

Further Observations on the Combination Lock Test for Survival

IAN STEVENSON¹

INTRODUCTION

In 1968 I published a description of a combination lock test for survival (Stevenson, 1968) that seemed to offer certain advantages, mainly of simplicity, over the cipher test advocated by Thouless (1946-49a, 1946-49b). A number of persons set combination locks in accordance with my instructions and sent the locks to me. From the experiences of these persons and other correspondence it has seemed appropriate to publish the present paper which will combine in one place some of the accumulated information we now have about this test. I hope also that the suggestions I shall offer will aid those who wish to participate in the test.

PRIOR OPENINGS OF COMBINATION LOCKS BY SENSITIVES

The stimulus for the combination lock test that I recommended came from an account by Greaves (1967) of how, after her husband's death, she had succeeded in opening a small box with a combination lock of which only her husband knew the combination.

I have since learned of three other combination locks that were opened with combinations furnished by mediums or sensitives. In one of these instances a husband survived his wife who had used their safe regularly whereas he had not. The widower thought he knew the combination, but found he could not remember it and failed to open the safe until a medium gave him the correct combination (Hyslop, 1913). In another instance, a man who knew the combination of a padlock challenged a medium to furnish a key word "loon" by which it could be opened. The medium did so, much to the astonishment of the lock's owner (Underhill, 1885). In both these cases the combination was known either consciously or unconsciously by the lock owner.

¹ I wish to thank Paul Beard, J. G. Pratt, and Richard Sheargold for sharing information with me about practical experiences in the setting of combination locks.

The third instance fulfilled the conditions we hope to achieve in a successful use of this test as evidence of survival. In it the owner of a safe, an inventor who had lived in Washington, D.C., appears to have been the only person who ever knew the combination to his safe. After his death, his widow could not get the safe opened; experts then worked on it unsuccessfully for two days and advised her to have it forced open. She then consulted a medium who sat in front of the combination lock with his hand on the dial and "then realized that some invisible power had assumed dominion over my hand." His hand turned the dial of the lock to the correct numbers and the safe opened (*Boston Herald*, July 18, 1904). It is regrettable that we have only a sketchy newspaper report of this case, but assuming that report to be accurate, we have on record at least this Washington case and that of Mrs. Greaves to encourage belief in success with the test I have proposed.

LOCKS ALREADY SET IN THE PRESENT PROGRAM

So far 10 combinations have been set by their owners and the locks registered with us. Actually 11 locks are involved since I myself have set two locks with the same combination; one of these locks can travel with me or be sent through the mails with the risk of loss while the other remains available for later use in a cupboard of my office.

Dr. R. H. Thouless has set a combination lock using for his combination the key to his cipher test. Thus any sensitive obtaining the key from Dr. Thouless while he is alive, or after his death, would provide the means both for opening the lock set by Dr. Thouless and for deciphering his encoded message.

Dr. J. G. Pratt has also set a combination lock and I shall say more about his method and recommendations later.

Two owners of locks who had set the combinations and registered the locks with us have died. I only learned about the death of one of these persons inadvertently. It appears that no attempt has been made by members of her family to learn through mediums or sensitives the combination of her lock and I have not myself asked any medium to do so. After the death of the second owner of a lock, her granddaughter vigorously sought information about the combination from a variety of mediums and sensitives and sent us some messages that she thought relevant to the lock. We tried many combinations thus suggested but have not yet opened the lock. None of the communications that the deceased woman's granddaughter passed on to us were linked verbally with the word "lock" or with the idea of a lock. We were thus working from two surmises, the usual one that the communications had in fact come from the deceased person and the additional one that such messages as were communicated pertained

to the deceased person's lock. We decided therefore to limit in the future the testing of combinations, or messages suggesting combinations, that were sent to us for trial. We ruled that we would not try any more combinations on this lock unless we were given a message that somehow linked the lock with something that might be considered a possible combination or a related key word or phrase.

