Continuing bonds: relationships between the living and the dead within contemporary Spiritualism

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ABSTRACT A number of recent authors have discussed the notion of ‘continuing bonds’ and methods whereby the living may maintain bonds with the deceased. One such method mentioned anecdotally is the consulting of Spiritualist mediums, although no empirical research has been conducted into this phenomenon to date. The aim of this article is to fill these lacunae in the literature through a discussion of the relationship between the living and the deceased within contemporary Spiritualism, drawing on fieldwork conducted at two Spiritualist centres in the north of England. To this end, I will propose a typology of the different strands or elements that make up the communications that take place during public demonstrations of mediumship—advice, support and evidence of survival—as well as discussing the influence of such messages on their recipients. Finally, I will conclude by answering two inter-linked questions; is bereavement a significant factor leading to an involvement in Spiritualism and, if so, is the desire for messages or a continued relationship with the deceased a significant factor in individuals’ continued involvement. Suggestions for further research are also discussed.

Introduction: continuing bonds

As Vickio (1999) has recently noted, for a long time in Western society the prevailing view of the grieving process—of the ‘proper’ relationship between the living and the deceased—has been of the necessity of severing ties and reinvesting in other relationships. Indeed, “persons attempting to maintain ties with the dead are likely to be viewed as suffering from complicated mourning or pathological grief. They may further be perceived as possessing a tenuous grasp on reality or attempting to deny their loss” (Vickio, 1999: 161; see also Silverman & Klass, 1996). For example, writers such as Bowlby (1971), Parkes (1972) and Worden (1982) have argued that grieving entails the bereaved ‘renouncing bonds’ with the deceased; so that, to cite Walter (1999: xiii), “grief is eventually ‘resolved’ by ‘detaching’, ‘letting go’ and ‘moving on’ to new relationships”. Looked at historically, this view is seen as the manifestation of a ‘sequestration of death’ generally within Western, post-Reformation culture (Mellor & Shilling, 1993). For example, whereas during the Middle Ages the relationship between the living and the dead involved a form of mutual...
assistance with the former assisted by the saints and the latter assisted by the prayers of the living through purgatory, the Reformation was characterized by the ‘sweeping away’ of this communion (Walter, 1999). As a result, death became privatized and—over time—increasingly medicalized and ultimately secularized to the point where

Medicalization portrays death as unnatural; secularization dissolves anxieties about the afterlife; privatization isolates the dying and the bereaved not only from society in general but also from the sacred canopy of religion; self-actualization highlights the problem of my own death in a society whose caring agencies are oriented to helping me deal with my beloved’s death; while critics of the impersonal modern way of death propose emotional expression as a way forward (Walter, 1993: 132).

However, during the last decade a number of writers have begun to question this view of the relationship between the living and the deceased to argue that, whilst a number of the bereaved do indeed ‘let go’ and ‘move on’, others “do not let go and move on; they transform the relationships, keep hold and move on” (Walter, 1999: xiii; emphasis added). For example, Silverman and Klass (1996) have argued that the bereaved not only sustain their interdependence with the deceased, actively constructing inner representations of the deceased as part of the normal grieving process, but also engage in the construction and reconstruction of new connections.

On this basis, a number of strategies have been suggested in order to maintain these bonds. Rosenblatt and Meyer (1986), for example, discuss the use of imagined interactions and internal dialogues, whilst Shuchter and Zisook (1988: 269) have suggested a variety of means including “hallucinatory experiences, verbal communications, and prayer; symbolic representations, which imbue material possessions with the spirit of the deceased; living legacies, which provide continuity through identification, perpetuation, and genetics; and social and cultural rituals, memories and dreams”. More recently, Vickio (1999) has suggested five strategies

(a) recognizing the ways in which the deceased have left an indelible imprint upon our lives and identities; (b) striving to actively incorporate meaning and purpose from the deceased’s life into our own continued living; (c) embracing tangible objects or seeking out experiences that symbolically link us to the deceased; (d) identifying special ceremonial opportunities for including the deceased in our lives; and (e) choosing to keep alive the deceased’s life story (Vickio, 1999: 165).

Another strategy—mentioned anecdotally—is the consulting of Spiritualist mediums. Geoffrey Nelson (1969: 267), for example, in his classic study of British Spiritualism in the 1960s, Spiritualism and Society, observed how “the loss of a close personal associate (through death) is probably the most common stimulus to membership of the Spiritualist movement”. Similarly, Walter (1999: 59) notes that “anecdotal evidence suggests that many bereaved people in Britain, particularly bereaved parents, consult spiritualist mediums in order to
find out whether the loved one is all right". However, he then goes on to say that despite this anecdotal evidence, “there are no figures indicating how many bereaved people consult mediums; the use they make of mediums is even less researched than is their use of prayer” (Ibid.).

