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MOURNERS AND MEDIUMS

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on participant observation in spiritualist churches, along with interviews with bereavement counsellors, the article establishes that a minority of mourners in England occasionally visit spiritualist churches or consult mediums. The messages received are typically benign and innocuous, assuring the mourner that the deceased is all right, and sends love; occasionally the messages help the mourner, reports of negative consequences are rare. These messages fit a culture that sees love as eternal, but encourages mourners to get on with their lives.

MOURNERS AND MEDIUMS ¹

It is not uncommon for mourners in Britain to make occasional visits to mediums and to spiritualist churches and to say they find this helpful, or at least not unhelpful. What are bereavement workers to make of this?

Much writing on spiritualism assesses its validity – is there good evidence for mediumship, or are mediums at best self-deluded, at worst fraudulent? Some bereavement workers may be concerned that mediums manipulate their clients; and since biblical times, the Judaic-Christian tradition has disapproved of mediumship. In this article, I do not consider such issues; I aim simply to describe what visiting a medium means to mourners. My definition of ‘mourner’ has no time frame; in this article, I include anyone who seeks a dead loved one, however long ago they died.

The article is based on fieldwork conducted in England in 2000. On four occasions I visited spiritualist churches and attended their regular Sunday or weekday meeting, along with the informal get-together over a cup of tea that typically follows. I also attended a packed one-off meeting when a high profile and nationally famous medium visited. I attended a ‘development circle’ at a spiritualist centre in London where beginners were encouraged to develop their own mediumistic powers. And I interviewed one counsellor who, intriguingly, also claims to have psychic powers. One limitation of this study is that I have no observational data on one-to-one consultations with a medium.

There is some evidence, both from historical accounts and from a more recent study (Riches, Dawson 1996: 156), that parents who have had a child die are particularly likely to visit a medium. I therefore also conducted taped, semi-structured interviews with the six staff of The Laura Centre, an agency in Leicester that provides counselling to parents after the death of a child. I asked them about their clients’ experiences of mediums. I was told that only about one in fifteen clients had spoken about visiting a medium, but these clients did so with great passion, and it was something the counsellors were keen to discuss with me. The counsellors tended to be person-centred, and described their clients’ stories about the dead without pathologising them or interpreting them within a fixed framework. *Unless stated otherwise, the direct quotes in this article come from the counsellors.*

Types of contact

Going to a medium is at one end of a spectrum of interactions in which the spirit of a deceased intimate may be thought to be communicating with the living. (For a perceptive and witty autobiographical account of one mourner’s encounters along this spectrum, see Picardie 2001.) Two key variables are whether the living seek contact, and whether a professional medium is used. I start with unbidden experiences that do not involve a professional mediator, moving through to the other end of the spectrum where contact with the dead is sought, possibly via a medium.

1) Most common is sensing the presence of the dead (La Grand 1997, Rees 1997; Bennett, Bennett 2000). The sense of presence comes unbidden (Bennett 1987), and is a private experience, though one which in England at any rate seems to be discussed with friends and family more now than when it was first researched in the 1960s. My sociology students now talk about it in a very matter of fact way, as do this counsellor’s clients: *‘It’s the ordinariness of this experience that so many of the people I work with have represented. It’s not a sort of extra-dimension, something we should whisper about.’*

2) Mourners also often talk to their dead, not least in the cemetery (Francis et al 2005). Asking a dead father for advice, for example, is not so different from wondering what an absent father might advise (Marwit, Klass 1995). Children have conversations not only with imaginary

friends, but also with dead siblings. *'My client's little boy would sometimes be sitting in the room jabbering away, talking away. And one day she asked him, "Who are you talking to?" And he said, "Well, I'm talking to ..." and he gave his dead sister's name.'*

3) A much smaller number of mourners are approached, uninvited, by a psychic who has been 'given' a message for them. I have an extended transcript from one Irish woman to whom this happened following the tragic death of her teenage son. And the psychic I interviewed said: *'Sometimes, you know, I'd walk into cafés and a name would just come: "Will you talk to that lady at that table and tell her for me that she's not to worry any more.'*" Sometimes when driving, this psychic would get her long-suffering husband to stop at a stranger's house, as she felt she needed to give its occupant a message.

