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### Article abstract

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# The Language of Mediums and Healers in the Spiritualist Church

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Spiritualism focuses on two levels of existence: life on earth and life in the spirit world. These two worlds are brought into contact through the psychic abilities of mediums. The language of mediums relies on nineteenth century imagery to convey Spiritualist values about work, spiritual advancement, and communication with the spirit world.

This paper is an examination of some of the terms which convey and condense the theology and values of Spiritualism.

*Le spiritisme pose en principe deux niveaux d'existence : celui de la vie sur terre et celui du monde des esprits. Les capacités psychiques des médiums permettent à ces deux mondes de se toucher. Les médiums emploient un langage imagé, emprunté au dix-neuvième siècle, pour exprimer les valeurs spiritistes dans les domaines du travail, du progrès spirituel, et de la communication avec le monde des esprits.*

*Je propose, dans cette présentation, d'examiner quelques-uns des termes qui expriment et qui renferment la théologie et les valeurs du spiritisme.*

During the middle of the nineteenth century several movements, which could be called new religions were founded in North America; some, such as the Shakers passed into oblivion, while others, such as the Mormons and Christian Scientists, continued to flourish. Spiritualism was one of these new religions, and although its demise has been forecasted by its detractors since its inception, Spiritualism continues to play an active role in the lives of many people.

This article, which is an examination of the language of mediums and healers in the Spiritualist church, grew out of an essay on the history and organizational structure of Spiritualism<sup>1</sup>. As I became more knowledgeable about Spiritualism, I have come to realize that the language of mediums and healers, while seemingly trivial is centrally related to the social experiences of Spiritualists and conveys an important dimension of Western culture.

## *The data*

Through intensive life history interviews and participant observation at religious services and weekly psychic development circles, I have become familiar with the backgrounds of many Spiritualists. Although these individuals have diverse ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, they share aspirations of upward mobility. For the most part, they own and

operate small family business or work as commissioned salespeople. They value the independence and opportunity of self-employment, as they value the opportunity for innovation, which is an important feature of Spiritualism.

Irving I. Zaretsky has extensively analyzed the language of Spiritualism. In his essay "In the Beginning Was the Word: The Relationship of Language to Social Organization in the Spiritualist Church" (1974), he presented an extensive typology of Spiritualist vocabulary and related it to the organization of Spiritualist churches. While this analysis provides an important starting point in considering the range and variation of the vocabulary of Spiritualism, I would like to take this one step further and examine how a few specific words frequently found in messages from the spirit world are related to the historical origins of Spiritualism and to the everyday life and concerns of Spiritualists. The words "work," "progress," "communication," "medium," and the ubiquitous word "spirit" are central to Spiritualism. The "world of spirit" in which these words figure prominently, is essential to Spiritualism. In many respects it mirrors life on earth. Spirits work, go to school if they are young, wear clothes, and have to strive for spiritual advancement, just as Spiritualists do on the earthly plane. On the whole, the world of spirits is a world of intention and action, just like the earthly plane. In other words, the spirit world is — at least in its lower spheres — a world of everyday life in which the paramount reality, like the earthly paramount reality is: work. Although Alfred Schutz was only speaking of the material world when he described work as the paramount reality of everyday life, as far as Spiritualists are concerned his definitions apply equally well to the spirit world and to mediumship. The spirits and their communications are part of the realm of work, because what they do has meaning beyond that of mental activity. According to Schutz:

Working, then, is action in the outer world, based upon a project and characterized by the intention to bring about the projected state of affairs by bodily movement. (1971: 212).

and what distinguishes fantasy from work is that:

Mere mental actions are, in this sense, revocable. Working, however, is irrevocable. My work has changed the outer world. At best, I may restore the initial situation by countermeasures but I cannot make undone what I have done. (ibid.: 217).

Spirits act on the world and are therefore part of it.

The theology of Spiritualism is centred around the belief that there is life after death and that communication with the spirit world is possible through mediums. There are no definitive authorities on

Spiritualism, although there is a substantial body of Spiritualist literature and theology. The most important nineteenth century Spiritualist theologians were Andrew Jackson Davis and Emma Hardinge Britten. In the twentieth century Arthur Ford was the most important Spiritualist philosopher. However, little attention is paid to these theological writings at the local level. This is because Spiritualism emphasizes the actual demonstration of its beliefs, rather than adherence to a specific doctrine. Spiritualist churches in North America tend to form almost spontaneously around the leadership of charismatic mediums or are established by a small group of individuals dedicated to Spiritualism.

