

AN EXPERIENTIAL STUDY OF MEDIUMS AND LIFE AFTER DEATH

by **Elliot Benjamin, Ph.D** September, 2008

INTRODUCTION

In this article I will describe my preliminary experiential study of mediums to explore the phenomenon (meaning the possible occurrence) of life after death. I have been researching this topic from an open-ended agnostic perspective, engaging in a qualitative research methodology with the primary focus being my own experiential analysis. Secondary qualitative research components involve a phenomenological exploration of mediums' perspectives of the reality of life after death, unstructured informal interviews of mediums with this research topic in mind, and participant observation ethnographic descriptions of participant and medium interactions in a number of Spiritualist camp medium group sessions.. In particular I have undertaken an experiential participant observation case study of a Spiritualist camp in Maine, which I will leave unnamed for privacy issues. This Spiritualist camp has offered a series of summer activities in 2008 with over thirty mediums, inclusive of individual and group medium sessions, seances, church services, medium workshops, and medium lectures. Along with my private independent medium sessions, this has given me a rich opportunity to experience the communications from mediums in a diversity of individual and group settings. The organizational and group dynamics component of this Spiritualist camp allowed for an ethnographic ingredient to be included in my study, although the dominant focus of my study has been my own experiences of the personal communications from mediums, inclusive of private sessions with three independent mediums and a number of

group sessions with mediums at the Spiritualist camp.

My essential research instrument has been my own experiential learnings, in the context of a heuristic qualitative investigation (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1990). For a four month period from April through August of 2008 I have experienced the various medium communications that I have listed above, and have written about my experiences soon after my sessions ended. Given the delicate nature of my medium sessions and the priority of me being perceived by mediums and session participants in a comfortable and natural context, I have relied upon my own experiential writing abilities in this study, along the lines of my published articles in the field of spirituality and awareness of cult dangers, and my self-published book: *Modern Religions: An Experiential Analysis And expose'* (Benjamin, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). My recording of experiences was done initially in an informal narrative style in which I assimilated what I have experientially learned (Creswell, 2007; Murray, 2003; Yin, 2003). This narrative recording of my experiential learnings was inclusive of my unstructured informal interviews (Robson, 2002) with mediums, phenomenological perspectives of the mediums I studied, and ethnographic aspects of the medium groups that I participated in.

After presenting the initial recording of my various experiences with the mediums and groups that I studied, which comprises the bulk of this article, I will analyze my experiential descriptions, finding common ingredients as well as distinctive prominent aspects of the medium communications that I have experienced (Creswell, 2007, Robson, 2002, Yin, 2003). I will then relate my experiential analysis to the research problem that I began with, which is the exploration of the phenomenon of life after death. As initially

stated by William James, and incorporated by Gary Schwartz in his books: *The Afterlife Experiments* and *The Truth About Medium* (James, 1896, Schwartz, 2002, 2005a), “In order to disprove the law that all crows are black, it is enough to find one white crow.” It therefore is significant in my exploration of the phenomenon of life after death if I am able to find even one “white crow” medium from whom I experience a strong connection to an individual who has died. My present study, unlike the experimental quantitative laboratory medium studies of Gary Schwartz (2002, 2005a), is not designed to scientifically “establish” the validity of life after death. Rather, my present study has the goal of offering a systematic qualitative experiential research component to the phenomenon of life after death, as opposed to anecdotal spontaneous life after death case descriptions, and it is conceivable that my study may either enhance or detract from the life after death hypothesis. As there is an overwhelming percentage of published quantitative compared to qualitative studies in parapsychology (Crabtree, 2007), I believe that my present study may serve an important function in scientific parapsychological research, and in particular in the study of the phenomenon of life after death. I follow in the footsteps of Frederick Myers and William James in their investigations of mediums and the question of life after death (Kelly et al., 2007), and in the expansive exploratory tradition of the Society for Psychical Research.

As can be seen from the following descriptions of my three private medium sessions, the contrasts between my three sessions with these mediums is striking, as will now be illustrated.

MEDIUM SESSION #1

4/26/08

Today I experienced my first individual medium session. I'd say at the least, it was both disappointing and anticlimactic for me. The medium was a short elderly man who looked to be in his 70s, finely dressed with a big tie, who appeared to me to be a remnant of a previous generation lost in time. I have been so steeped in all my medium, psi, and consciousness readings and was geared up to experience "something." This was supposed to be a group reading, but I was the only one there, and the last time I went to this new age bookstore space for a group medium session, about a year and a half ago, there were approximately 25 people who came for the reading. In comparison to my private reading today, I did experience "something" a year and a half ago. I must concede that today was one point for the skeptics.

Skeptics refer to "cold readings" whereby the medium supposedly gets his/her information from visual and/or verbal cues from the sitter (Irwin & Watt, 2007; Schwartz, 2002). My medium closed his eyes after saying a prayer, and then proceeded to tell me how he was getting information that I was a fine person, spiritual, involved in projects, would be taking trips, that there was a birthday or perhaps anniversary important in my life that was coming up (yesterday happens to have been my birthday but this question obviously could not go wrong for the medium), and that I was involved in a romantic relationship. Then he said that he was being visited by a woman who had departed, who loves me. After asking me if this made sense to me and if my mother was still living, he concluded that this woman was my mother. He said that she was very proud of me, and that she would give things to me that I wanted, but that I had to ask

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for them “Now.” He said that “they” were emphasizing the “Now” because they had no conception of time in the spirit world. Then he said that some small object would move on the bureau in my bedroom, as this would be my mother’s way of telling me that she was still there, watching over me. My mother had died over 30 years ago, and I could feel myself starting to become emotional, wanting to believe that somehow she was still there and communicating to me through this medium. But deep down I felt that this was not what was happening, and I did not fall into what I believe was nothing more than a medium trap, though I did gain an experiential understanding of how vulnerable people could easily jump into this kind of temptation and choose to believe what a medium said.

After about 20 or 25 minutes, the medium said that the session was over and asked me if I had any questions. I knew that this session was a total failure for me, but given that I went to all this trouble to attend the session, in all fairness to the medium I decided to give him an opportunity to make “something” happen for me. He had not picked up on my brother who had died a few years ago, whom I still love and want to connect up with. However, since the medium did establish that I had a good romantic relationship (after I responded to his questions, telling him that my romantic relationship was with a woman and that I was divorced and not remarried), I decided to ask him if he could pick up on the extreme personal difficulty that the woman I was romantically involved with was presently going through. This was something very specific, difficult, challenging, and overwhelming for my girlfriend/significant other Dorothy, as her dog who she had been completely devoted to and loved very much for 13 years, is slowly dying. But the medium did not pick up on this at all, asking me if she was having problems with her

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health. Virtually all people in their fifties are having some kinds of problems with their health, and I proceeded to explain to him that this could be a general context, but there was still something very specific and obvious that I wanted him to tell me. The medium then informed me that the spirits would not answer because they felt they were being “tested.” Well, I could not argue that I was now testing him. It was obvious to me that he knew he would only dig himself in deeper by giving me another generic answer that did not specify the situation, and he knew enough to decline to answer--to his credit.

Where are all the astounding and amazing dead hit specific informational readings given by the spectacular mediums described by Gary Schwartz in his books *The Afterlife Experiments* and *The Truth About Mediums*? (Schwartz, 2002, 2005a). Is the problem that the most famous of these mediums are able to charge as much as a thousand dollars an hour and I only paid ten dollars for my reading? In my best guess, I’m going to give this medium the benefit of the doubt and make the hypothesis that he is not purposely deceiving people, and that he truly does believe that he is channeling information from the spirit world. But regardless of whether or not he is intentionally tricking people or being tricked himself, I must say that I have to side with the skeptics on this one. My interest in research is of a qualitative nature, in a complementary role to the scientifically controlled quantitative medium studies as described by Gary Schwartz in his books. I firmly believe that there is an important contribution that can be made from an experiential participant observation study of life after death through medium communications. I had hoped that I would experience something truly phenomenal today, something that would make me feel the impetus to connect up with Gary Schwartz

and join the Society of Psychical Research and the Parapsychology Association.