4) The mourner may go to a spiritualist church or other meeting, hoping for a message. The chances of getting a reading depend on how many are present as there is usually time only for seven or eight people to be 'read'. In the spiritualist churches I visited, there were usually about thirty people present. Bernice Martin's (1970) excellent sociological account of a spiritualist church (which has hardly dated in 35 years) found three kinds of attenders: a core congregation of regular attenders, those who attend occasionally (and are likely also to attend other, more conventional, churches), and once or twicers. Another more recent study found little evidence of bereavement being a significant motivation for the core congregation; mourners were more likely to attend just once or twice (Walliss 2001). The Spiritualists' National Union has 17,000 members in 368 churches, averaging 45 members per church, but clearly over a year the number of attenders, including the occasionals and once or twicers, is considerably more than that.

5) At the far end of the spectrum are mourners who seek a private sitting with a medium. They really are commissioning someone to call up the dead. Though mediums emphasize that they cannot call up a particular spirit to order, they say that a receptive medium may well be contacted by the relevant spirit.

Motives

'This group of parents who had lost their only child, they were in this funny position of not being seen by the rest of the world as still parents, although they felt parents themselves. And they came up with the notion that what they wanted was a letter from heaven. They wanted to hear back, "I am all right." And I don't think any of them actually went to spiritualists. But this would be their dream, their ideal.'

The deaths of children and young people are nowadays seen as untimely, and in addition may be violent; these two factors are associated with hoping for a message from beyond the grave. Large numbers of mothers, wives and fiancées consulted mediums after World War One, seeking a message that the deceased was at peace (Bourke 1996: 233-5; Winter 1995: c.3). Their anxieties are echoed in this concern about someone who had been murdered: *'It's like the body was damaged, but has the spirit been damaged?'* Such questions may also be directed to suicides.

There may have been guilt. A middle aged woman had felt guilty about her fraught relationship with her mother, which – after her mother's death - led to her contacting the spiritualists. She was comforted to be told by a medium that her mother was all right. This one session was speedier than the multiple visits a counsellor would probably have needed to deal with her guilt. And it seems to have been more effective than praying to God for forgiveness - God might forgive the daughter, but her mother's soul might continue to suffer the consequences of their poor pre-mortem relationship. It was not her own guilt but her mother she was worried about.

In other instances, the sitter may have felt responsible for the death:

‘Two that come to mind, both were mothers and both felt responsible for the death... Both were accidents..... So both of these women have gone to mediums. One is a committed Christian and, just completely out of the blue, said to me one day “I went to a medium last week.” She’d been going through a very difficult time with how her son felt in his last moments, couldn’t imagine what he was feeling. Did he wonder why she couldn’t save him? It was such a hard time for her, and she went to the medium during that period.... She came back and said, “Oh, I’m looking at it as if I’m looking through another window now.” She sensed the boy was all right, and the last thing he saw was his mother trying to save him, and that comforted him. And that comforted her.’

Again, the client is concerned not with her own feelings (with which counsellors work) or her spiritual state (with which clergy work), but with the deceased – and that is why she went to a medium.

The message

The messages that mediums bring from ‘the other side’ vary by culture. In contemporary spiritualism in England, the messages are remarkably similar. The vast majority say: S/he’s okay. Don’t shed any tears. You can get on with life without worrying about him/her. S/he’s with you, watching you. And s/he sends you love. The message is that the dead are watching us, or are for a generation or so, and they want us to move on. The sitter need not feel guilty that she has taken a new husband – the deceased knows, and approves. The deceased do not want to be disturbed by our tears.