### *The historical setting*

Religion in northeastern United States had gone through many changes since the Puritans first settled in Massachusetts. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Unitarianism superseded orthodox Calvinism, introducing a secularizing influence that paved the way for a variety of fundamentalist and mystical reactions (Tyler, 1944: 27-28). The first half of the nineteenth century gave rise to a diversity of new faiths. Although never organized along the lines of a religion, Transcendentalism of the 1830's, a philosophical, mystical, and ethical way of life, was a reaction against the entrenched middle-class liberalism of Unitarianism. The Transcendentalists embraced a spiritual vigour which emphasized individualism and self-reliance, while asserting the need to:

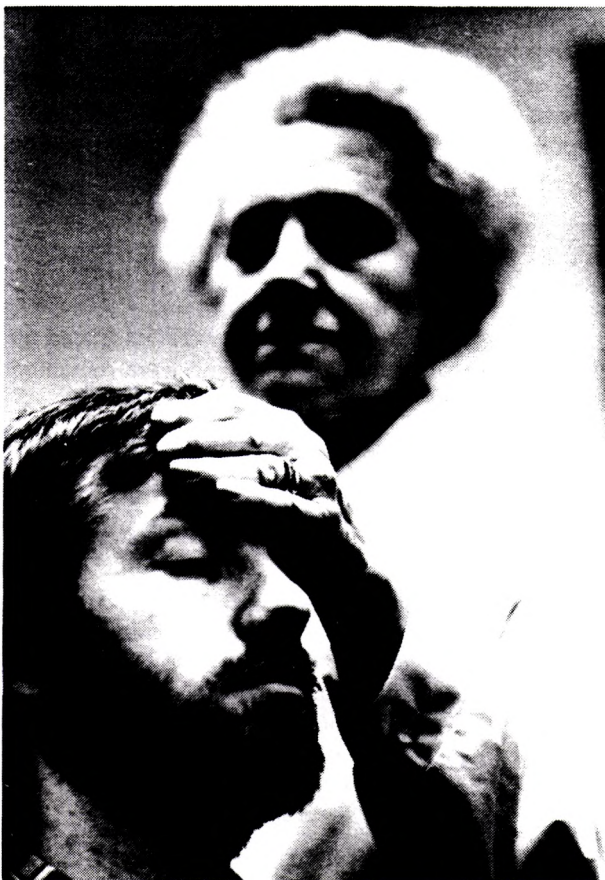
Transcend reason and intuitively reach the spiritual absolutes through which man could find the reality behind the outer shell of life. (Tyler, 1944: 59).

These qualities and attitudes were embraced by nineteenth century Spiritualists, and have remained in contemporary Spiritualism.

Spiritualism began in a part of Western New York State long known for intense religious activity. This part of New York was called the "burned-over district" because of the many revival fires, perfectionist, and millennial movements which regularly swept through this area (Cross, 1950). In the first half of the nineteenth century, American society went through many social upheavals, brought about by increased industrialization and scientific discoveries. Spiritualism, like other new religions, attempted to establish scenarios which enabled its followers to understand and seemingly control the events and circumstances that were altering their lives.

The origins of Spiritualism are traced to two mediums, Catherine and Margarita Fox. The Fox sisters introduced communication with the spirit

world through mediumship to North America in 1848. They did not intend to start a new religion, but were simply engaged in demonstrating their abilities as mediums. In 1850 the religious significance of communication with the spirit world was realized with the founding of the first religious Spiritualist group, the Apostolic Circle of Auburn, New York. Until that time, seances and public demonstrations were presented as scientific phenomena, not as religious phenomena. From about 1850-1880 Spiritualism swept across the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Europe. It was highly respected by the nineteenth century intelligentsia of both continents. Some of the prominent Spiritualists were Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, James Fenimore Cooper, and in Canada, a prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King. There were two important international influences which preceded Spiritualism, the teachings of Emmanuel Swedenborg and demonstrations of Mesmerism. Swedenborg claimed to have had conversations with Christ, Galileo, and a host of lesser spirits while in trance. His teachings about the social structure of the spirit world had a great influence on Spiritualism. In particular, Swedenborg stated that the spirit world is divided into seven concentric layers



Mrs. Doris Trautner giving a psychic healing (Ph. Dick Wallace).

of spiritual existence. The spirits of the dead must pass through these layers until they have progressed to the outermost and most perfect state of spiritual existence. Mesmerism, which was based on the theory that magnetic forces exert an influence on the body, was demonstrated at public lectures and helped set the stage for the examination of spiritual matters by using methods considered to be scientific.

Since Spiritualism is a loosely structured religion, it permits many shades of belief. Unlike Judeo-Christian religions which cite the Bible as the basis of their beliefs, or sects which trace their origins to a specific leader, Spiritualism is based on claims of scientific fact proven at each religious service through healings and clairvoyant readings performed by mediums with the aid of the spirit world. The demonstration of these phenomena is considered empirical proof that there is life after death and that communication with the spirit world is possible. No other Western religion claims to present, at each religious service, scientific proof of its validity.