In this paper, I intend hopefully to go some significant way towards correcting this lacuna in the literature through a discussion of the relationship between the living and the deceased within contemporary Spiritualism. This will be based on an ethnographic study conducted at two Spiritualist centres in the UK and interviews with mediums and those who attend services.[1] In particular, I will seek to describe the nature of the continuing bonds that exist between the living and those who have passed “to the higher side of life” as it is often called. To this end I will propose a typology of the different strands or elements that make up the communications that take place between the deceased and the living during public demonstrations of mediumship, as well as discussing the influence of such messages on the living. Before doing so, however, it would be pertinent to say a few words about Spiritualism.

**Spiritualism**

**History**

The ‘birth’ of modern Spiritualism is typically dated as 31 March 1848 when percussive raps were heard in the vicinity of two teenage sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, living in Hydesville, New York. Over time the sisters devised a code whereby questions could be asked and answers allegedly received from a spirit calling himself Charles B. Rosna (Carroll, 1997). The publicity generated by this led to an upsurge in public interest in the possibility of spiritual communication to the extent that

By 1850—only two years after the Hydesville happenings—it was estimated that there were a hundred mediums in New York City, and fifty or sixty ‘private circles’ in Philadelphia. A decade later, believers could be numbered in their millions (Brandon, 1983: 42).

The growth of Spiritualism in the UK, however, proceeded much more slowly. Whilst there were mediums already working in public, it was not until after the publicity generated by the visit from the USA in 1852 of two mediums, Mrs Hayden and Mrs Roberts, that Spiritualism became absorbed, with other phenomena such as phrenology and mesmerism, into the wider religious and philosophical debate about the meaning of existence. Davies (1999), for example, notes two broad responses within Christianity to Spiritualism during this period. On the one hand, some saw it as an unwelcome return of pre-Enlightenment superstition and, in some instances, representing a technique whereby Satan and demonic forces could be channelled. However, others ...
ism, saw in it a potential avenue of spiritual healing” (Davies, 1999: 31).[2] Moreover, the phenomenon of ‘table-turning’ and ‘spirit rapping’ became for a section of the population a pass-time; “it was not long before ‘table turning’ became socially acceptable. Smart ladies served tea and then retired to ‘communicate’ with the spirit. For them it was a social pass-time. But there were others for whom ‘Spiritualism’ became a way of life” (Bassett, 1990: 9). For these individuals, who joined together to form the Spiritualist National Union (SNU) in 1890, Spiritualism offered “a Religion of Reason for all those who see this as an Age of Reason” (Meynell, 1998: no pagination).

However, it was during and after the Great War that Spiritualism grew rapidly, both in influence and membership. As Hazelgrove (2000; see also Winter, 1995: 54–77) has recently noted, during this period large numbers of people who had lost loved ones on the front line flocked to mediums to receive messages from them and to maintain a form of relationship with them.[3] In this way, “mediums performed ... therapeutic services for the bereaved” whilst “Spiritualism acted as a kind of living memorial to the dead” (Hazelgrove, 2000: 35). This, however, alongside the numbers of fraudulent mediums charging large fees for final messages from loved ones, led to a backlash against the movement (see Bassett, 1990: 33). The Umpire, for example, spoke out in August 1916 against what it saw as the “harpies of humanity trading upon the mental crucifixion of those whose loved ones have fallen to die upon the wasted fields of France and Flanders” (Bassett, 1990: 34). Likewise, Elliot O’Donnell wrote in his 1920 book The Menace of Spiritualism of how

The war has made people so anxious to glean tidings of another world that they will jump at anything, however remote and trivial ... and of this the mediums are thoroughly well aware. They know they have only to weave even the barest semblance of truth into one of their messages, and their poor, half-demented clients will joyfully accept all that follows, convinced that it is of spirit origin (O’Donnell, 1920: 158).

It was the Second World War, however, that represented Spiritualism’s ‘finest hour’ (Akhtar & Humphries, 1999), although in many ways it was a bitter–sweet time. As during the Great War, Spiritualist mediums came under attack from the authorities who feared, for example, that Nazi spies might infiltrate séances to obtain war secrets from dead naval men (Hazelgrove, 2000). The medium, Helen Duncan, for example was convicted in 1944 at the Old Bailey under the 1735 Witchcraft Act after she had allegedly informed a woman at a séance of the sinking of her son’s ship and his death three weeks before the sinking was officially announced. However, despite this, according to Psychic News the number of Spiritualists quadrupled from around 250,000 in the 1930s to one million in 1944.[4] Again, many of these were seeking messages from loved ones killed in battle or, in some cases, predictions of forthcoming air attacks. Indeed, as Akhtar and Humphries (1999: 72) note, “assurances to those that attended [spiritualist churches] that they would come to no harm in the attacks seems to have given many renewed strength and confidence to carry on”.

