

MEDIUMS AND MOURNERS ¹

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Visiting mediums is discouraged in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Prohibitions against using a medium to contact the dead in Leviticus 19:31, Deuteronomy 18:10-11 and 1 Samuel 28, unlike some other Old Testament bans, have become part of Christian orthodoxy. ² Nor is actively seeking contact with the dead valued by a medical model of grief, which typically sees grief as a set of psychological processes within the mourner's mind and body, rather than a re-ordering of the relationship between the living and the dead. Nevertheless, mourners make occasional visits to mediums and to spiritualist churches and typically say they find this helpful, or at least not unhelpful. What are clergy and bereavement counsellors to make of this?

Much writing on spiritualism assesses its validity – is there good evidence for mediumship? If not, are mediums fraudulent or self-deluded? ³ I write here though as a sociologist. Just as a social scientist researching a Christian congregation is not interested in whether Christianity is true but rather in social or psychological aspects of congregational life, so in this article I do not ask questions of truth. Rather, I aim to describe what visiting a medium means to mourners. My definition of 'mourner' has no time frame; anyone who seeks a dead loved one, however long ago they died, comes within my purview.

Data

I conducted fieldwork in England in 2000. On four occasions I visited spiritualist churches (in the South and the Midlands) 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.

I also conducted taped, semi-structured interviews with the six staff of The Laura Centre, an agency in Leicester that provides counselling, mainly to parents, after the death of a child. I asked them about their clients' experiences of mediums. Only about one in fifteen had spoken about visiting a medium, ⁴ but these did so with great passion, and it was something the counsellors were keen to discuss with me. I chose this particular agency for two reasons. Firstly, anecdotal evidence suggests that people are more likely to approach mediums after the death of a child than after other kinds of death. Secondly, the Laura Centre is sympathetic to the new thinking about continuing bonds between the living and the dead that since the mid 1990s has marked a paradigm shift in bereavement theory. ⁵ Its staff were therefore able to describe their clients' stories about the dead, without trivialising the stories as mere evidence for the client's emotional state, as previous psychodynamic models of bereavement have tended to do. Unless specified otherwise, the direct quotes in this article come from these interviews.

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. The 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. The further along this spectrum we move, the more likely some clergy and some counsellors are to be worried.

1) Most common is sensing the presence of the dead,⁶ an experience that can occur not just in the early months of bereavement but for years afterwards. The sense of presence comes unbidden⁷ 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 the Laura Centre's clients.

2) Mourners also often talk to their dead, not least in the cemetery.⁸ Asking a dead father for advice, for example, is not so different from wondering what an absent father might advise.⁹ 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 cafes 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.'"*

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 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ The Spiritualists' National Union currently 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 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 the relevant spirit is likely to contact a receptive medium.

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 being two factors associated with hoping for a message from beyond the grave. Large numbers of parents, wives and fiancées consulted mediums after World War One, seeking a message that the deceased was at peace.¹² Their anxieties are echoed in this concern about a child 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 might 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 pre-mortem relationship. It was, ultimately, not her own guilt but her mother she was worried about.

A counsellor told me about a mother who felt responsible for the accidental deaths of her child.

She 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? She came back from the medium 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 and shamans 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? ¹³ 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 and in some bereavement counselling)	Romanticism (e.g. opera, pop songs, grave inscriptions) Self-help groups (e.g. The Compassionate Friends)

The medium's message resonates 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.¹⁴ It is all very loving, and accepting. Everything's okay. Family relationships, romanticised since the nineteenth century, are transferred beyond the grave.¹⁵ There is no place here for sin, for child abuse, for granny abuse: everything is now okay.

Though the message is likely 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.

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.¹⁶

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 is 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, you focus on the petitions that are not answered, and rationalize away those that apparently are. If you are not sure what you believe, you may remain not sure.