Of-course it is way too early for me to dismiss my hopes--from one session with one medium, but I must describe my current state of mind as an accurate reflection of my personal experience, as part of my experiential qualitative research methodology.

So much for my Medium Session #1. I can hardly wait to experience my Medium Session #2.

MEDIUM SESSION #2

5/16/08

My second medium session today was far more interesting and meaningful to me than my first medium session of a few weeks ago. I had seen this medium before, as Dorothy and I had participated in a group reading with her about a year and a half ago, and I had also witnessed her and her husband give a public psychic talk and reading about 12 years ago. This medium's husband died 5 or 6 years ago, and she had conveyed to me on the phone earlier that she constantly dialogued with her husband, whose continued presence in her life is very real to her. She even still lists herself along with her husband's name in the white pages of the phone book. I was aware that this medium's certainty of life after death could partly be explained by her personal loss and dedication to her husband, but it is also true that she had been a medium with her husband for a number of years before he died. At any rate, I had felt "something" with her in my previous group medium session, and I decided to make the \$50 investment of going to see her for a private session.

What I knew was affecting me the most in regard to the death of a loved one was my

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brother Fred, who died a few years ago. I watched over my brother for most of his life, even though he was 11 years older than me, as he had a lifetime of going in and out of mental hospitals, was diagnosed as “bipolar,” and for nearly the last 12 years of his life I was his legal guardian. I loved my brother very much, and I felt a warmth and comfortableness being with him that I felt with no-one else. My *Art and Mental Disturbance* book (Benjamin, 2006, 2008a) is dedicated to him, and I miss him very much. He could be very demanding and dependent upon me, but I had learned how to form my boundaries with him for my own self protection, while seeing him on a regular basis, taking him out to dinner and frequently watching old movies with him afterwards in his apartment. My brother represented the natural, simple, unpretentious part of me from Brooklyn, New York, and the priceless value of a comfortable silence.

And virtually the first words out of the medium’s voice were something to the effect of “I am seeing the presence of a departed spirit who may be a brother to you, and he is there for you when you need to be comforted in times of stress.” Needless to say, I felt “something” right away with this medium. She proceeded to say that there were a number of people like a family, who were gathering around me to give me a tremendous sense of support, and I visualized my mother and father and other brother as well, making me feel indeed a sense of comfort. As the session went on, the medium said a number of things, some of which clicked more than others for me. One of the other interesting and impactful things she said involved a dog. My girlfriend/significant other Dorothy had put her dog of 13 years to sleep about a week and a half ago. This has been a challenging

ordeal for Dorothy to go through for the past few months, and I have been very much involved with Dorothy and her dog Jasmine for nearly three and a half years. I have experienced the feeling of personal attachment to an animal, and I felt my own sense of sadness and loss of Jasmine no longer being with us. Dorothy believes that Jasmine's spirit is now guiding her, and that it may even be reincarnated in the new puppy she decided to get two months ago. The medium saw a dog in my life, not a dog in the spirit world, but one in this world. She saw me petting and comforting this dog, with my "very loving and special hands." This did feel impactful to me, as I used to enjoy "playing the drums" on Jasmine and petting her often, as she was always so happy to see me and have me play with her. At first I was thinking that the medium messed up on the dog being in this world rather than the spirit world, but then I realized that I could interpret her pronouncement as signifying my future interactions with Dorothy's new puppy, whom she has named Maggie. Yes--Maggie represents the positive future of my animal connections, and whether or not Maggie is a reincarnation of Jasmine (and I do not believe that she is), the medium's disclosure certainly had an impact upon me.

What else struck me as impactful and personally interesting? The medium said I needed to embark on my own personal journey that would be turning me away from my intimate relationship in a minor temporary way, and that the person I was most involved with would not like this. However, she also said that this was not cause for great alarm, as it would not have any damaging effect on our relationship. It is true that Dorothy and I have had conflicts in the recent past over my extreme involvement in my new Ph.D psychology program at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center.. Things are

much more resolved between us now, but I could relate my need to go all out on my self development voyage to what the medium was saying. The medium also said that there would be no significant changes if I were already in an intimate relationship (or if I were not), meaning to me there would be continuity in my high quality meaningful intimate relationship with Dorothy, which certainly rings true for me. She said that I was on the verge of making significant leaps in my spiritual life, which feels right to me, and that it was important for me to continue doing things outdoors with my feet planted firmly on the ground, which also feels right to me. She said that she sees the presence of someone who departed and is about my same age, who was very sad in life but is now happy.

With a bit of a stretch regarding the age part, I was able to again view this as meaning my brother Fred, and it reminded me of how the medium had responded to the question I asked her a year and a half ago at the group reading I attended, which was if she sensed any spirits close to me who had died. The medium had responded that she saw a male presence who “was more than he appeared to be in life.” This had struck me at the time quite emotionally, as it was about a year after my brother had died, and it was very comforting to me to hear this.

Back to my present session, the medium also said that there were parts of my current job and way that I earned my living that were draining to me, and that I needed to carefully look at this and make constructive changes. This did not click for me at the time, as I have already made my constructive changes from my draining work as a mathematics professor and instructor to my presently rewarding work as a mental health worker and mathematics enrichment teacher of gifted children. These changes feel

meaningful and invigorating to me, and although I do feel a degree of concern and stress over my significantly reduced financial income, this does not relate for me to what the medium was saying. It reminds me of how a year and a half ago at my group session the medium said that she sees me as being an innovative teacher who will be very popular in a traditional institution. This was certainly a big flop on the part of the medium (at least in the immediate sense), as events quickly displayed to me.

So am I able to conclude that this medium was a “white crow?” Not exactly, but it is enough to motivate me to continue in my experiential study of mediums and the phenomenon of life after death. There are a number of possible explanations for the accuracy of some of this medium’s pronouncements that had personal impact for me. As I have been familiarizing myself with the arguments of psi skeptics as part of my independent study of parapsychology, I know that the first thing a skeptic would say is that the medium could have easily looked up some of my articles on the internet. Indeed my article *The Person vs the Pill* (Benjamin, 2008b) had been publicly available on the Integral World website (www.integralworld.net) for nearly a year, and in this article I disclose about my involvement with my brother Fred and his unfortunate life of mental disturbance and hospitalization. Although my strong personal sense does not feel like the medium did any prior search about me before I arrived for my session, certainly any psi skeptic worth his/her skepticism would have a field day with this possibility. And of-course there were all the obvious personal cues that I was giving by my presence, in spite of the fact that I often closed my eyes and tried to not reveal when something the medium said was impactful to me. But this kind of sensitivity to the physical presence of

the sitter is what is referred to as a “cold reading” (Irwin & Watt, 2007, Hyman, 2001, 2003, Schwartz, 2002), and I would be the first to admit that this could readily explain much of what the medium said to me. It could explain her sensitivity to my spiritual development, my continued good relationship with Dorothy, my needing to go on my self development journey, etc. Many people my age have brothers who died and who are a source of comfort to them, have friends their own age who died and who had been sad in their lifetimes, and have a dog who they enjoy petting and playing with, and my responsiveness to these statements can all be explained by “subjective validation,” which I will describe further in the concluding section of this article. I know in my mind that there was not anything here that resembles the most striking of the “white crow” readings described by Gary Schwartz in his aforementioned books (Schwartz, 2002, 2005a).