### *Mediums and Messages*

By incorporating scientific language into its vocabulary, Spiritualism made a gallant effort to bridge the gap between science and religion, a problem which had troubled much of nineteenth century America, and has yet to be resolved for many people. Slater Brown captures this feeling with a quotation from the nineteenth century:

To many of those who read about the rappings in the newspaper, this newly discovered spiritual telegraph, transmitting messages from the world of beyond to the world of here-and-now, seemed a far greater wonder that God had wrought than any man-made contrivance of wires and magnets. As one enthusiast exclaimed, 'God's telegraph has outdone Morse's altogether'. (1970: 109-110).

This discussion of the messages of Spiritualism is centred around the thesis that messages from the spirit world can be regarded as products of the social, cultural, and historical processes of Western culture. To understand this it is necessary to look a little deeper into the social milieu in which Spiritualism developed. One of the great challenges to religion in the nineteenth century was the rise of science. The problems this caused for the individual were aptly described by Elizabeth Phelps in 1886:

We learned that we were not men but protoplasm. We learned that we were not spirits, but chemical combinations. We learned that we had laid up treasure in the wrong places. We learned that the drama of Hamlet and the Ode to Immortality were secretions of the gray matter of the brain. (quoted in Carter, 1971: 89).

In confronting this anxiety, Spiritualism's unique world view defined spirits and the afterlife as

phenomena conforming to the regularities of Natural Law, viz., the psychic and spiritual laws of God governing the universe. By conforming to the Natural Laws of the universe, Spiritualism teaches that the individual can obtain health, peace of mind, inner spiritual strength, and the development of psychic abilities. By replacing the traditional Christian emphasis on faith and belief with the rule of law, Spiritualism broke with traditional religion's relegation of spirits to the realm of the supernatural.<sup>4</sup> This world view which unites spirit and Natural Law can be seen in the Declaration of Principles by the National Spiritualist Association of Churches:

7. We affirm the moral responsibility of the individual, and that he makes his own happiness or unhappiness as he obeys or disobeys Nature's physical and spiritual laws. (1975/1911: 37).

One of these Natural Laws is "progress," a word and a theme that continually crops up in historical Spiritualist writings as well as in contemporary religious services. In *Keywords* Raymond Williams notes:

The full development of the idea of "progress" as a law of history ('you can't stop progress') belongs to the political and industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (1976: 206).

It should also be noted that "progress" used in a religious sense did not originate with Spiritualism, but can be seen in the title of John Bunyan's 1678 book, *The Pilgrim's Progress: From This World to That Which is to Come*.

Spiritualists use the word "progress" in two senses. The first and most widely used meaning of "progress," is concerned with spiritual advancement, which is possible in both the material and spiritual worlds. On the material plane, individuals progress as they become more attuned to the spiritual world; this may be in the development of healing or mediumistic talents, or simply by living with greater spiritual awareness. On the other side of life, spirits progress by advancing through the hierarchical realms of the spirit world. They work at this, and have guides and teachers who help them. Part of the creed adopted by the Spiritualist National Union, and which is pasted into the frontispiece of the hymnals used by both Spiritualist churches in London, Ontario, states:

Eternal Progress open to every Soul.

Messages from the spirit world frequently contain references to personal progress or development. Recently a medium described the manner in which a woman who was developing her mediumistic talents would progress. This was important information, since she was not going to progress at a steady pace. Therefore, she was told not to be discouraged by

the lulls in her development. In older Spiritualist writings the word "progress/ive" is used in the sense of being more advanced than other churches. For example the title of a manual used extensively by one of the churches in London, Ontario is *The Lyceum Manual: A Compendium of Physical, Moral, and Spiritual Exercises for Use in Progressive Lyceums* (Britten et al, 1922). In addition to "progress," the messages of mediums and healers are centred around the words "work," "communication," "medium," and "spirit." In Spiritualism these words are key symbols, that is, symbols that play a central role, "in relation to the other elements of the cultural system of thought" (Ortner, 1973: 1343). These terms are very closely related to each other in the messages from the spirit world. The major religious principles and modes of action of Spiritualism are bound up in these words.