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In the decades following the war, however, both the number of Spiritualists and the influence of Spiritualism has declined. At the end of 1997, for example, the Spiritualist National Union (SNU) had 381 affiliated churches, with a total membership of 20,026.[5] Whilst, in many ways this decline may be understood within the context of wider patterns showing a decline in religious attendance in the UK in the post-war period generally (see Davie, 1994: 45–73), a number of authors have suggested factors implicit within Spiritualism itself for the decline in its fortunes. Akhtar and Humphries (1999) for example, argue that for the baby-boom generation onwards Spiritualism seemed too ‘cosy’, personal, family-oriented and, in particular, associated with the older generation. Similarly, Spencer (2001) argues that “it seems difficult to imagine that the public association of mediums with fraud enhanced spiritualism’s attractiveness to the uncommitted or potential converts”. Linked to this, as previously noted, Spiritualism’s greatest growth periods during the last century were during the mass-bereavement of the two World Wars. On this basis, it could be argued that the last 50 years of, on the whole, peace-time within the West is not conducive to a mass interest in Spiritualist phenomenon. Rather, the bereavements that potentially lead to an involvement in Spiritualism are more than likely to be those of, relatively speaking, isolated individuals. Indeed, it is highly possible that the previously mentioned ‘privatisation’ of death and bereavement could be a factor in this, with the bereaved either wishing to ‘detach and move on’ or to continue bonds privately or in a non-religious context.

Beliefs

Whilst Spiritualism has no set creed or dogma, it does possess a philosophy, known as The Seven Principles, although individual Spiritualists often display a high degree of reflexivity in their interpretation of them;[6]

1. The Fatherhood of God
2. The Brotherhood of Man
3. The Communion of Saints and the Ministry of Angels
4. Continuous Existence of the Human Soul
5. Personal Responsibility
6. Compensation and Retribution hereafter for all the Good and Evil Deeds done on Earth
7. Eternal Progress open to Every Human Soul

Whilst all are interlinked and of equal importance for the religion of Spiritualism, for our purposes here it is only necessary to pull out one of these Principles in depth; ‘The Communion of Saints and the Ministry of Angels’. To quote from an introductory leaflet produced by the SNU on Spiritualism,[7] this belief “is the key around which our whole philosophy turns”. Thus, whereas ‘Orthodoxy’ denies the possibility of such a relationship, believing often that physical death represents the end of an individual’s existence, “… for the past one hundred and twenty years we have proved conclusively that man [sic] not only
survives physical death but is able, through mediums, to communicate with those left behind”. Indeed, “not only that, they spend quite a lot of time giving us help and guidance in various ways with our earthly problems”.

This ‘proof of survival’ is provided within Spiritualism, then, largely through the ‘demonstration’ of mediumship, which is a prominent feature of Spiritualist services. This is the, typically half-hour, segment in which the medium communicates messages from those in the Spirit World to the congregation (see Martin, 1970: 152–155). In the following section I intend to describe the nature of this continuing relationship between the living and the deceased through an examination of the different elements or strands that may be found within these messages. To this end, I will develop a hermeneutic model of the various elements and their inter-relationship, using illustrations drawn from my fieldwork.

**Continuing bonds within contemporary Spiritualism: a model**

The demonstration of mediumship may be usefully envisaged as a three-way relationship between three social actors, only two of whom are empirically present,[8] characterized by information sharing and negotiation (see Fig. 1); The role of the medium in the demonstration is, as the name suggests, to act as an intermediary between the worlds. This can take one of two forms. In the first, the medium is passive and is possessed by the particular spirit for whom (s)he becomes an ‘instrument’. In this condition, the spirit manifests through the medium who adopts, for example, the mannerisms, posture and in some instances the voice and/or facial characteristics of the deceased. This ‘physical’ form of mediumship is relatively rare today, having seemingly been superseded by more ‘mental’ or psychological forms.[9] In these the mediums acts as an active intermediary between the living and the deceased by gathering super-sensory information from the spirit, translating and selecting from this and then presenting their interpretation to the congregation in the hope that someone will be able to ‘take’ the message (see Skultans, 1974).[10] To give an example of the latter, interpretative, form:

Now, I’m very aware of a gentleman here and I have to say that he wishes to speak to his son. A gentleman here wishes to speak to his son and I have to also say that I’m just coming in here and I’m just trying to get a name from him which isn’t forthcoming just yet but I’m working on it. As I am aware of him I have to say he is quite a tall gentleman … And I also know that with this gentleman there’s a heart condition with him and I know I’m a bit gasping but that’s through the heart condition, not specifically a chest condition with him. So I know he will have passed with heart-related problems, maybe even a heart attack because it’s spreading now as I’m getting in with him that little bit more. He’s also talking about Mark so whoever I need to go to knows the name of Mark. Now, is this making sense to anybody so far?
In other instances, however, the medium may come straight to a particular member of the congregation with a name or a description:

Can I come to you my love please with the green jacket on? ... Speak up because I want to come to you my love because I’ve got a lady by the name of Elsie that was calling through and I’ve got another lady but I don’t know which is which at the moment.