However, after my last extremely disappointing session with a medium, I was relieved that I at least felt “something.” On a scale from 1 to 10 that progresses to higher numbers representing increasing personal meaning and impact of a medium’s pronouncements, I would rate the first medium as a “1” and the second medium as a “5” or “6.” Well, the fact that virtually the first thing out of this medium’s mouth was about my brother, and that she did see a dog in my life (which I don’t think many people would see by just looking at my math professor outward appearance), makes me feel that she does deserve a solid “6.” These are qualitative experiential ratings, as my research approach is primarily in an experiential qualitative mode. I am not trying to scientifically “prove” the existence of life after death, or give scientific evidence in a controlled laboratory setting to support the possible phenomenon. Rather, I am wishing to contribute to our

understanding of this phenomenon by conveying my own present experience with a number of selected mediums. I approach this experiential research from an aware balanced perspective that understands the arguments of skeptics, but is also open to what my own experience conveys to me. This balanced perspective that focuses upon my own experience may contribute to our understanding of the phenomenon of life after death, following in the footsteps of the quantitative experimental laboratory studies of life after death described by Gary Schwartz (Schwartz, 2002, 2005a).

Afterword: It is interesting that three months after I wrote this part of my experience with Medium #2, her prediction about my involvement with Dorothy's new puppy has turned out to be quite accurate, my financial stress from my current mental health job has been steadily increasing for me, and I realized that I indeed had experienced being a successful and popular teacher in a traditional school setting, through my mathematics enrichment work with gifted children (though this did not happen until a year after the medium's group reading prediction).

MEDIUM #2 INTERVIEW AND DISCUSSION

A significant secondary aspect of my session with this medium took place during the interview and discussion second half of my session with her. My original intention was to disclose very little about myself in order to discover what the medium would be able to come up with primarily through her own devices. My session was supposed to last for about an hour. However, after less than half an hour the medium seemed like she was finished giving me her information, and she asked me if I had any questions. Things

started to feel like they were stilted, and I somehow knew that unless I was willing to be genuine and authentic with her, that there was nothing else I would be able to gain from the session. Given that I had already obtained all the information the medium would be telling me, and I did not see any valid reason to return for another session, I decided to candidly describe my personal conflict of always being in the middle regarding skepticism and belief in the phenomenon of life after death. I also described my professional interests in studying the phenomenon in an experiential way as part of my al Ph.D psychology dissertation. I asked the medium how one can “know” that there truly is life after death, as there are a number of different interpretations one can attribute to these kinds of personal experiences. The medium answered my question by disclosing to me how she “knew” her husband was still there, how she has experienced much physical evidence of his continued presence, and how she had continual dialogue with him every day. I knew that I was treading on delicate vulnerable ground here, but since I was the client in this encounter I decided to pursue the matter. With as much sensitivity as I could convey, I responded by saying that many people would attribute her experiences to grief, emotion, hallucination, and delusion. The medium appeared to me to be somewhat unsettled by my comment (as would be expected) and she asked me if I were a scientist. Although I did not want her to pigeonhole me, I conveyed to her how I was a mathematician, but that I understood that I needed to transcend my mind and learn about these things through what I experienced beyond my mind. I talked about all the skeptics’ arguments that I was constantly exposed to in regard to exploring psychic phenomena, inclusive of my closest male friends and my son. The medium looked at me

deeply and said that she would be candid with me. She then proceeded to tell me how she felt a sense of sadness and a lump in her throat, related to how I was not letting myself open up to the deeper realities that I was capable of experiencing.

Somehow the medium's candid expression of her feelings had an uplifting effect upon me, and I found myself describing to her how I truly would like to experience the knowledge of life after death, and that this was why I was here and thinking of doing this research. I told her how the materialistic, evolutionary, atheistic explanations for life did not really add up for me, and I found myself talking about "spirit," while I could feel myself lightening up, becoming animated, and laughing. The medium also seemed to lighten up, and she said that I looked completely different, like a whole new person, once I started to open up to these higher levels of reality possibilities. I asked her if she had heard of the life after death scientific research studies of Gary Schwartz, and she said that she was vaguely familiar with him and proceeded to recommend a book to me about channeling and the scientific explanation for extrasensory perception. I was not overly receptive to her suggestion of reading any additional books, because of the overwhelming number of books I am already reading on parapsychology, consciousness, etc. for my doctoral program, but she was persistent in her recommendations (during my reading she had said that there was a particular book she saw me being immersed in).

By the time I left the session I felt confused but somewhat uplifted. Not transformed by any means, but uplifted enough to feel like "something" had taken place between me and the medium. It sort of felt like the old "new age" connection from the 1960s and 1970s, an idealistic utopian beyond mind spiritual kind of connection that reached me in

a deeper aspect of my self than my intellectual mathematical exterior self that people generally see. I ended up saying to the medium that I needed to associate with people whom I felt inspired by, who were doing scientific studies of psychic phenomena. I was thinking of people like Gary Schwartz and Dean Radin, although they are focused upon quantitative experimental studies of psychic phenomena, which is quite different from my own personal/professional interests (Radin, 1997, 2006; Schwartz, 2002, 2005a). And then it occurred to me that right in my own backyard I have one of the most prominent researchers in the fields of parapsychology, dream studies, and consciousness, who is in personal contact with me and open to serving on my doctoral dissertation committee: Stanley Krippner (Krippner, 1975). The prospective chair of my committee, Ruth Richards, is an international authority on creativity and mental disturbance who has an avid interest in psi phenomena (Richards, 1994), and is very supportive of my interest in doing a qualitative study of the phenomenon of life after death. And it then dawned on me the possible meaning of something else the medium had said during my reading; something that I had not thought too much about. She had said that there would be an important friendship with a woman that I would be having, and that this friendship would be very significant to me, but would not be of a romantic nature. At the time all I could think of was my intimate relationship with Dorothy, and I figured the medium messed up on the “not being romantic” part of it. But after I left my session I started thinking about my potential doctoral dissertation committee, about my prospective dissertation chair Ruth Richards, and about my upcoming get-together in Maine with a prospective third member of my dissertation committee, a well known expert in clinical hypnosis:

Claire Frederick. Could Claire perhaps become this female friend the medium was talking about?

My head was spinning from all this, and my head is still spinning a day later. But tomorrow I will be meeting Clair Frederick for lunch, and I am psyched up to talk to her about my research plans of studying mediums for my dissertation to obtain my Ph.D in psychology. The connection with this medium indeed feels “real” to me.

Afterword: As it turned out, my luncheon with Claire went quite well, and the upshot is that Claire Frederick will become the third member of my dissertation committee.

Yes--I would say that both Ruth Richards and Claire Frederick may very well fulfill the role that this medium was predicting for me.