The owner of this second lock had not set its combination until the time of her terminal illness and there are grounds for believing that she may then not have been equal to the task of correctly setting the combination. The difficulties encountered with this particular lock have led to suggestions that I will offer later in this article.

Two owners of locks in England who had set the combinations afterwards died. Attempts were made to learn their relevant key words or phrases from mediums and sensitives, but in both cases these were unsuccessful. These locks were not registered with us and I do not know what types of locks were used or whether my instructions were followed. I have learned, however, that other persons in England have used locks other than the one I recommended, Model 8088 manufactured by Sargent and Greenleaf, Inc. of Rochester, N.Y.²

ADVICE FOR PERSONS SETTING A COMBINATION LOCK

I will now mention various recommendations about the setting of the lock that have emerged from our experiences so far or that were included in my first article on this subject and overlooked by some participants. I intend to limit participation in our program to persons I consider qualified for the test, although I should be glad to hear of any successes outside our own program. One qualification is willingness and ability to follow my previous instructions and the recommendations here offered. Another is that no lock should be shipped to us without prior correspondence and acceptance of the owner into our program.

Who Should Set a Combination Lock?

Some publicity about this test in public news media led to our receiving much correspondence from persons whose curiosity had been transiently aroused, but who lost interest as soon as they realized what was involved. Setting a combination lock in order to provide evidence of personal survival after death should not be undertaken as a domestic pastime. If we have successes with this test

² This padlock is still available from Brown's Lock and Safe. Their address has changed to: 210 West Market Street, Charlottesville, Virginia 22901. And the price is now (June, 1975) \$19.98. Mailing charges are additional.

I expect they will come from persons who, like R. H. Thouless and J. G. Pratt, have had a serious interest in the evidence of survival after death for many years. If they survive death and find themselves able to try communicating their combinations to persons still alive, they will have two motivations for doing so. First, they will have the usual presumed wish to communicate evidence of their own survival to the loved ones they leave behind; and second, they will have the desire to contribute evidence about survival of value to mankind in general. It is often assumed that the first of these motivations should be sufficient to generate a communication. This, however, is obviously incorrect. Many persons have died after expressing the hope and intention of communicating to their loved ones after death and have never been heard from again. They may have tried to communicate and found conditions unsuitable or themselves unequal to the task. We have ample evidence that mediumistic communication on the part of discarnate communicators, if we provisionally accept that there really are such, is exceedingly difficult for the communicators.³

It is also possible, as I pointed out some years ago (Stevenson, 1965), that motivations of all kinds undergo drastic shifts after death. "Out of sight, out of mind" is a truism which, if it is true, could apply just as well to the dead, if they cannot see us, as to the living who cannot see them. I think we should be prepared for the possibility that some persons who seem when living to be keenly interested in this test or in some other method of providing evidence of their survival will simply lose interest in the whole matter when they find themselves surviving after death.

When Should a Combination Lock be Set?

The lock should be set when the owner is in good physical and mental health. The setting of a Sargent and Greenleaf lock does not demand high intellectual powers, but it requires a degree of mental concentration that is not often found in people who think they are dying.

Locks that may be registered with us should in general be set by older persons, those say 55 years of age or older. This provision simply gives those of us who are presently interested in the test more likelihood of being able to pursue the investigation while we are living.

The above suggestions are not intended to exclude some younger

³ Communicators have sometimes stated that they enjoy perfect clarity of thought until they attempt to communicate through a medium and that in doing so, they become befuddled and cannot remember or adequately express what they wanted to say. For reports and discussions of complaints by communicators of such difficulties see, for example, Gibbes (1937), Hyslop (1908, pp. 191-206), Johnson (1908-09, p. 230), and Thomas (1928, p. 208).

persons who otherwise qualify for the test. One can imagine, for example, a young person who knows that he or she is going to die of cancer within one or two years but who yet retains full mental clarity, as a suitable person to participate in the test.

How to Set a Combination Lock

All locks registered with us should be set according to the instructions given on pages 248-250 of my first article on this subject (Stevenson, 1968). It is particularly important that the correspondences between numbers and letters given in that article be used by all participants in the program.