The word "work" is not used as frequently as the other words in the messages of mediums; however the concept of work is a key symbol in Western culture, particularly in the sense of Weber's ideas concerning the Protestant work ethic. Ortner's notion of "key scenarios" which are "culturally valued... (and) formulate the culture's basic means-ends relationships in actable forms" (1973: 1243), is particularly applicable to the notion of "work" as used by Spiritualists. "Work" as a symbol provides Spiritualists with a scenario for personal improvement on both the earthly and spiritual planes. It condenses the ideas of personal effort and self-reliance associated with the Protestant work ethic, while permitting the medium to construct scenarios in which the spirits and/or the individual receiving the message are portrayed in work related situations illustrating a particular concept. This symbolic usage of "work" links the other key concepts of Spiritualism. Therefore, even though the actual word "work" is not found in every message, it and its related symbols penetrate and colour all the messages given in Spiritualist religious services. Before analyzing the specific usage of these words, it is important to outline the context in which they are used. A medium is the person who communicates with the spirit world during a religious service. The action of the medium is called "platform work" and is distinguished from private sittings (or readings) which involve only the medium and a client. Spiritualist religious services normally last about two hours. The sermon, or alternatively a healing service, lasts about a half an hour; messages from the spirit world usually take about forty-five minutes, and the remainder of the service is divided between prayers, hymns and announcements. The "work" of the medium is "communication" which brings together the Two Worlds, i.e. the world of spirit and the material plane on which we live. This communication

is probably the most important facet of Spiritualism. The phrase "the medium is the message" is frequently heard at Spiritualist services, and is literally true. William James defined reality as being composed of multiple universes, with the "real" one being the reality which holds one's attention at a given moment (1950/1890, Vol. II: 295). The medium's work is to hold the attention of the congregation to the two realities of Spiritualism, that of the spirit world and that of the material world. This is truly the meaning of mediumship, to meditate between two realities. Mediums see and describe what they do as work even though they have other paid occupations and are generally not paid for their church work. Healers, too, consider their healing as work, although every healer I have interviewed has emphatically stated that they would not accept payment for healing under any circumstances, since healing is a gift from the spirit world and money would taint that gift. Nonetheless, healing is work and as the automatic writings of one healer, who is not a medium, said:

The Lords of the Heaven of the Worlds are ready with support of those who work-Not for Wealth; but 'for the Good of Man'. Power has been found by those in the Work but new and greater Power will be made available to those who work in the Light.

The fact that many people in the congregation work at jobs which are not particularly satisfying is not missed by the mediums, and occasionally is the topic of a message from the spirit world. Recently a teenage girl was told to be very careful in choosing her first job, because she is the type of person who really has to like what she is doing or else does not follow through. This message was actually an interpretation by the medium of a mental image (clairvoyancy) in which the girl was taking her arm back to throw a baseball, and then not following through with the throw. Also, during the sermon, which is received spontaneously from the spirit world, the congregation is constantly being told to send off good vibrations toward those who are causing them problems; this group of trouble makers frequently includes a mean or overly demanding boss.

Spirits also "work" in the spirit world. A very common message during a Spiritualist religious service is that a loved one who has passed over (died) is working to improve conditions around someone here on earth. Even though spirits are working for the benefit of the congregation, the members of the congregation are constantly exhorted to take their lives in their own hands and make their own happiness. This call to action and self direction is quite simply an exhortation to act on reality, to plan, and to act with intention.

## Conclusion

To quote from a recent sermon, "Communication is what Spiritualism is all about!", communication and mediumship are the lynch pins of Spiritualism. Communication with the spirit world is the focal point of Spiritualism. To paraphrase the message of the sermon, people come to church mainly for the readings and only secondarily to hear the sermon. The word "communication" does not belong so much to the vocabulary of the messages themselves, but to the peripheral commentary by the medium. Spirit communication and communication between the medium and the audience are frequently compared to the telephone system (you sometimes get a bad line with both). The symbolic expression of communication between the medium and the congregation is also important. The congregation has been told by several mediums to verbally reply when addressed during a reading, as a sign of communication. The image of the telephone is again used to symbolize this process. Mediums have frequently compared a silent congregation to a phone call that goes unanswered, and hence no communication.

Keeping in mind Alfred Schutz's assertion that "working is ...most important... for the constitution of reality of the world of daily life" (1971: 212), I would like to assert that the messages of Spiritualist religious services and psychic development circles are about the paramount reality of everyday life and are very much a part of that reality in Western society. It is through the key symbols represented in the messages that mediums make a commentary on everyday life.

## NOTES

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1. This exercise has subsequently grown into a project to collect and write the "psychic biographies" of several mediums and healers for the Folklore Division of the Museum of Man.

2. Carter (1977: 100-103) cites several examples of nineteenth century criticism of Spiritualism, including, John Fisk, and editorial writer for Harper's Magazine, who, in 1876 said: "We have nothing to say to gross materialistic notions... of spirits that upset tables and whisper to ignorant women the wonderful information that you once had an Aunt Susan" (Carter, 1977:100).

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