MEDIUM SESSION #3

6/1/08

My third medium session was a combined one hour session with my girlfriend/significant other Dorothy. The medium was young (late twenties or early thirties), attractive, vivacious, intensive, and had already told me that her goal is to become a famous medium like John Edward. She said an extensive prayer out loud to begin with, quite rapidly and rather mechanically, as it appeared to both me and Dorothy. Then she proceeded to tell us a number of things that were blatantly wrong, such as she was seeing that I have three children (I have one son), Kentucky is significant to us (not at all), we're going to buy land to build a house together (quite the contrary), etc. She took her errors in stride though, as she was nonplussed and just said that this was what she was seeing and being told, and went on to her next pronouncement. Early on she started focusing

upon what she perceived as my extreme mental abilities that were very striking to her, asked me if I were a scientist, and when I said I was a mathematician studying to become a psychologist she seemed quite pleased with what she was perceiving in me. She continued in this vein for a while, talking about the significant projects I was working on, seeing me publish articles on-line, etc. All of this is quite true, but in all due modesty it hardly needs a psychic or medium to sense these kinds of qualities in me when seeing me in person. However, when the medium started talking about my son Jeremy (she did guess the significance of the “J” word for me correctly), things got rather tense for a minute. After asking me some questions about my son’s personal life and romantic relationships, she strongly made a prediction about him that ran completely counter to everything I know about my son’s state of mind and lifestyle. When I protested that there was no way this would happen, the medium actually got a bit angry with me and asked me if I were saying that she was not seeing what she was seeing. I did not want to get into a full scale argument with her and end our session prematurely, so I worded my thoughts and feelings carefully and listened to what she had to say more calmly. After the session, Dorothy and I both agreed that if the medium’s predictions for the change in my son’s life style were to come true (she did give things up to three or four years to materialize in my son’s life after she saw how much I did not believe her about this), then this would be a strong testimony to the medium’s psychic powers.

The most impactful things the medium told me had to do with my father, who died before I was two years old. Supposedly she saw my father standing right behind me, and she said that he was very proud of me, was always with me, and especially was with me

when I was driving my car, and that he wants me to get my brakes fixed (yes--my brakes need to be fixed, but I no longer drive this car). She also said that my father very much likes Dorothy, who during this whole first half of the session was not much focused upon by the medium. But Medium #3's talking about my father did have emotional impact upon me, in a somewhat similar way to the emotional impact for me of Medium #1 talking about my mother. However, in spite of all Medium #3's obvious blunders and many questions she would ask us, there was some kind of depth and authenticity to her that reminded me of Medium #2, and put her in a class for me way above Medium #1.

Finally the medium started focusing upon Dorothy. I need to say that Dorothy has been going through a tremendously difficult time the past few months through her dog's sickness and death, and is very taken up with the continuous presence of her dog as a form of spirit to her. I had even mentioned to the medium on the telephone last month that we needed to cancel our session with her because Dorothy's dog was very sick. However, the medium seemed to have absolutely no recollection about this, as she continued to make blunders, such as focusing upon Dorothy's career and professional interests, or upon what was not at all relevant or important to Dorothy. It was about this time that I realized the session was probably two thirds over and what Dorothy very much needed to talk about was not being addressed by this medium. Out of sheer frustration and caring for Dorothy, I responded to the medium's statement that she sees Dorothy teaching people in some kind of setting, by saying that it may not necessarily be "people" that Dorothy is teaching. Sure enough the medium gradually picked up upon my comment, to help steer her in the right direction. The medium had previously asked

us if horses were significant to us (one of her many blunders), but after returning to the topic of horses and seeing this did not get a reaction from Dorothy, she next asked Dorothy if she felt the presence of a cat. Yes--this was a hit--finally, with a little help from me. At least Dorothy was now getting some therapeutic value from our session, as she was able to emotionally talk about the cat whom she loved who she had to put to sleep a number of years ago, and she also talked about her present cat. The medium started talking about Dorothy doing work in her garden, and I was hoping she would realize our plans to soon bury the ashes of Dorothy's dog and previous dog and cat in her garden. But no--the medium did not pick up on this, and finally Dorothy expressed her own very real need to talk about her dog by actually telling the medium that she had a dog who recently was put to sleep.

At least our session now took on emotional value for Dorothy, as she was able to talk about her loss, and also about her joyful anticipation of the new puppy she will soon be getting. Dorothy asked the medium if it were possible for her dog to be reincarnated in this puppy, and the medium said she saw that this was indeed possible, as she described how there were no separations of time and space in the spirit world. But in spite of all the tremendous help that Dorothy and I both gave to this medium, I must say that once the medium was on the right track (with our significant help), she did have a way of impactfully connecting up with both me and Dorothy. However, I suspect that this was more a function of her gifts for charisma and personal engagement as opposed to her psychic powers of being a medium.

The medium also said a number of things about Dorothy's mother, father, and

grandmother, practically all of which clicked nicely and helpfully for Dorothy (after incorrectly thinking that Dorothy's amazingly spunky 91 year old mother was no longer living). I did not appreciate the medium telling Dorothy that her mother would be entering the spirit world some time soon, but this did not disturb Dorothy very much, as she has been preparing herself for this. Perhaps what is most important about the last part of our medium session is that the medium was establishing an authentic connection with Dorothy, and that Dorothy seemed to be gaining therapeutic value from our session.

Somewhere in the middle of our session the medium did make some nice comments about the relationship between me and Dorothy, including her vision that we were together in previous lifetimes and that we had put much intention into finding each other in this lifetime. This has a nice emotional ring to me, but as far as the metaphysical reality is concerned I once again must establish myself as an agnostic, and this time a skeptical one. At the end of our session I did ask the medium how she "knows" her visions are accurate reflections of departed spirits and not just her own imagination. She answered me as well as could be expected, affirming how she sees her images of departed spirits very clearly as pictures, and how she has always seen these spirit visions, heard the sounds of spirits, had otherworldly feelings, etc. This is all very consistent with the many descriptions of transpersonal and altered states of consciousness as described by mediums, psychics, mystics, and spiritual visionaries throughout the ages (Baruss, 2003; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Irwin & Watt, 2007; Kelly et al., 2007; Rao, 2002; Tart, 1975). The medium gave me the explanation of how she was able to clearly see my father standing over me, and I ventured to ask her what he looked like. From what

I know of my father's appearance, her description was another one of her blunders (something I had gotten quite used to but for some uncanny reason did not greatly disturb me). However, when Dorothy and I talked about this later, Dorothy said that she thinks the medium was mistaking my father for my brother. Suddenly this clicked for me, as I realized that the medium's physical description of my father indeed resembled the physical characteristics of my brother Fred, my brother whom I have previously written about who died a few years ago, and whose presence I very much still feel. Perhaps as the medium says, things are not concrete in the spirit world, there are intermingling associations, and that she was talking about my father but then got a picture of my brother. I know that this all had emotional impact for me, but I seriously doubt that there is metaphysical reality to any of this.

Perhaps one would think that with all Medium #3's many blunders and need of assistance to get on track, that I would be highly critical of her psychic powers as a medium. But there was a "presence" about her the whole time she was in session with us, a presence that somehow even went beyond that of Medium #2 for me, who was tremendously more accurate in her actual medium pronouncements. Perhaps it was for this reason that I asked the medium if she taught classes in developing psychic powers, and that I am actually considering attending one of her monthly four hour workshops on this topic, and Dorothy may even attend this with me. Medium #3 appears to be doing quite well for herself, as she charges \$100 an hour for her medium sessions (medium #2 charges \$50 an hour), and \$90 per person for her four hour psychic development classes, which have between four and eight people in them. Medium #3 said at the very end of

our session how she believes that I am capable of all the psychic powers she has, and she right away confirmed my guess that all people are capable of this. She said that she sees this as a religious kind of experience, as a form of God (which is similar to what she describes on her website). This resonated with me, and is also similar to how Medium #2 described her perspective on being a medium, which made me consider also exploring psychic development classes with Medium #2 as well. For studying the phenomenon of life after death would certainly be far more revealing for me if I were able to experience something for myself, aside from anything a medium may be communicating to me (see the concluding section of this article for a description of my related synchronicity experience).