Within these instructions the owner should do whatever seems most natural to him in the selection of a key word or phrase, or the numbers of the combination themselves, that he plans to remember and communicate after his death.

I happen to favor selection first of a key word or phrase to which matching numbers for the new combination of the lock are then looked up. I did this myself because I wanted to choose a phrase or word that would be specially meaningful to me.

The lock owner should, however, avoid choosing a word or phrase likely to be readily associated with him by his family and friends. For example, to give an instance suggested by J. G. Pratt, it would be foolish for him to select the word "Fields" as part of his mnemonic; the farm on which he lives is called "High Fields" and if the word "Fields" was given after his death by a medium to a member of his family or circle of friends they would not be able to tell whether the word came from themselves or a discarnate J. G. Pratt who had survived death and was communicating.

Dr. Pratt, however, has completely obviated the foregoing possible difficulty. In setting his lock, he obtained numbers first and then found a phrase made up of words with initial letters that corresponded to the numbers. To describe the method he favors, I will next quote from some notes which he furnished me, dated July 23, 1970:

My own experience of starting with six random digits to form the combination and then working from these digits to a mnemonic device as an aid to remembering the combination leads me to feel that this method may be easier to apply than your [I.S.'s] original article seemed to imply. Also, I feel it may *not* have the disadvantage of being less likely to be remembered than would some meaningful personal word or phrase taken as the starting point for getting the combination. In my own experience, the six-word sentence I made up to correspond with the six random digits (each digit represented by the initial of one word) has thus far seemed to be meaningful to me because of its distinctive significance in relation to this test. I have found myself remembering the mnemonic sentence at odd moments almost every day, as well as

the actual sequence of numbers forming the combination of the lock. Since each person would be setting only one lock in his lifetime, perhaps a six-word sentence formed on the basis of a random number might easily become a very special memory for him, one that he would remember while living and would be more likely to communicate if he finds himself surviving death.

I will put down here an illustration of how my approach might work. For this purpose, I have arbitrarily taken three two-digit numbers that are not related to any actual lock test. They simply represent the six random digits that anyone might select as his starting point. Anyone wishing to set a lock by my method might find it convenient to think of the procedure as follows:

The starting point is the six digits of the combination: 47, 05, 18.

Under each digit there are possible corresponding letters from the July, 1968, *JASPR* article, as (in this case):

47	05	18
DG	JE	AH
NQ	TO	KR
X		U

The task is to make up a six-word phrase or sentence, with each word starting with one letter taken from each column, left to right. Examples from the above letters are:

No Good To End And Rest.
Do Go Just Over A Hill.
New Goals That Ever Are Higher.
Die Quickly To Enjoy Another Realm.

This is for purposes of illustration only, since it is desirable that the person setting a lock should not use paper and pencil. I found it not too difficult to carry out the task with my combination in mind and with your [I.S.] original article before me.

What to Do After Setting a Lock

Dr. R. H. Thouless commented to me somewhat wryly that after setting a combination lock—he had completed his enciphered message many years before—he felt some obligation to die in order to get on with the experiment, but I assured him that this was not my wish for him in any way! There are, however, some matters that the lock's owner can attend to that would be helpful in the event that he should die.

For locks registered and deposited with us we provide a simple registration form that includes elementary identifying information about the lock owner and the name of a person such as a spouse, close friend, or attorney, who will notify us after the owner's death. The form also states the method the owner used in setting the combination—that is, whether he selected the number first or a

mnemonic first—and whether he did or did not use writing materials as he set the combination. One copy of this form is to be sent to us and one copy filed with the owner's will or other papers that will be noticed soon after his death.

Since we accept in our program only the Sargent and Greenleaf Lock Model 8088, there is no need for us to have instructions about how to open the lock. If other types of combination locks are used for this test and kept by the owner, the instructions should always be kept with the lock. Combination locks do not all open in the same way and a failure could occur if a person trying to open a lock does not have proper instructions for turning the dial of the lock he is working with.