The message is then ‘verbally negotiated’ (Wooffitt, 2000) by the medium and a specific member of the congregation with the latter giving clarification through ‘yes’ or ‘no’ responses, gathering and interpreting the evidence given by the medium and then giving either positive (‘that’s Aunt Jane’) or negative (‘I don’t know anybody fitting that description’) feedback.[11] This process is then repeated typically until the individual can ‘take’ the spirit and their message, although in some instances it can continue throughout the message albeit interspersed with the other elements that I shall discuss below. It can also sometimes transpire, and has always been the case when I have personally received one, that a message cannot be accepted on either factual grounds or because the spirit cannot be recognised. This could potentially call into question the charisma of the individual medium—but not, interestingly, the process itself (Wooffitt, 2000). As a result, mediums typically do one of two things. Usually, the reluctant recipient is asked to ‘go away and think about it’; to, for example, ask older relatives whether they remember the person attempting to communicate, or, in the case of factual information, to go away and mull the information over. Alternatively, the medium may explicitly open the message up to the rest of the congregation by saying ‘can anyone else accept this message?’. Where there is an acceptance, and there invariably is, the process will continue.
The evidence given for survival may also, aside from just information, inherently contain important messages to the living. For example, part of the message could be the spirit telling the congregation member that they’re ‘OK’ and that they’re settling into their new existence. Linked to this, (s)he may also want to let them know that, for example, their death was peaceful, that they were aware of their love and help towards the end of life (this is often the case with those who were not lucid towards the end) or that any ailments that they suffered from in life are now absent. In addition, (s)he may also speak of family and friends who had ‘passed over’ beforehand with whom they have met up again. Indeed, it is often the case that mediums can relay a set of messages to an individual from a number of spirits, a phenomenon that may be likened to, for example, the image of relatives passing around the telephone receiver on a special occasion.

Proof of survival and some information about their passing and present condition, then, is a key aspect of the messages delivered through mediums. The other dominant theme in the messages may be expressed as ‘I’m still here for (or with) you and …’. In other words, the spirit will affirm their continued interest in, and relationship with, the living and seek to assist in a number of ways (see Fig. 2). Whilst, as will be discussed below, these ways are often inter-related, in general terms two general strands within the messages may be discerned: advice and support.

Advice

In the first instance, the deceased may wish to offer advice to the individual. This may be at the general level and include relatively mundane advice such as the location of misplaced objects, how to deal with unruly children or even gardening and home improvement. In other instances advice is offered concerning life plans:

But I feel on the material pathway my love [that] we’re coming to a crossroads where we have to make a decision … And I feel that there again nobody can tell us what to do or how to go about it but I feel very strongly that if we simply relax and we learn to tune into our spiritual selves we instinctively know the right direction to travel in … and you will get there, it might be words, it might be thoughts or whatever, but you will be directed in that direction … Because I feel for you my love that there are two doors that are waiting to be opened for you, so I don’t know what direction this is in the material plane … but I feel that there are two opportunities that are there for you. But whatever one you choose it will be the right one for you at this time … If you don’t like it, you can always come back and go through the other door [laughs].

In some cases the deceased may offer warnings or attempt to raise the individual’s awareness of a particular (possibly dangerous) situation or relationship. One woman, for example, was alerted to problems within her marriage through
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![Diagram of spiritual communication and its elements]

**Figure 2.** The elements found within spiritual communication and their inter-relationships.
messages over a period of time as well as through her own clairvoyance. However, the majority of those who I spoke to were uneasy about whether such messages should be seen as explicit warnings or, more specifically, a form of prophecy for two main reasons. Firstly, for many it contradicts the ideas of free-will and personal responsibility inherent within the Seven Principles by effectively handing over one’s destiny to another. A medium that I interviewed, for example, told me that although ‘you do get one or two people who run their lives according to what they’re told’:

that isn’t according to Spiritualism because if you read the Principles you’ve got personal responsibility for your life. Spirit don’t run your life, they’re just there to help you and to give you the upliftment if you need it when you need it most, but they can’t tell you what to do because that’s your choice, that’s your free-will.

The second reason is historical and relates to the fact that, as noted previously, a medium could be prosecuted for prophecy until relatively recently (1951) under the Witchcraft Act. As a result, contemporary mediums are keen to distance themselves from this phenomenon. Moreover, Spiritualists are also arguably aware of the disillusionment that was generated within the movement before and during the Second World War as a result of a number of incorrect predictions (Nelson, 1969).[13] Nevertheless, prophecy of a kind does continue albeit in a more subtle form by the medium raising the individual’s awareness of a particular issue, e.g. ‘there’s going to be a new life around you’. Similarly, they may shift a message into a prophecy. This phenomenon was picked up by one Spiritualist that I interviewed:

So, if a person can’t take the message [the medium will] say ‘have you lost a purse?’ and [the member of the congregation will] say ‘no’. They’ll say ‘well, be careful because you might do’.

Those I spoke to, however, were much less reticent about receiving advice regarding their spiritual development from the deceased or spirit guides. Indeed, a number said how such communications were often the catalyst for them beginning to develop spiritually or develop as mediums and/or healers. One woman, for example, recalled how

I’ve always wanted to get into Spiritualist healing ... and this message was that if I wasn’t sitting to develop I should do—I was already—and that I would be a Spiritualist healer and the medium said ‘and you will work from the platform. You’ll be doing what I’m doing’.