So where am I left from my first three personal experiences of sessions with mediums? I would say that my appetite has certainly been whetted. I may want to believe, but it is my responsibility as an authentic philosopher to keep an open mind while reserving judgment. But I am an experiential philosopher, and I do value my own experience as an authentic form of personal knowledge. My experiences with both Medium #2 and Medium #3 had enough personal impact and value for me to make me want to pursue my study of life after death, both by continuing to experience personal sessions with other mediums, and by exploring my own psychic development through perhaps taking workshops with these two mediums, and other mediums who inspire me. At the very least, I will gain more understanding of the inner workings of the mediums I engage with, and hopefully I will gain more understanding about the phenomenon of life after death.

GROUP MEDIUM SESSION AT SPIRITUALIST CAMP 6/26/08

Last night was supposed to have been my group medium session at the Spiritualist camp with Reverend Anne Gehman, who is one of the five famous mediums featured in Gary Schwartz' book: *The Afterlife Experiments* (Schwartz, 2002). However, Reverend Gehman was not able to come to Maine, and the medium circle (officially referred to as "message circle") was conducted by a very ordinary looking blue collar native Mainer who looked to me very much like some of the parents I work with in my community mental health job. There were ten people in the circle, including myself, and for the most part the people appeared to me to look like quite normal everyday people, very different from the highly educated and/or alternative new age psychology kind of people I generally associate with to explore the metaphysical mysteries of life. However, I also have experienced numerous stimulating conversations about all of these metaphysical mysteries, including the question of life after death, with my long time rural Maine friends Steve & Kate, and I tried to tell myself to keep an open mind to this medium and to the people in the circle. But as the medium would give his readings to each of the people present, I was neither moved nor impressed. I knew that I was feeling disappointed and not believing that anything of spiritual significance was taking place here. The medium did appear to me to honestly believe that what he was "seeing" were the real spirit guides of the people he was reading, but from my perspective he was essentially believing in the traditional Christian religion he was brought up in, with some acquired mediumship quirks.

Finally the medium got to me as his very last reading, and proceeded to make some

absurdly wrong statements that were completely alien to my personality, such as I was working on a boat, was involved in a chiseling rock kind of project, inherited a jackknife from my father, etc. It was obvious to me that the medium was projecting his own practical realistic focus onto me, and I was quite surprised that he did not at least pick up on my extreme philosophical and intellectual industrious interests, as all three of my previous mediums had done; even Medium #1 had done this. The medium did say a few things about my mother watching over me, being proud of me, and wanting me to remember to take my pills. I could once again feel the emotional impact of hearing about my mother, in a similar way to how I felt from Medium #1, but I had no doubt that this was nothing more than my nostalgic feelings for my mother coming to the surface, just as had happened for me with Medium #1. It was somewhat interesting to me that Medium #3 had said my father wanted me to get my car brakes fixed and Medium #4 said my mother wanted me to take my pills. It certainly would not hurt to allow my departed parents to remind me to pay more attention to my practical survival needs, but I was quite sure that in both cases these mediums were not seeing the spirit guides of my parents in the room. The medium also said a few names of people that were completely foreign to me, and essentially he was as far off the mark as Medium #3, but he lacked her intelligence, presence, and new age consciousness that I could relate to. At the end of the session he asked the group if there were any questions, and a number of people thanked him and asked him about various departed spirits who they wanted to know more about. I could see that the medium was very popular in these medium circles, had been a medium for many years, and to my surprise it turned out that he was also a Reiki master..

Upon hearing that he was a Reiki master I decided to communicate to him how perhaps his interpretation of my spirit guides was mixed up, as I was highly engaged in psychological and philosophical projects and was not at all mechanically inclined. The medium right away agreed with me that this was the case, and that the rocks I was chipping away at were symbolic. Although I did not have any more confidence in his medium abilities, I at least appreciated his flexibility and openness to reinterpreting his spirit messages and his being willing to view me more as I really am.

Although I could not help feeling judgmental and condescending toward my fellow circle sitters, I did notice that there was one woman in the circle who seemed somewhat “new agey” to me, with what I perceived as a higher level of awareness than the rest of the people present. This woman said something about stars she was seeing to a woman who wanted to know more about her departed granddaughter, and the grandmother soon broke down in tears. I started to wonder if this woman was some kind of a medium in her own right, and sure enough she announced at the end of the session that she was one of the Spiritualist camp mediums and would be offering a number of sessions over the summer. Before I knew about this second medium, I was thinking about Gary Schwartz’ “White Crow” motto that he respectfully inherited from William James. The closest I had come to finding a “white crow” was my session with Medium #2, but I could not honestly say that I was so impressed with Medium #2 to consider her to be a white crow. I had been hoping that my session with Ann Gehman might serve this purpose for me, but this was not what fate had in mind. At any rate, I did feel some kind of connection to the second medium in the room, and I decided that I would continue my medium

explorations at this Spiritualist camp by trying to attend this second medium's sessions.

As the session ended I asked this second medium when she would be offering her sessions, and she seemed pleased to be interacting with me. And then came the surprise of the evening for me. She said that she was getting a very strong thought about a book by Harold Kushner that was important information for me, and she asked me if I knew of this author. I somehow remembered that Harold Kushner was a Jewish rabbi who had written the famous book: *When Bad Things Happen To Good People* (Kushner, 1983). I had never read this book, but I had no doubt that I would relate to it well, and I figured that the medium was somehow picking up that I was Jewish, as being Jewish was not particularly common in rural Maine. However, the next thing the medium said did give me pause. She said that she was getting a strong connection to the name "Benjamin" and asked me if this name had any meaning to me. Well--the medium somehow guessed my name! I was both impressed and amused, though of-course I also realized that she could have easily seen my pictures and name in a community flyer or newspaper press release for some of my workshops, and this could have subliminally entered her consciousness (Bargh & Marsella, 2008, Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Then she took me aside and told me that the whole time I was sitting in the circle she saw a strong image of a taller man sitting in front of me, who looked a lot like me but had different color hair and was bald in a different place than me. She said this could be a brother to me and that he may have died from Leukemia. I did feel the impact of my oldest brother Marvin who died around seven years ago, from Leukemia, although the medium's physical description did not match up tremendously well with my brother's appearance. But this

medium made a real connection with me, and her disclosure of my correct name was impressive to me, no matter how she came up with it. I think I have reason to continue my exploration of life after death through experiencing personal sessions with mediums at this Spiritualist camp. I had an unexpected bonus mini medium session last night, and I shall refer to this second medium as “Medium #5” in my continued explorations of the phenomenon of life after death. But have I found my white crow? We shall see.

SÉANCE: A TRAINING GROUND FOR MEDIUMS

7/16/08

My second medium session at my Spiritualist camp was a séance. The medium in charge of the séance opened up the session by explaining that in the séance we would all be mediums for each other. There were eight of us in the circle, including the medium in charge, and there was only one other male aside from myself (I was learning that this male/female ratio was the norm in the group sessions at this Spiritualist camp). The format was that each person would take turns conveying whatever images or associations they were receiving from the spirit world, predominantly focusing upon another person in the room. Then the person being focused upon had the opportunity to respond with her/his own spirit world associations. There was also the option to “pass” if no images or associations came to the person.

The séance opened up with the woman sitting next to me saying she had images of me in a tent camping, and I responded by saying that I occasionally like to go camping and that this was a relaxing activity for me. As the séance continued it became evident to me that most of these people were seasoned veterans of the Spiritualist camp, and that there

were strong social expectations to convey images and associations of other people in the room. Various departed spirits were brought in by people, and each time my turn came I passed. In the beginning a few other people also passed, but after a while everyone other than me had something to say and it was obvious that I was not joining in the way the others were. The medium in charge focused upon me in one of her spirit world messages, describing her image of a woman from a past generation who was close to me, and I responded that it brought up the image of my mother to me, though I knew that this was such a generic medium communication that it did not have much impact for me. The atmosphere in the room was somehow a combination of light and deep, with the sounds of laughter and social conversation continuously being heard from the adjoining office. After a while, when my turn came again, I described how my mind was moving very fast, as I was preoccupied with my thoughts about things that were going on for me. In my next turn I described how my thoughts were starting to slow down and that insights were starting to come to me. I didn't want people to think that I was just a detached observer, especially if there was any chance of me getting eventual approval at this Spiritualist camp to do my dissertation research. I knew that I did not feel comfortable expressing any images or associations I had of the other people in the room, and my thoughts were very much taken up with the positive involving connections I was making in my various fields of work and study.