I have given some examples of consultations with mediums that sitters say have benefited them. I have yet to speak to anyone who was disturbed by a reading, and only one of the counsellors I interviewed could think of such 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 possibly lower, than negative experiences mourners have at the hands of clergy – frequent criticisms of clergy by mourners include their conducting funerals impersonally or without integrity, being more concerned to preach than to comfort, or being unable to respect a mourner's unorthodox beliefs or experiences. There is no statistical evidence to compare satisfaction rates with mediums and clergy; all I am saying is that clergy in glass houses should not throw stones at mediums. Clergy are certainly entitled to criticize mediumship on theological grounds, but the pastoral critique that readings may damage sitters can easily be turned back on clergy.

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 outsider – so too could the Christian doctrine of resurrection. What to the insider is a triumph over death, to the outsider can be denial. (And spiritualist terminology – 'on the earth plane', 'on the other side' – clearly assumes the physical reality and boundary of death.) I also 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.'¹⁷ 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 obtain 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. Whether such visits are on the increase is difficult to verify, but there are several reasons why British people might be increasingly willing and able to speak about visiting a medium. It is becoming culturally more legitimate and visible.

First, with fewer people going to church, and fewer people being familiar with orthodox Christian doctrine, fewer sitters or potential sitters care, or even know, about the Christian ban on consulting mediums.

Second, whereas in the 1960s secularism and rationalism were gaining ground over the supernaturalism of Christianity, subsequent scandals concerning science, technology and the environment now mean that many people distrust the authority not only of bishops and Bibles, but also of scientists. People now can be as sceptical of rationalism as of supernaturalism. For many, the touchstone now is not external authority (whether of Bible or of science), but of personal experience.¹⁸ So, 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 need 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.'*

Third, women make contact with the dead more often than do men. Scheitle has argued that earlier 'peaks' of spiritualism have been when men have shown interest (during and immediately after war, and during anti-rational social movements); but now women have more power, status and confidence to speak of their own experiences, so spiritualism is more generally visible.¹⁹

Fourth, visiting a medium has been part of a traditional working class fatalism which is now collapsing into a consumer culture that – through reality TV and soaps – is more visible to middle class professionals.

Pastoral responses

Some secularists and some Christians consult astrologers, consult mediums or believe in reincarnation.²⁰ In their own lives, people can hold together what philosophers and theologians would keep apart. But some of my counsellors' clients did worry about what their priest or minister, or indeed they themselves, would think of their visiting a medium, so kept quiet about it. What though are clergy and counsellors to make of the fact that, when bereavement throws up unanswerable questions, some of their flock visit a medium, finding it at best helpful and at worst innocuous?

Protestant theology has always drawn a sharp line between the living and the dead. Protestants cannot say masses for the dead; the saints in heaven cannot intervene with God on behalf of the living. Once you have died, there is nothing any human – on earth or in heaven – can do to assist your salvation. This is at the theological heart of Protestantism. So Protestant clergy have typically affirmed the few Biblical texts warning against contacting the dead. Catholicism, through its prayers for the dead and to God via the saints, does not so much ban intercourse between the living and the dead as claim a monopoly on it; only its own priests and saints can promote this intercourse. Non-authorised persons – spiritualist mediums – directly challenge the church's monopoly. So, both Protestant and Catholic theology, each in its own way, have anathematised spiritualist mediumship.

By focusing on the dead rather than on the bereaved,²¹ mediums may also have something to offer mourners denied them by those grief 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, especially those wedded to a psychodynamic rather than a 'continuing bonds' model of grief, 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 occur not just during the first months of bereavement. Attachment theorists had presumed 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, which in turn is a preliminary for the ultimate goal of letting go of the emotions that bind the mourner to the dead.²² In the newer 'continuing bonds' paradigm, however, grief evolves into finding a place for the deceased in the ongoing life of the living;²³ within this framework, contacts with the departed may be a normal and ongoing part of mourning.

¹ I acknowledge David Aldridge and Jan McLaren for very helpful comments on a draft of this article.

² Eric Stoddart, "Addressing the dead: a pastoral response", Contact – The Inter-Disciplinary Journal of Pastoral Studies, 134 (2001), p. 26.