A person planning to participate in this test should give as much thought as he can spare to the question of how, if he survives death, he will try to communicate the information that will open the combination. He may consider one or more mediums. If he knows one in whom he has confidence already he should inform her about his plans and, if appropriate, become better acquainted with her so that a satisfactory rapport will have developed between the medium and the lock owner prior to the latter's death. He should also invite the medium to try to learn his combination or key-word or phrase while he is living. The greater the efforts made to obtain information that would open a lock while its owner is living, the greater will be the positive impression made if these efforts fail and the lock can be opened as a result of communications after the owner's death.

The foregoing proposal makes an assumption that is, so far as I know, not well supported by available evidence. It suggests that persons surviving death are able to communicate better through mediums they have known when they were living than through strange mediums. In fact, some of the best communicators have had little or no contact when living with the mediums through whom they seemed to communicate after death (Hodgson, 1898; Radclyffe-Hall and Troubridge, 1920). And the suggestion carries some risk of the normal transmission of information from the would-be communicator to the medium. The more we know another person the more we are likely to learn about those stock phrases and favorite topics which are likely to be adopted as mnemonics by persons using my own preferred method for selecting the combination of a lock. Dr. Pratt's method avoids or greatly diminishes this disadvantage. It may be better to have an intermediary sitter invite a medium to try to obtain the combination to a particular lock while the owner is still living. Or perhaps we need to experiment in various ways that preserve, to the extent this is possible, both a feeling of comfort for the participants and safeguards against transmission of information to any medium by normal means.

A lock owner may also plan to communicate to his own loved ones after his death either in their dreams or by manifesting as a visual apparition. In that case, it would seem to me both helpful and thoughtful for him to warn the persons concerned before he dies that he will attempt this after he does so.

Dr. Pratt recommends that the owner of a combination lock set in this program should review his mnemonic from time to time and even try to open his lock fully by deriving the combination from the mnemonic. I quote below some further notes (dated April 12, 1974) that he furnished me concerning his own experience with such reviews:

My lock combination was set by taking a sequence of six digits from a random number table, with the starting point in the table having been decided arbitrarily before the book was opened. After the combination to be used was thus determined (by subtracting 50 from any of the three two-digit numbers that were more than 50), I chose a mnemonic of six words with initial letters that corresponded to the combination, according to the code provided by Dr. Stevenson in his original article on the lock test for survival (*Journal of the ASPR*, 1968, 62, 246-254). Since this sequence of words was, under the circumstances, not something that is deeply ingrained in my memory from some earlier period of my life, I resolved to "review" the mnemonic at frequent intervals by allowing it to run through my mind and to confirm that I had not forgotten it by locking my doors and testing whether I could successfully apply it for opening my combination lock.

This general schedule for opening my lock had been carried out two or three times before the beginning of March, 1974, but it had been on my mind for some weeks before that time that I should again try to open my lock. Perhaps this contributed to the fact that, when I became ill with the 'flu and pneumonia early in March [1974], I found myself one night, when suffering from fever, dreaming in a sort of confused state in which the mnemonic ran through my mind time after time as something that I had to do something about. When I woke the next morning the result of that night's experience left me in a state of doubt regarding whether I remembered the mnemonic correctly.

Several days later I locked my office doors and started to see if I could open my lock. My first effort was a failure, and I considered what I should do next. I was fairly confident that I remembered correctly the first two and last two words of the mnemonic, and I had a degree of doubt only about the middle two. I therefore started out to try, systematically, all possible numbers for the middle setting on the combination, and in the course of an hour went through the full range from 01 to 50, preceding each one and following it with the numbers of which I was confident.

To my chagrin, none of the fifty efforts opened the lock. Then I re-read the instructions that come with the lock and discovered that I had overlooked the fact that the dial must be returned to zero after

dialing the combination before the lock will open. Having corrected this error, I tried once more with the mnemonic as I seemed to remember it and found that the lock opened the first time!