During this whole séance I must say that I was not very impressed. There were strong social expectations to express one's images and associations of other people in the circle, and view it as messages from the spirit world. The whole session seemed to me to be a

textbook case of how belief in mediumship and the spirit world is highly correlated with environmental expectations, peer group influence, and hypnosis scales and measures of fantasy proneness (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000, Irwin & Watt, 2007). The images and associations of the mediums in training were certainly creative and interesting, but as far as any reality for me of life after death was concerned, this was feeling like my most disappointing medium session to date, perhaps with the exception of my session with Medium #1. However, a few minutes before the séance ended, a young woman who was very vocal about her associations with practically everyone in the room, said she had a strong image for me. She proceeded to describe how she saw me in this entertainer striped suit with a large top hat that I was supposed to pick up and put on my head, but that I was hesitant to do so. She said that if I were to put on the hat, then I would be led into this group of beautiful people, with an emphasis on how “beautiful” these people were, and everything would just flow so wonderfully for me. But she said I had to pick up the “darn hat” for this to happen, that I was reluctant to do so, and that I needed to know that this was my transition in life; i.e. to pick up the hat, put it on my head, and enter this new world.

As this budding medium was conveying all this to me, I felt immediately that somehow she had picked up on what was presently truly going on for me in my life. Indeed I was being given the invitation to become a musician at the next Saybrook gathering of my Ph.D program, becoming a theatrical personality immersed in the whole network of what for me is truly a network of “beautiful people” connected to the founders of humanistic psychology: namely Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Rollo May,

Jim Bugental, etc. (Bugental, 1965; May, 1969; Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961). My inner calling to become the philosopher I have always felt I deep down am is being actualized in tremendous proportions. But this is all dependent upon my willingness to go with the flow and let it happen, or symbolically “to pick up the hat and put it on my head.” My shyness and my accustomed need for my own space, is hesitant to pick up the hat. And yet my deeper inner core knows it is time to do so and that the opportunity has been given to me. This was a powerful and meaningful message for me. I expressed to the group how much I resonated with this message, described a bit about the specifics of how it related to what was going on for me in my life, and thanked the woman who gave me the message. Then the medium in charge said we were now out of time and that there would be another séance the next week, and then again every week following that for the rest of the summer.

So what is the verdict here? In an uncanny similar way to my previous medium session at this Spiritualist camp, for virtually the whole session I am feeling unimpressed and disappointed, and then something happens at the very end which has a strong personal impact for me. I am certainly not assuming that the medium in training received her top hat image and associations from any kind of spirit world, but I must admit that the way in which she reached me is still having its impact upon me, for I can even interpret the opportunity to pick up the top hat as letting in God or the creative spirit of the universe into my inner self. Today I have my first conference call as a member of a doctoral student’s dissertation committee for her oral comprehensive exam on Buddhist Studies at Akamai University, and this does feel to me like I am picking up the

“darn hat.” The musician in me can go even deeper with this image and relate it to my family musical heritage from my oldest brother and my father. How did this medium in training get these images and associations that were so right on for me in my inner depths? My guess is that she is highly sensitive to the inner thoughts and feelings of others, and that she utilized her creative imagination to describe what she sensed was going on for me. But once again, there is enough interesting here to make me want to go back to this Spiritualist camp and keep my study of mediums alive. Who knows--perhaps this young woman could actually be a “white crow” in training.

MEDIUM WORKSHOP #1

7/24/08

A few days ago I did my first medium workshop at the Spiritualist camp, entitled “Seeing the Unseen World.” The workshop lasted for three hours on a Saturday morning, and was attended by 14 people, all of whom being women except for myself and one other man. The workshop leader was a robust elderly gentleman from Scotland, who was quite charming and experienced in giving medium channeling sessions and workshops for 40 years. He was a captivating speaker, engaging, humorous, and apparently quite popular at this Spiritualist camp. He interspersed his lecturing with a number of individual, dyad, and group experiential exercise involving imagery with chakras, visualizations, and even a physical measurement of our energy vibrations. But what had the most impact for me is the influence of the group consciousness of belief in soul survival upon the people who attend the various Spiritualist functions at this camp.

Everyone who attends these Spiritualist functions, with the exception of myself, appears to be fully convinced of the reality of the spirit world and the ability of their loved ones to communicate with them. People at the Spiritualist camp frequently talk about their experiences of reincarnation, including my own workshop presenter who discussed some of his many past lives. He believes that this is his last incarnation, meaning that he will be attaining spiritual self fulfillment or Nirvana along the lines of Eastern religious and spiritual belief (Rao, 2002; Tart, 1975). I am by no means any more convinced of the reality of soul survival or reincarnation than I was before I started my experiential mediumship research activities a few months ago. But I believe that I have gained significantly in my understanding and appreciation of the sociocognitive perspective on medium channeling (Baruss, 2003; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Spanos, Menary, Gabora, Debreuil, & Dewhirst, 1991).

It is actually quite tempting for me to suspend my hesitation and judgment, and join in the Spiritualist camp group consciousness of the spirit world. Yes this would be wonderfully comforting to me in many ways. But it would also become the same problematic situation that I encountered repeatedly in my experiential study of modern religions and new age spiritual organizations (Benjamin, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). There is no easy way out for me, and I need to be careful to not return to the Spiritualist camp until I have fully assimilated all my previous medium sessions there.

It is interesting that one of the workshop participants conveyed to me during the group exercise that she wanted me to have the card that described great personal potential. This message felt quite similar to me to the impactful feedback I had received at the

Spiritualist camp séance I attended last week, regarding me wearing my entertainer suit and needing to pick up the top hat and put it on my head in order to see all the beautiful people. I can certainly believe that there is a deep sensitivity in many people who attend these Spiritualist camp functions, and even perhaps some kind of uncanny extrasensory perception. I believe that the occurrence of telepathy and clairvoyance has been well recorded and documented (Baruss, 2003; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Kelly et al., 2007; Irwin & Watt, 2007; Radin, 1997, 2006; Rao, 2002). However, this occurrence does not necessarily imply the existence of any kind of non-local entity, much less the reality of life after death or reincarnation. On the other hand, I believe it is also important to not get swallowed up in a rampant pseudo skepticism that rejects all forms of psi phenomena regardless of the scientific soundness of the research which supports it (Kelly et al., 2007; Pfeiffer, Mack, & Devereaus, 2007; Radin, 2006; Schwartz, 2005a). Where does this leave me? I suppose it leaves me essentially where I began, but with a deeper experiential foundation to base my agnostic views upon. But it also leaves me once again with a desire to continue my experiential explorations of mediumship at this particular Spiritualist camp.

