim:** In a sense.

**CO:** That's certainly hedging your bets!

**Dr. Sadilim:** *[laughs]* I'm not trying to be cagey. I believe in an afterlife — Obviously! It's my field of study! — but maybe not in the strict Judeo-Christian theological sense.

**CO:** So you're rejecting traditional religious ideas of heaven and hell?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Not rejecting, just recontextualizing. I think we may experience that liminal afterlife space through the lens of what we're most familiar with, what comforts us or fulfills our expectations.

**CO:** Got it. That makes sense. So where would you go if you died?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I'm sure some would assure you I'm on a one-way highway to hell. *[laughs]* But I'd like to think my personal afterlife would be more heavenly.

**CO:** So if you were to die and go to your version of heaven, who would you want to see there?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I can think of a few family members I would very much love to see again.

**CO:** That does bring me to my next question. What led you to this field of study?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Well, my work has always centered around death, but I was specifically drawn to after-life research following a personal tragedy.

**CO:** Would that be the untimely death of your daughter?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I... Yes. My daughter's death was certainly the catalyst for the ultimate direction of my research.

**CO:** When you say she was the catalyst, what exactly do you mean by that?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I know every mother says this, but she was extraordinary. She really was. When she died, I

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felt like a part of me died with her. I was devastated for months, overwhelmed with grief. As a psychiatrist, I recognize the value of therapy, and my therapist suggested I was spending too much time isolated and alone in my house, that I should start getting out more. I wasn't really ready to be social yet, but I started hiking. Just being outside and surrounded by nature did help some, but more importantly, I started noticing the flora around me. I remembered something I'd read about how plants and trees communicate using their roots and the mycelial network, how they're all connected under the surface. It got me thinking that maybe we weren't so different. And then...something happened that convinced me of that and spurred my research.

**CO:** Do you mind sharing what happened?

**Dr. Sadilim:** If I'm being honest, I'd rather not. I have to say this story is very personal and hasn't always been well received in other circles.

**CO:** We work hard to keep an open mind here at *Crossing Over*. I think our readers would love to know more about your motivations and what led you here.

**Dr. Sadilim:** Well... Okay, but first, a little background: My daughter's favorite animals were bears. And not, like, cute stuffed animals. Grizzly bears. Big, hulking, deadly beasts. She was obsessed. She had photos and drawings of them all over her room.

About a year after she died, I was hiking alone in Western Maryland. I hadn't seen anyone in hours when I came around a curve in a narrow, little-used trail. And there, sitting in the middle of the trail, was the biggest bear I've ever seen, almost like it was waiting for me. I froze while trying to remember

everything I've ever read about what to do when you encounter a bear in the wild, but it just watched me peacefully. Then, and I swear this is true, it nodded to me. We stared at each other for a few minutes, then it stood up, turned and walked away down the trail. I started crying, not out of relief or fear or anything, but because I was sure it was some sort of message from my daughter.

**CO:** What do you think the message was?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I believe she wanted me to know that she was okay. That she was out there.

**CO:** Do you think she reincarnated as the bear?



**Dr. Sadilim:** Oh no, nothing like that. I believe she was just able to influence or guide the bear in some way. But that encounter was the genesis for my belief that our consciousness lives on after our bodies are gone. I became convinced that there must be some way to communicate with people who had died, perhaps even influence the afterlife. After all, if they could communicate with us, influence this plane of existence, then we must be able to do the opposite.

**CO:** This is all utterly fascinating. Not to be rude or belittle your research, but you have to admit this all sounds a bit fantastic.

**Dr. Sadilim:** *[laughs]* Certainly, and you're not the first to point that out, but there's a lot of research out there that supports my hypothesis. For instance, there are some researchers in Virginia who have done some amazing work of their own on near-death experiences and past life memories.

**CO:** So you're saying there's proof of past lives?

**Dr. Sadilim:** I wouldn't say proof, but perhaps a growing body of evidence.

**CO:** How does that tie in with your research?

**Dr. Sadilim:** It supports the idea that our consciousness lives on after our bodies die. One of the most interesting findings in their research, at least for me, is that almost everyone who has reported having memories of past lives or who have had near-death experiences, have near identical stories. Many of them describe a sort of afterlife. And that's where I think we have a chance of reaching those consciousnesses, those people who have died. I want to take it a step further. I'm not content with waiting until that

consciousness is reborn into a new body or whatever.

**CO:** You want to communicate with the dead.

**Dr. Sadilim:** Communicate with them, sure, but why stop there? What if we can actually change the afterlife? Influence it?

**CO:** Influence the afterlife?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Yes. What started as a desire to communicate with my daughter grew into a desire to make her afterlife as comfortable and enjoyable as possible. After all, I'll always be a mother first, even if my daughter is no longer with us — at least physically. And I've come so close. So close. I feel like I'm right on the edge of a major breakthrough.

**CO:** What's holding you back?

**Dr. Sadilim:** The problem, and I'm far from the first researcher to say this, is capital. I could do so much more with proper funding. Academic research is great, and I'm grateful to MITS for allowing me to pursue this line of research, but it only goes so far.

**CO:** Does that mean you're looking to leave the Institute?

**Dr. Sadilim:** It means I'm willing to leave. If the right opportunity comes along.

**CO:** And what might that opportunity look like?

**Dr. Sadilim:** That's hard to say, really, isn't it? I think the kind of funding needed to take my research to the next level is most likely to come from a private source. I guess I'm looking for my eccentric million-

aire to sweep me off to a state-of-the-art laboratory, preferably in Baltimore. *[laughs]*

**CO:** Why Baltimore?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Are you familiar at all with ley lines? Or thin places?

**CO:** Somewhat.

**Dr. Sadilim:** You can think of ley lines as metaphysical rivers of energy that criss-cross all of the globe, sort of like an invisible energy grid. A lot of ley lines come together in Baltimore. That's why it's long been a city associated with the paranormal. That's why the city has always drawn folks interested in the



metaphysical, from Edgar Allan Poe to the Institute of Visionary History. That convergence of ley lines creates an ideal environment to find — or perhaps even artificially create — a thin place, a place where the boundary between life and death is particularly porous.

**CO:** How do you deal with the Phil Gabriels of the world, and other critics who dismiss your work as “pseudoscience”?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Many branches of science were once seen as pseudoscience. Even in recent years, meditation research has gained credibility where it was poo-pooed not so long ago.

**CO:** We're almost out of time, but speaking of Phil Gabriel, a few years ago, at an international conference, he very publicly denounced you from the stage. I believe his exact quote was that you were a “moonstruck mother in mourning.” You've never publicly responded to that. Would you like to do so now?

**Dr. Sadilim:** *[laughs]* I never responded because I never thought it warranted a response. It's a load of misogynistic nonsense. Of course I'm a mother in mourning. My daughter died. That's a normal, rational human response. Despite what so many of my colleagues believe, especially those with XY chromosomes, emotions aren't a bad thing in and of themselves. My grief is what motivates me. It's what drives me. But it doesn't cloud my judgment or my research.

**CO:** In closing, is there anything you'd like to say to Dr. Gabriel?

**Dr. Sadilim:** Yes. See you on the other side!