Every society has norms about how and where to place the dead - should they be cut off entirely from the world of the living, as in Protestantism and in Freudian grief theory, or is there some continuing relationship with the living, as in Catholic prayers for the dead and in Japanese ancestor veneration? And every society has norms about what mourners should do with their troubled emotions – should they express them, or should they contain them? (Walter 1999) These two variables lead to four possible combinations, and in contemporary British culture we find all four, though the top left box is dominant:

	SEVER BOND	CONTINUE BOND
CONTAIN EMOTION / GET ON WITH LIFE	Popular wisdom in UK	Spiritualism Remembrance of war dead
EXPRESS EMOTION / NEED TO GRIEVE	Grief work (as in psychodynamic grief theories)	Romanticism (e.g. opera, pop songs, grave inscriptions) Self-help groups (e.g. The Compassionate Friends)

The medium’s message resonates with the idea that love is eternal, and with an English culture that is reserved about expressing emotion, but challenges the popular notion that we must leave the dead behind. It promotes a calm way of getting on with life, with – not without – the dead. This it shares with remembrance of the war dead, though of course spiritualism does not share war remembrance’s official status and public visibility.

In contrast to Catholicism, in which prayers for the dead focus on forgiveness, sin is nowhere in sight in spiritualism’s communion between the living and dead (Swatos 1990: 472). It is all very loving, and accepting. Everything’s okay. Family relationships, romanticised since the nineteenth century, are transferred beyond the grave (Ariès 1981: Pt IV). There is no place here for sin, for child abuse, for granny abuse: everything is now okay.

Though the message is almost certainly going to be at best comforting, at worst innocuous, this is not widely known by outsiders. It is not surprising, therefore, that more of the Laura Centre's clients thought of going to a medium than actually went; some were worried what the message might tell them, or that the medium might not receive a message. *'There usually is this big thing of "I'd be frightened. I want to go, to know that it's real, that they are there in another world. But I'm frightened of going and being disappointed."'*

Responses

How do mourners who have not previously visited mediums respond to such messages? They may accept the medium's authority; or they may not; or they may remain agnostic. They are impressed, or they are not, or they are not sure. If sitters are impressed, it is because they feel the medium could not have gleaned the information by 'reading' the sitter. (This need not mean the source of the message actually is paranormal - for an insightful analysis of how mediums and other psychics gain authority for their messages, see Wooffitt 2000: 467.)

Not being sure is the most common response for the clients of the counselors I interviewed. *'Most remain sceptical. I haven't known anyone be damaged by it. I haven't known anybody feel it's made things worse. The general sense seems to be of continuing agnosticism about it all.'* It seems to be rather like conventional prayer. If you believe in prayer, you are likely to notice the petitions that are answered and rationalize away those that are apparently not. If you do not believe in prayer, you focus on the petitions that are not answered, and rationalize away those that apparently are. The first time I visited a spiritualist church was in the company of a friend who believed. The medium picked me out for a reading - and got some things about me right, and some wrong. My friend noticed the things the medium got right, seeing this as evidence of the medium's powers. I, more sceptical, noted both the correct and the incorrect readings, and remained agnostic - the medium could have come up with the information by chance or intuition, or maybe she did have special powers. She got enough wrong, as well as right, for my verdict to remain open. Such is the response of most of the Laura Centre clients who had been read by a medium.

I have already given some examples of consultations with mediums that sitters say have benefited them. It is, of course, possible that the mourner may be disturbed by what the medium has to say, though I have found few such cases and only one of the counsellors I interviewed could recall an example: *'She had an absolutely ghastly time, because this medium told her why her son had committed suicide. It was an absolutely appalling, awful experience for her.'* This rate of negative experiences is no higher, and quite possibly lower, than negative experiences mourners have at the hands of clergy - clergy have been subject to frequent criticism by mourners that they conduct funerals impersonally or without integrity, are more concerned to preach than to comfort, or are unable to respect a mourner's unorthodox beliefs or experiences (Walter 1990).