This experience thus showed that my struggling, mentally, with the mnemonic in my semi-delirious state had *not* resulted in my forgetting my sequence of six key words as I had feared. Furthermore, I think that the whole experience has given me more confidence about retaining my mnemonic in the event that I find myself surviving my death. I therefore have come through the experience with higher expectations and more determination than I had before that I will be able to carry out my part of the test if it is possible to do so.

As I have already mentioned, in setting my own locks, I started not with meaningless random numbers, but with a word or phrase that is extremely meaningful to me. I have no fear whatever of forgetting it on this side of the grave and, if I remember anything on the other side, I shall surely remember it. I therefore do not feel the need for any review of the kind Dr. Pratt recommends to those who follow his favored procedure. Nevertheless, just to keep my hand in, I recently (June, 1975) opened both the locks I had set by working back (without pencil and paper) from my mnemonic to the combination. I had forgotten completely the combination and had to consult the chart of correspondences on page 249 of my first article. The only difficulty I encountered was in following the directions for opening the lock (which I had also forgotten) so that I had to dial the combination three times before I got my first lock to open. I then opened my second lock at the first trial.

ADVICE FOR LOCK OWNERS WHO MAY TRY TO COMMUNICATE AFTER DEATH

As already suggested, a recently deceased person who survives death will have many new experiences to assimilate and many things on his mind apart from the combination lock that he set. So will the persons he has left behind. The discarnate lock owner may succeed in communicating with his survivors, but if he tries to transmit information to enable them to open his lock he must somehow connect the information about the combination with his lock. Otherwise the persons receiving the communication will not know what to do with it. Suppose the lock owner's key word is the name of a person such as "Robert,"⁴ or a word for a feeling such as "serene." The

⁴ Because most mediums have difficulty communicating proper names, I advocate avoiding them in the selection of mnemonics. But the special meaning of a particular proper name for someone might outweigh its disadvantages as a communicable item of information.

communicator should not expect the person who hears these words, say in a session with a medium, to connect them automatically with the communicator's lock. Since the interested relatives and friends of the deceased person should have no idea whatever about the key word or phrase they might well think a message for Robert was intended or perhaps that one had come from Robert if the lock owner used his own name as a mnemonic. It is therefore of the greatest importance for the discarnate lock owner to precede his message of information about the combination with a clear indication that the message pertains to his lock. Ideally the whole message should be something like "Lock-Robert" or "Lock-serene." It may not be feasible to communicate so succinctly, and in that case the discarnate lock owner may have to fall back on paraphrase and description; but somehow he must link his message of information about the combination to the idea of the lock itself.

REFERENCES

- GIBBES, E. B. Have we indisputable evidence of survival? *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1937, 31, 65-79.
- GREAVES, H. *The Dissolving Veil*. London: Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies, 1967.
- HODGSON, R. A further record of observations of certain phenomena of trance. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1898, 13, 284-582.
- HYSLOP, J. H. *Psychical Research and the Resurrection*. Boston: Small, Maynard, 1908.
- HYSLOP, J. H. The case of Mrs. Blake. *Proceedings of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1913, 7, 570-788.
- JOHNSON, A. On the automatic writing of Mrs. Holland. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1908-09, 21, 166-391.
- RADCLYFFE-HALL, M. AND TROUBRIDGE, U. On a series of sittings with Mrs. Leonard. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1920, 30, 339-554.
- STEVENSON, I. Some psychological principles relevant to research in survival. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1965, 59, 318-337.
- STEVENSON, I. The combination lock test for survival. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 1968, 62, 246-254.
- THOMAS, C. D. *Life Beyond Death with Evidence*. London: W. Collins, 1928.
- THOULESS, R. H. A test of survival. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1946-49, 48, 253-263. (a)

- THOULESS, R. H. Additional note on a test of survival. *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, 1946-49, 48, 342-343. (b)
- UNDERHILL, A. L. *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism*. New York: Thomas R. Knox, 1885.

Division of Parapsychology
Department of Psychiatry
School of Medicine
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Virginia 22901