MEDIUM LECTURE & MEDIUM WORKSHOP #2

7/26/08

Friday night medium lecture and Saturday morning medium workshop--and my head is buzzing and I realize it is time for me to assimilate things. The Spiritualist camp is becoming a comfortable place for me; it is sort of starting to feel like I belong there, like I am part of this Spiritualist camp. I do like their philosophy of individual experience

without subordination to organizational doctrine. Of-course they have their overriding belief in the survival of the soul after the death of the body. But somehow their way of going about their various medium sessions, workshops, séances, and lectures makes me feel nourished, supported, and stimulated in a positive way. I have no doubt that if I were to do my experiential analysis of cult dangers vs. spiritual benefits for this Spiritualist camp, what I would come up with would be one of the most favorable spiritual groups that I have experienced (Benjamin, 2005a, 2005b, 2007). Am I becoming hooked on this Spiritualist camp and “going native?” (Creswell, 2007; Robson, 2002). I do believe in becoming temporarily immersed in the spiritual groups I explore, and in assimilating my experiences when I am ready to. I consider my mode of experiential research to be a form of qualitative heuristic research (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1990), in which the expectation is that the researcher becomes deeply personally involved in what he/she is researching. The theory is that in order to truly know and understand a phenomenon, it is necessary to experience the phenomenon in a subjective first person capacity (Moustakas, 1990; Wilber, 1983). Of-course this subjective first person encounter is complimentary with more objective third person observations (Creswell, 2003, Robson, 2002). But the gist of the matter is that I am gaining more knowledge and understanding about the phenomenon of life after death the more I attend Spiritualist functions at this camp. Now the psi critics would undoubtedly disqualify my research as being “subjectively involved” (Carroll, 2005; Hyman, 2003; Randi, 2001; Wiseman & O’Keefe, 2001). But I already knew this before I started my investigations, and my approach to explore the phenomenon of life after death is decidedly qualitative and experiential.

At the Friday night lecture I attended, the medium giving the lecture was another elderly gentleman, but this time we were sitting in traditional classroom rows as opposed to the circles that I had been sitting in for all my precious functions at this Spiritualist camp. Although at first I was disappointed at this traditional classroom seating arrangement, with the medium lecturer up at a podium, I quickly transcended this as I felt an extremely strong and intense energy of communication from the medium/lecturer. Much of what the medium/lecturer talked about in regard to the history of Spiritualism was familiar to me from all my readings about consciousness and parapsychology. I found it interesting that the medium/lecturer did not feel comfortable with the notion of reincarnation, saying that he did not think there was any viable evidence to firmly establish the reality of reincarnation. His rationale for considering the evidence for life after death to be undeniable is not something I agreed with, but I knew this was the sacred cow of the Church of Spiritualism, and was not something I should be publicly questioning at this Spiritualist camp; certainly not if I have any hopes of getting the Spiritualist camp to approve me doing my eventual Ph.D dissertation research studying them. But as described in my various parapsychology and consciousness readings (Baruss, 2002; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Irwin & Watt, 2007; Kelly et al., 2007; Radin, 1997, 2006; Rao, 2002, Schwartz, 2002, 2005a), even if the mediums' communications are highly accurate and fraud, chance, sensory leakage, subjective validation, etc. are ruled out, there is no present way of knowing that the information actually came from departed spirits, as opposed to some kind "super-psi" explanation involving intricate psychic inter-connections between living individuals or various

formulations of energy fields (Laszlo, 2001; Chari, 1977; Sheldrake, 1994). This indetermination was conveyed to me personally by both Stanley Krippner and William Roll, two well known and respected long time parapsychology researchers (Krippner, 1975; Roll, 1976).

I did ask the medium/lecturer what the Spiritualist viewpoint was on animals having spiritual souls, and his answer was that there was no Spiritualist agreement about this one way or the other. Some mediums in the small audience of 7 or 8 came up to me afterwards and shared how they did believe that animals had souls, and one person shared how she saw her dog's soul leave its body right after she had her dog put to sleep. I thought of my significant other/girlfriend Dorothy and our recent sad loss of her dog Jasmine, and how Dorothy sensed and visualized Jasmine's presence running happily in the fields soon after she had her put to sleep. My strong inclination is that these kind of animal soul visualizations are a function of dealing therapeutically with grief, in a similar context to the "after death communications" (ADCs) with various interpretations to explain them (Krippner, 2006).

This morning's medium workshop was led by the most prominent medium visiting the Spiritualist camp this summer. This medium has the honor of being one of the few certified A.R.E. Edgar Cayce mediums. The medium workshop was highly experiential, as we were being trained to become mediums in our own rights, myself included. This was a bit more than I had bargained for, especially as I had felt somewhat dizzy and queasy this morning and had to use quite a lot of will power on myself to get me out of bed and to the Spiritualist camp again, after having just attended the medium lecture there

last night. But I was glad I decided to attend this morning's workshop, as in a number of ways this was the most positive experience I have had thus far in my explorations of mediums.

The medium workshop facilitator was deep, intelligent, humorous, and patient. She focused part of her talk upon the recent scientific evidence for psi phenomena through research findings involving water, electromagnetic waves, and quantum physics (Hameroff, 1994; Jahn & Dunne, 1987; Kelly et al., 2007; Persinger, 1987; Pfeiffer, Mack, & Devereaux, 2007; Radin, 1997, 2006, Stapp, 1993; Rubik, 1992). Once again all this was essentially familiar to me from my readings on parapsychology and consciousness, and I even shared with everyone about the medium research and books by Gary Schwartz (Schwartz, 2002, 2005a), which the medium workshop facilitator thanked me for reminding her about. I ventured to ask her if the scientific electromagnetic and quantum physics explanations of psychic phenomena bypassed the notion of non-material spirits, since these scientific explanations were all forms of material phenomena. The medium workshop facilitator answered me very strongly and intently, saying that this was by no means the case, as these were nothing more than scientific manifestations of spirit, no matter what the scientists wanted to believe. Once again I experienced the sacred cow of Spiritualism, and I knew that I could not tread on this sacred ground and expect to be welcomed back to the Spiritualist camp. However, when the medium facilitator went around to each person in the beginning of the workshop to "bless our water bottles," she was silent with virtually everyone, but when she came to me she smiled and said "you have great energy." There were a number of experienced mediums

in the room of 18 participants, so this was something I particularly appreciated. It is interesting that once again there was only one other man in the room, and the one remaining chair for me to sit down on was next to this man. But what is even more interesting is that this man was none other than my medium #1! I almost didn't recognize him, as he was dressed much more casually than in my private session with him three months ago, and he seemed much more comfortable in this setting. He remembered me and was friendly as we chatted a bit; perhaps I would be a bit more open to him as a medium in the future if the situation ever came up naturally.

When it came my turn to try out my medium abilities, being paired up with another person in the group, what came to me was my experience of getting immersed in the writings of Hermann Hesse in my early twenties, most especially his book *Demian* (Hesse, 1965). This clicked for the person I gave my "reading" to, who had also read and valued Hesse when she was younger, although for me this had nothing to do with getting information about the person I was supposed to be "reading." Everyone else seemed to be chattering away nonstop, and for the second person I was supposed to read I got absolutely nothing. But my partners did get some interesting information for me. My first partner got my mother, flowers, and my oldest brother Marvin, who she reluctantly conveyed to me was feeling anger. This all made sense to me, especially as I had recently visited my parents' and brother's graves in their cemetery in New Jersey, putting flowers on each of their stones. My second partner acknowledged me for not being able to concentrate in the room full of loud chatter, and said she was getting my brother and tobacco, that he is calming to me, that he accepts my explorations of various

spiritualities even though he doesn't understand it, and that I am becoming a master of all the spiritualities I am studying. My brother Fred came to me quite vividly, especially the part about tobacco, as he loved smoking cigars, and my assimilation of various spiritualities certainly resonated with me as well.

Yes--much of this morning's workshop has had meaningful impact upon me. The extent of what this impact truly is for me is something I need to assimilate over time. My initial study of mediums is coming to its close for this summer, although I still may go to one or two more séances, and a medium workshop with Dorothy. On the whole I would say that my medium studies have been a positive experience for me, and that this Spiritualist camp has become a stimulating and comfortable environment for me to do my medium research in.