One counsellor commented *'I did have a client who was a member of a spiritualist church, and this made the death very, very difficult for the children of the family, because the child could never die. Because they didn't believe in it, you see.'* Certainly spiritualist theology could be interpreted as a denial of death, but - to the sceptical outsider - so too could the Christian doctrine of resurrection. What to the insider is a triumph over death, to the outsider can be a denial of death. (And spiritualist terminology - 'on the earth plane', 'on the other side' - recognises the physical reality and boundary of death.) I have heard anecdotally of two other instances where the sitter was helped but this alienated other members of her family. And one parent 'may feel envious if the child "comes through" to their partner but not to them.' (McLaren 2004) Consulting a medium certainly can cause difficulties within families, but so can religious

experience or zeal of any kind (including zeal for counselling) when not shared by other family members.

Is it increasing?

I have not been able to get a historical sequence of membership statistics for the churches that belong to the Spiritualist National Union; in any case, membership figures tell us little about the number of people who visit such churches in Britain, and nothing about those who consult a medium privately or who frequent psychic fairs. A number of people tell me they sense these things are on the increase. This is difficult to verify, but it does seem possible that British people are increasingly willing and able to *speak* about visiting a medium.

First, with fewer people in Britain going to church, and fewer people being familiar with orthodox Christian doctrine, fewer sitters or potential sitters care, or even know, about the historic Christian ban on consulting mediums. If a mourner senses the presence of the dead or has a meaningful message from a medium, the experience can be valued for itself, without any drive to either validate or invalidate it by some external theology. *'She just felt completely at ease telling me. She was completely at ease with it alongside her faith – she's a Sunday school teacher, and she goes to church.'*

Second, certain aspects of British working class culture are arguably becoming more visible to professionals, even as it collapses into consumer culture. Visits to mediums and psychic fairs have long been a staple of conversation on the factory floor among working class women. Traditionally there is a double element of fatalism - both as working class and as women they have had little control over their lives, and develop ways of coming to terms with that. Going to a medium is like gambling or visiting an astrologer – who knows what fate has in store? Whereas middle class people are more likely to go into therapy where the therapist attempts to empower the client, working class people are more likely to visit astrologers and mediums where power is handed to the astrologer/medium's privileged knowledge of fate. It is in middle class culture – a culture that values planning, control and self-determination - that visits to mediums have been kept secret. With the replacement of the middle class bias of radio and television by a daily diet of reality TV, soaps and celebrity chat shows, working class experience is now more visible to other social classes.

Conclusion

By focusing on the dead rather than on the bereaved (Walter 2006), mediums may have something to offer mourners denied them by those bereavement counsellors who focus on the client's feelings - mourners typically think about the dead as much as about their own feelings, and it is this that mediums recognise and cater for. Some counsellors, like those I interviewed, can accommodate this; others, possibly those who embrace a psychodynamic theories, may see mediumship as a distraction from the mourner's 'real' business of working through feelings.

It is also clear that encounters between mourners and their dead are not restricted to just the first months of bereavement and, as Parkes (1996: 62-3) observes, these encounters can bring the mourner considerable comfort. Attachment theorists had once argued that these encounters are a means by which mourners search for the dead, as a preliminary to a deeper understanding that they have truly died, in turn a preliminary for the ultimate goal of letting go of the emotions that bind the mourner to the dead (Worden 1983). Within a 'continuing bonds' paradigm, however, grief evolves into finding a place for the deceased in the ongoing life of the living (Worden 1991; Klass et al 1996; Walter 1996); within this framework, contacts with the departed can be a normal and ongoing part of mourning.

Whether or not they resonate with current bereavement theories and therapeutic practices, the messages that mediums impart do resonate with a popular culture that celebrates love – especially parental love - as eternal, yet expects mourners to get on with their lives.

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