Similarly, advice or support may be offered to an individual who feels that they have reached an impasse in their spiritual development. For example, one man who is training to be a spiritual healer received the following message at a service:

What I was getting was ... this blank, this blank; that there’s something that’s not happening or that you think is not happening. And I must have a sensitive
right side of my head tonight and it just feels like a blank and a block and I’m wondering if this is how you’re feeling at the moment. And it certainly feels very much about your spiritual development … What I’m getting is [that] you should have more faith in yourself and try not to ask questions and it’s blooming difficult. You should have more faith in yourself …

Indeed, one Spiritualist that I interviewed distinguished between advice about material and spiritual matters and described how he felt that the latter were much more within the ‘domain’ of the Spirit World. He also described a technique whereby rather than waiting for a message regarding his development he would ask a question in his meditation and then see whether a reply came through from the Spirit World during demonstrations.

A final form of advice that is sometimes found within Spiritual communication regards family members, particularly partners, ‘letting go’ of their deceased loved ones and ‘moving on’. At one of the first services that I attended, for example, one gentleman was told that he had grieved for ‘too long’ for his wife and that—while keeping her in his thoughts—he had to stop obsessively grieving for her. A similar theme was also developed in the following message:

I feel as if there’s still a lot of grief in the family as if somebody’s not over it to the point of going and visiting [the grave]. Would you understand that? And I feel as if it’s tearing my heart out and with all of us we need to grieve the way we need to grieve and when it comes to love we always grieve but I feel very, very strongly that there’s a concern that he wants to put across, a concern, because this grieving is very harsh if you can appreciate that. Not that he can remedy it by coming and saying ‘I’m here, I’m here’, but I just feel that his thoughts are with his family ...

Likewise, one of my interviewees related the story of how a young girl who had taken her own life had come back during one service to say ‘mum, stop grieving for me’;

She said she’d seen her mum by her grave and said something like ‘I don’t want you to go to my grave. It’s depressing. If you want to be near me be at home and think about me. I’ll be there’. So she was almost saying ‘you don’t have to go to spiritualist church, you don’t have to go to the grave because I’m there anyway’.

Support

The deceased may also wish to offer support or emotional assistance to their loved ones. Indeed, in many ways support is intrinsically bound up with the advice given. The advice received by the developing medium that I discussed previously, for example, implicitly contains within it the ongoing support and encouragement of his spirit guides. Moreover, because the support is typically non-directive those I spoke to felt much more comfortable about accepting it than they did when advice was given.

There were, however, reservations in some instances. This was particularly
the case in messages of reconciliation, where the deceased wishes to say either what was not said or what they perhaps felt that they could not say whilst they were alive. To give an excerpt from a lengthy message of this kind:

Would you understand why this gentleman wants to particularly talk to his son? Because there’s something, either words were said or there was some uneasiness, something was unresolved when he went to the Spirit World and you’re able to pass this on are you? Because he really needs to do this because as this gentleman is coming in here he is so sorry … And I know here that he is so sorry, maybe not for what has happened but I feel here that this bridge needs to be built and he needs to know there’s nothing, there’s no malice, there’s no unnecessary hurt or anything like that. This bridge needs to be made and he’s so sorry for not taking the time that it needed … All that I’m saying to you is that your father is saying that—I know it’s very easy for the Spirit World to say ‘put the past behind you’, it’s something that they do keep saying—but all I’m saying to you is that there are good things in life to look back to as well as the bad things that happened because I feel here that there’s been a lot of reflecting back recently.

Thus, the deceased will seek to repair the relationship with the living by expressing regret and asking them, as in this example, to put the past behind them. Similarly, as in this next example, they may also wish to express to the individual(s) concerned what they perhaps couldn’t say whilst they were alive:

He’d try and do his best … I feel as if he tried and he wants to emphasise that because I feel as if I wanted to try. Not everything worked out and not everything I would have wanted happened but in his own way he wants to get across ‘I tried’. Would you understand that, please? Because I feel as if sometimes he was a little hard to understand because I’m sitting in a chair and I’m thinking and I’m thinking and I’m thinking and no one knows what’s going on. Would you understand that, please? … this is a very strong need of his, ‘I tried’ … because there’s a lot of love there I want to say which was not always expressed …

Those that received such messages, however, typically expressed an ambivalence towards them. One man, for example, told me that although such messages helped him to grow and “get [that person’s] life and that relationship into much more perspective”, he felt that it was “a bit ironic that the communications that have achieved the reconciliation come after life rather than during life … I’d have liked that communication if only it could have taken place beforehand”. Similarly, another expressed an uneasiness at the idea that an individual could “really mess someone’s life up while they were alive and then come back and say ‘I’m sorry’ and everything was all right”.