³ An exception is Justine Picardie, If the Spirit Moves You (London: Macmillan, 2001), who offers an autobiographical account of her visits, after her sister's death, to various spiritual helpers and mediums. Concerned with what does and does not console more than with truth and falsity, she provides insight into her experience as a mourner.

⁴ In a study of 18 couples who had lost a child, 8 of the mothers (a much higher proportion) reported having visited a medium: Gordon Riches & Pam Dawson, "Communities of feeling: the culture of bereaved parents", Mortality, 1(2), p. 156.

⁵ See Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, Steven Nickman, eds Continuing Bonds: new understandings of grief (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996); Tony Walter, "A New Model of Grief: bereavement and biography", Mortality, 1:1 (1996), pp. 7 – 25. For the Laura Centre director's view, see Jan McLaren, "A New Understanding of Grief: a counsellor's perspective", Mortality, 3:3 (1998), pp. 275-90.

⁶ See Dewi Rees, Death and Bereavement: The psychological, religious and cultural interfaces (London: Whurr, 1997), ch. 17; Gillian Bennett and Kate M. Bennett, "The Presence of the Dead: an empirical study", Mortality, 5:2 (2000), pp.: 139-57; Louis E. LaGrand, After Death Communication (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1997).

⁷ Gillian Bennett, Traditions of Belief: women, folklore and the supernatural today (London: Penguin, 1987).

⁸ Doris Francis, Leonie Kellaher, & Georgina Neophytou, G. (2005) The Secret Cemetery. (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

⁹ S. J. Marwit & Dennis Klass "Grief and the Role of the Inner Representation of the Deceased", Omega: Journal of Death and Dying, 30 (1995), pp. 283-298.

¹⁰ Bernice Martin "The Spiritualist Meeting" in David Martin & Michael Hill (Eds) A Sociological Yearbook of Religion (3) (London: SCM, 1970), pp 146-61.

¹¹ John Walliss 'Continuing Bonds: Relationships Between the Living and the Dead Within Contemporary Spiritualism', Mortality, 6:1 (2001), pp. 127-45. See also Rory Williams, A

Protestant Legacy: attitudes to death and illness among older Aberdonians, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 129-131.

¹² Joanna Bourke Dismembering the Male: Men's bodies, Britain and the Great War (London: Reaktion Books, 1996), pp. 233-5; Jay Winter, Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: the Great War in European cultural history (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ch.3.

¹³ Tony Walter On Bereavement: The Culture of Grief (Buckingham: Open University Press: Taylor & Francis, 1999).

¹⁴ William H. Swatos, Jr, "Spiritualism as a Religion of Science", Social Compass, 37:4 (1990), p. 472.

¹⁵ Philippe Ariès, The Hour of Our Death (London: Allen Lane. 1981), Part IV.

¹⁶ This need not mean the source of the message is paranormal. For an insightful account of how mediums and other psychics gain authority for their messages, see Robin Wooffitt "Some Properties of the Interactional Organisation of Displays of Paranormal Cognition in Psychic-Sitter Interaction", Sociology, 34:3 (2000), p. 467.

¹⁷ Jan McLaren, "The Death of a Child", in P. Firth, G. Luff and D. Oliviere, eds, Loss, Change and Bereavement in Palliative Care (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Paul Heelas & Linda Woodhead The Spiritual Revolution: why religion is giving way to spirituality (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

¹⁹ Christopher Scheitle, "Bringing Out the Dead: gender and historical cycles of spiritualism", Omega, 50 (2004-5), pp. 237-253.

²⁰ Helen Waterhouse & Tony Walter, "Reincarnation Belief and the Christian Churches", Theology, 106 (2003), pp. 20-28.

²¹ Tony Walter "Mediator Deathwork", Death Studies 29 (2005), pp. 383-412.

²² Colin Murray Parkes, Bereavement, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 1996), ch. 4; J. William Worden, Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy, 1st edn. (London: Routledge, 1983).

²³ Klass et al, Continuing Bonds; Walter, On Bereavement.