The final sense in which the deceased may wish to assist the living is by sending them ‘healing energies’. This is typically done in one of two ways. Primarily, it may be stated explicitly by the medium, for instance, saying to the congregation member that ‘this individual also wants to send you their healing thoughts’ or ‘I know that she’s sending you her healing energies’. In other cases
elements of the evidence for survival may become metaphors for healing or support. Thus, in this example the deceased’s walking stick which had been used previously as a piece of evidence becomes a metaphor for emotional support:

And I know he had a stick towards the end of his life ... Well, he’s just showing me a stick here and he’s saying ‘I needed that for support’ and I know he wants to give that for you, not in a physical way, but emotionally here where you need a bit of support at the moment and he’s saying ‘I’m here for you, very much here for you’ ... I want to give you this walking stick so that when you’re just feeling a bit low, you know it’s there for you.

At first glance, then, it could be argued that in many ways within Spiritualism the deceased occupy a dominant position. Thus, the emphasis is placed on what they can do for the living—typically offer advice and support—not *vice versa*. They are not, for example, dependent on the prayers of the living to assist them through Purgatory. Moreover, as Spiritualists are keen to point out, during the demonstration of mediumship it is those in the Spirit World rather than the living who choose who gets a message and from whom. To quote one medium I spoke to, “Spirit goes where the message is needed the most ... Spirit know more than we do and they guide you to go to that person that really needs a message”. However, this is not to say that the living exercise no authority. As I have already noted, where they do recognise the communicator and remember the advice given this does not mean that they will act on it.

In this way, the relationship between the ‘worlds’ does not fit comfortably into the broad typology of possible relationships with the dead recently proposed by Klass and Goss (1999). In comparison, for example, with the ancestral relationships of Japan, the Spiritualist dead are not treated with any level of veneration or worship. They may of course be admired or adored, but this attitude of the living is usually a secular rather than a spiritual affair; admiring them for their success in life or character rather than because of their role as an ancestor. Equally, there is no sense of ‘mutual obligations’ between the ‘worlds’ or that the inhabitants of both have “equal power to help and hurt” (Klass & Goss, 1999: 548). The living, for example, are not expected to perform rituals for the dead, as in Japanese ancestor worship, or envisaged as having any power to assist the deceased in any way. Similarly, the deceased cannot help in any other sense than perhaps through the relatively indirect ways that I have discussed above. There is also most definitely no way in which they may be perceived to ‘hurt’ the living except, again at the indirect level, by their apparent inability or unwillingness to communicate via a medium to their loved ones.

The deceased are therefore also not seen as having become the ‘sacred dead’ and thus having attained any special insights or powers following their death. For example, they are never seen as having the ability to intercede with the Supreme Being on behalf of the living. Moreover, their insights into life are not seen as those of ‘ascended masters’ nor is their advice coloured by a form of post-mortem objectivity (see Nelson, 1969: 28–29). Rather they are typically
seen to be the same as they were whilst alive and are therefore not treated with any form of reverence:

just because they’re in Spirit, they’re actually just the same … and if they were a git when they were alive they might still be a git now and if they were completely stupid and missed the point while they were alive they might not be that different now. And if when they were alive you never took their advice then y’know … just because our spirit relatives come back doesn’t mean that they suddenly become these wonderful growthful spiritual beings, because whilst that might be a purpose for them they might not have got that far and they might just be coming back in a different form but really as much as they were before.

In this way I would argue that the relationship is typically seen to represent a *literal continuation* of the relationship that occurred during life (see Young & Cullen, 1996: 173–174). Thus, someone who was ‘completely stupid and missed the point’ whilst alive will similarly be more than likely the last person that advice would be sought or accepted from now they are dead. Likewise, referring back to a previous point, someone with whom one had a negative experience in life—a parent, for example—will generally not be treated with any more civility than they would have received whilst alive nor will they be instantly forgiven for what potentially occurred in life. Indeed, the phenomenon of ‘forgiving the dead’ is perhaps the only way in which the dead are dependent on the living and the only ‘service’ that the living may provide.

**Spiritualism and bereavement**

At the beginning of this paper I noted the existence of anecdotal evidence to suggest that there was a phenomenon of people consulting Spiritualist mediums following a bereavement as a method to continue their relationship with the deceased. In the previous section I described the nature that this relationship can take; how the deceased may offer support and advice as well as, perhaps most importantly, evidence of their survival. In this section I would like to go some way to addressing this anecdotal evidence by answering two inter-linked questions: is bereavement a significant factor leading to an involvement in Spiritualism and, if so, is the desire for messages or a continued relationship with the deceased a significant factor in individuals’ continued involvement?

Primarily, my fieldwork would show that *contra* Nelson’s (1969) findings, bereavement is not an overly significant factor leading to an involvement. None of those that I spoke to or interviewed stated it as a reason for initially coming along to services.[14] Nevertheless, those I spoke to were able to tell me anecdotally of individuals who came once or twice, got a message and then never returned. How, to quote, one committed Spiritualist:

the majority of people will turn to [Spiritualism] if they are in trouble or bereaved or some such. Usually when people’s lives are going hunky-dory they
don’t bother. As soon as they’re faced with a bereavement or a problem they run to the nearest medium, don’t they?

This appeared to be particularly the case with one of the centres that I observed which was less than 100 metres away from both a large general hospital and a children’s hospital. Moreover, my fieldwork would lead me to believe that it is not so much bereavement per se but rather specific forms of bereavement that may lead to individuals consulting mediums for evidence of survival or in order to say goodbye. Typically this was the case where the deceased was young and/or where the death was sudden or tragic, for example through an accident, murder or suicide. Having said this, however, individuals may be helped by their Spiritualist beliefs through a subsequent bereavement or with how they cope with death. One woman I spoke to, for example, works with the terminally ill and finds that her beliefs help her to discuss death and the afterlife with her patients or the experiences of families following a bereavement. In her words, it gives her “a different dimension” of experiencing and relating to others. Similarly, others who I spoke to felt that although Spiritualism wouldn’t be a particular comfort straight after a bereavement and that they’d still feel the loss of their loved ones at anniversaries and so on, they would be consoled to some extent by the knowledge that “they’re going to be OK afterwards and cared for and with their loved ones”. Thus, whilst (s)he is physically absent and missed on this basis, as we have seen, in many ways they are not only spiritually present but also seen to be still concerned about and involved with those they have left behind.

However, whilst this may be the case, my fieldwork would also lead me to conclude that, again possibly contra the anecdotal evidence, the desire for messages or a continued relationship with the deceased is not a significant factor in individuals’ continued involvement with Spiritualism. Thus, whilst the desire for communication may lead to an initial involvement, it does not on the whole lead to long-term commitment. Rather, those that I spoke to cited two other factors as pertinent, primarily, the atmosphere of the centre and their relationships with the other members of the congregation. One woman, for example, recalled that her first impressions of the local centre were of “just being accepted, no questions asked. Nobody [was] asking you ‘who are you? Where do you come from?’. You’re just ‘in’. If you feel like you want to be, you’re part of it”. Moreover, for many of those who attend regularly the service becomes a form of social event where they can meet up with friends and like-minded individuals.[15] The second factor cited is the ‘philosophy’; the segment in the service prior to the demonstration where the medium presents a form of sermon (see Martin, 1970: 151–152):

I don’t get many messages and it doesn’t really matter. It’s the philosophy down there that’s important and the general beliefs and all the rest of it. But also it’s my relationships with the other people down there that’s important to me.
One of the best parts for me is the philosophy. To some people it may be straightforward, it may be common sense, but because of the level of stress that I'm under and pressure and things that are my experiences in life, you don’t often see things in a common sense way.

This is not to say, of course, that such individuals are uninterested in receiving messages, but rather that as they become more involved in Spiritualism other things take on more of an importance to them and that these things may serve to hold their interest during the periods when they don’t receive any messages.

## Conclusion

To conclude, Spiritualism may be seen to offer a means and a supportive environment where a type of relationship can continue between those on both sides of the ‘Great Divide’. This relationship is in many ways a continuation of the lived one, with the deceased offering support and advice which the living can then either act on or not. Indeed, in many cases it is not so much the content of the communications per se that is significant for people, but rather the fact that their loved ones have communicated with them. However, it would be wrong to claim that those involved in Spiritualism are solely motivated by a desire for such communication. As I hopefully made clear in the above discussion, whilst bereavement may be a factor leading to involvement, it is not on the whole a significant one. Moreover, the desire to maintain communication with the deceased is not in itself a significant factor in why individuals continue to attend Spiritualist services. Rather, it is their relationship with others in the congregation and an interest in the philosophy of Spiritualism that tends to maintain individuals’ involvement. In other words, whilst the phenomenon of spirit communication is an intrinsic part of Spiritualism—enshrined as it is in the **Seven Principles**—it would be wrong to see it as its sole **raison d’être**. There are, however, sites at which I feel that this would be the case. Primarily, at public demonstrations of mediumship that take place outside of the context of religious worship—in, for example, clubs and pubs—and where individuals who are not necessarily Spiritualists have private sittings with mediums. At these I believe there would be an emphasis on the **phenomenon** of Spiritualism—in particular, spirit communication—and its value as a form of entertainment above and beyond any, strictly speaking, religious concerns. Further research, however, would be needed to examine whether or not this is the case.

## Notes

[1] The research for this paper is part of an ongoing project investigating contemporary Spiritualism. This has involved participant observation at public demonstrations of mediumship, interviews and discussions with those attending a Spiritualist centre and a Spiritualist church in the north of England. I would like to thank the Spiritualists’ National Union at the national level for granting me permission to undertake this research and at the local level the Spiritualists who consented to be interviewed and discussed my research with me,
and the numerous mediums who allowed me to record their demonstrations. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees for their comments on the earlier draft of this paper.

[2] For further discussions of the origins of modern British Spiritualism, see Barrow (1986), Hallam et al. (1999) and Howarth (2000).

[3] This included a number of ‘high profile conversions’. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his wife became involved in Spiritualism in 1917, becoming the chairman of several Spiritualist institutions and a tireless propagandist for it until his death in 1930 (see Conan Doyle, 1997). Likewise, the editor of The People, Hannen Swaffer became a Spiritualist in 1925 and regular feature writer in Psychic Times after becoming convinced that he had received messages from his former boss, the newspaper tycoon, Lord Northcliffe. Other famous ‘converts’ included Sir Oliver Lodge and the socialist writer, Robert Blatchford (see Akhtar & Humphries, 1999: 71; Bassett, 1990: 34; Hazelgrove, 2000: 15–16).

[4] This figure is arguably an exaggeration. According to official figures, the number of SNU societies and members was actually falling during this period. This figure may, however, include members of private circles or other Spiritualist Associations who were not necessarily members of the SNU. See note 5 below. If one accepts the official SNU figure, then the number of SNU members has generally grown over the course of the century. I have no figures for the number of Spiritualist churches during the twentieth century as a whole, although—again drawing on Nelson’s (1969: 286) figures—the number of churches has decreased in the post-war period from 400 to 381 in 1997.

[5] In addition there were another 2007 Class B members and 352 provisional Class B members (source: SNU website: http://www.snu.org.uk/members.htm). There are, of course, no figures for those who attend Spiritualist churches or centres and who do not become members of the SNU. It should also be remembered that a number of individuals are not members of the SNU for a variety of reasons, but would still see themselves as being Spiritualists. For a review of SNU statistics between 1908 and 1964 see Nelson (1969: 273–288).

[6] ‘With liberty of interpretation’ is a common phrase used within Spiritualism when discussing the Principles. For example, in the 1976 edition of the SNU Hymn Book this phrase is presented in italics below the list of Principles on the first page. Likewise in the Principles of Spiritualism leaflet (see below), the reader is reminded that “it should be borne in mind that these are principles, not commandments and in accepting them, one is accorded complete liberty of interpretation”. Whilst this phrase was legally removed from the aforementioned hymn book in its following edition, the idea is still implicit within the religion. This reflexivity in interpretation was also a persistent theme in interviews and my discussions with Spiritualists.

[7] The leaflet entitled For Those New to Spiritualism, 2. The Principles of Spiritualism was purchased from the Chesterfield SNU centre.

[8] For the purpose of this paper I intend to ‘bracket out’ the question of whether the spiritual communications emanate from a supernatural source or whether mediumship is a form of trickery. There is a wealth of literature for both positions (see Bjorling, 1998). Rather, my account will be phenomenological and will seek to describe the phenomenon as it is understood and articulated by those present. Thus, I will speak of ‘the deceased’ because that is whom those whom I spoke to believe they are receiving communications from via mediums and because, ultimately, I can make no judgements of the ontological existence, or not, of spirits.

[9] Mental mediumship falls into three broad categories; Clairvoyance (the medium sees the spirit); Clairaudience (the medium hears the spirit) and Clairysentience (the medium senses the presence and the thoughts of the spirit). (Source: SNU website: http://www.snu.org.uk/index2.htm).

[10] One medium that I have seen demonstrate on many occasions during the period of my fieldwork consistently ‘sees’ deep pink roses which she then interprets to the congregation member with, for example, a small white bud symbolising a deceased infant or the thorns
on the stem representing life’s woes. The spiritual roses are then given symbolically to the particular individual at the end of the message.

[11] An in-depth discussion of this process is outside of the scope of this paper; see, however, Martin (1970) and Wooffitt (2000).

[12] The term ‘Rescue Circle’ refers to the gathering of a number of Spiritualists together in order to help a spirit who, for whatever reason (typically the shock of their passing) has failed to gravitate towards their proper place in the afterlife. The medium Frederick Wood, for example, described how “although the physical pain is ended, the conditions of their passing may affect their mental condition for a long time. In cases of sudden death by accident or bombs they are often bewildered—lost in a grey mist—until rescued by some spirit-helper” (Wood, 1942 quoted in Hazelgrove, 2000:64).

[13] For example, two weeks before the outbreak of the war, Two Worlds ran a headline declaring that there would be ‘No World War’. A number of other predictions, ultimately incorrect, were also made such as that the war would only last three years, that Italy would remain neutral and that Hitler would die of throat cancer before 1942 (see Nelson, 1969: 162–163).

[14] A full account of the factors that lead to an individual’s involvement with Spiritualism is again outside the scope of this paper. What is worth noting, however, is that none of those that I spoke to self-consciously set out to become a Spiritualist but typically came across it in a variety of different ways. This would also appear to be the case with mediums.

[15] After all the Spiritualist services that I attended, for example, cups of tea and biscuits were served and there was the opportunity for those attending for the first time informally to put questions to members of the committee or speak to the medium. This time was also an opportunity for the regular members to talk about matters often unrelated to Spiritualism and to share news.

REFERENCES
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Biographical note

John Walliss has recently completed his PhD at the University of Sheffield and is currently a part-time lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of Warwick. His research interests are situated broadly in the intersection between the sociology of religion and social theory. In addition, he is interested in exploring the place of religion in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. His current research interests include an ethnography of contemporary Spiritualism and a sociological analysis of the ‘fringe’ archaeology of Graham Hancock.