MEDIUM CHURCH SERVICE & MEDIUM WORKSHOP #3 8/31/08

It happens to be the case that I had been to a medium church service at this Spiritualist camp about 20 years ago, soon after I moved to Maine. From what I remember, it was essentially a group medium session with a demonstration of spirit messages for a few people chosen from the group. But the Thursday evening church service I recently attended at this Spiritualist camp was quite different, as for most of the time I was the only churchgoer in attendance. There was the Spiritualist camp minister medium, who was a middle aged and well dressed distinguished looking gentleman, the Spiritualist camp administrator, the organist, and me; after a while we were joined by another churchgoer. The administrator said this was highly unusual for their church services and

attributed it to the rainy weather. At any rate, I must say that the minister conducted the service for me with his full intention, inclusive of prayer books, hymns, and recitations. I didn't feel comfortable singing the church songs, but the atmosphere was accepting and informal, and the administrator seemed to me to be a warm and homey elderly woman.

After a few minutes the minister played a CD of some kind of Buddhist chanting and took us on an inner voyage fantasy trip to find a buried treasure with an important message in it for us to receive. By this time the other churchgoer had arrived, and everyone but me had rich colorful concrete images for meaningful objects in their treasure chests. When I reported how I do not generally get concrete objects for images and had experienced a lot of mental wanderings, the minister laughed good naturedly and said that this explains what he was picking up on me. He proceeded to tell me how the spirit world was conveying to him how I needed to focus my energies and intention on what was most important for me to experience, and that I had a great deal of spiritual potential if I were to do so. This felt like a reasonable and positive piece of advice to me, and quite consistent with what a number of other mediums had been telling me the past few months. I sincerely thanked the minister and actually felt a real bond with the people in our little group as we joined hands in the closing ceremony.

Before the church service began, I had asked the administrator if she minded if I left some of my counseling brochures and business cards out with the other various advertisements, and she read through my brochure carefully and asked me about my study of cults. I was somewhat taken aback but explained to her how I did not view the Spiritualist camp as a cult and sincerely complimented the camp in its openness,

non-manipulation, and genuineness. She seemed satisfied, and she approved me leaving my business cards and brochures in the camp, which included a description of me being in a Ph.D psychology program at Saybrook. I had finally made a preliminary entrance into conveying to the Spiritualist camp that I was a researcher in psychology, and I knew that I needed to soon take the crucial second step of letting them know about my dissertation plans of focusing upon their Spiritualist camp in my study of mediums and life after death. Thus when the administrator asked me if I would like to stay for coffee and cake after the service was over, something she had asked me at other Spiritualist camp events I had attended as well, for the first time I said Yes. I could see that the administrator really wanted to get to know me, especially since she had given permission for me to put up my business cards and brochures in their camp. But rather than there being the small social group of conversation that usually took place at their coffee and cake after-session get-togethers, for much of the time it was just me and the administrator.

I felt this calm and relaxed feeling as we talked, and I honestly conveyed to her about my personal/professional research interests, which she seemed to take in stride. This administrator is completely devoted to retaining the old fashioned personal atmosphere of the Spiritualist camp, and lives at the camp for the summer to be continually available to people who call and visit. She said that I looked familiar to her and that she somehow had a recognition of my name, even though she had never seen any of my advertisements and flyers before. This reminded me of Medium #5 from my first Spiritualist camp group medium session guessing my name out of the blue, but the administrator and I figured out

that she was probably at the church service I had attended at this Spiritualist camp 20 years ago. She would need to have quite the exceptional memory to have remembered my name from a brief church session of 20 years ago, but by this time I was getting well used to mediums displaying surprising psychic abilities at this camp, although the administrator said that she was not a medium. After a while the organist joined us; the administrator showed him my brochure and the organist said that he would love to hear me play classical piano some time. The minister joined us for a few minutes, having changed his clothes from his tie and jacket into jeans and a tea shirt, and they both told me how much this administrator had given of herself to the Spiritualist camp for 30 years. When I left this wonderful warm cozy little get-together, I felt like perhaps I had found a religious group that I could truly be part of. I honestly conveyed to the administrator how I was an agnostic and wanted to believe in life after death, but needed to experience this for myself. She was very understanding and non-judgmental, and I told her a bit about my significant other/girlfriend Dorothy, and that we were planning on attending the medium workshop in a few days on Sunday (with Medium #5, the medium who had guessed my name).

This after-session get-together was in some ways the highlight for me of my summer activities at the Spiritualist camp. Medium Session #3 was rather anticlimactic in comparison, as Medium #5 had canceled and the same Spiritualist camp minister who led my church service was the workshop facilitator. The workshop focus was on “raising your vibrations” and the workshop facilitator/minister chose to have the five or six people present, including me and Dorothy, go through the same Buddhist chanting visualization

that I had experienced a few nights ago. Once again everyone got rich colorful images in their treasure chests, including Dorothy, but this time I thought about the advice the minister had given me, and I all of a sudden remembered the impactful dream I had dreamed the night before about my son Jeremy. This dream felt very significant to me, and when I communicated to the group how I was remembering a dream that was meaningful to me, the minister responded quite favorably. It turns out that this minister is eminently well known in the Spiritualist movement, has a Masters degree in theology, and an avid interest in Buddhism. Dorothy appreciated his Buddhist interminglement with Spiritualism, and felt relatively comfortable in the small group atmosphere. Dorothy and I may very well attend a Sunday afternoon church service at this Spiritualist camp from time to time, and my research medium experiences may thereby continue on an occasional basis past this summer. But my preliminary research exploration of mediums and life after death are nearing completion, and it will soon be time for me to assimilate all my experiences thus far and formulate an analysis of what I have learned about the research question I began this investigation with; namely does there exist life after death?

EXAMINING THE VERACITY OF THE LIFE AFTER DEATH EXPERIENCE

Before analyzing my own experiences with the various mediums I have described above, I would like to briefly describe some of the problems with determining the veracity of a life after death communication from a medium. One problem, as I previously mentioned, is the supreme difficulty of distinguishing between a veritable life after death explanation from a “super-psi” explanation, which may involve psychic

inter-connections between living individuals, as well as various kinds of field energies (Irwin & Watt, 2003; Kelly et al, 2007). This supreme difficulty is stressed by Irwin & Watt in *Introduction To Parapsychology*, as can be seen from the following passage: “The prospects look bleak for a critical test between the survival hypothesis and its major alternative, the super-ESP hypothesis. Available evidence can be accommodated by each hypothesis in turn, even if at times they have to be stretched somewhat in order to do so.” (Irwin & Watt, 2007, p. 143). However, it is by no means agreed upon that bona-fide medium communications have taken place to begin with, as is well illustrated by the extensive debate and controversy regarding the medium research of Gary Schwartz (Carroll, 2005; Hyman, 2003; Randi, 2001; Schwartz, 2005b; Wiseman & O’Keefe, 2001).

I must admit that the most knowledgeable, thorough, and insightful psi critics, such as Ray Hyman (Hyman, 2003), have portrayed a number of serious flaws in Schwartz’ research that need to be satisfactorily addressed in future medium research studies, inclusive of lack of adequate controls, possibility of subjective validation of sitters, problems with sensory leakage, etc. Although some of these concerns have been addressed by Schwartz in his subsequent research (Schwartz, 2005a), such as double-blind experiments, medium sessions via telephone where the sitters are silent, the use of control groups, and the inclusion of factual investigations to reduce the possibility of subjective validation of sitters, I believe that the overall concerns described by Hyman still need to be seriously considered. However, as my own exploration of mediums is in an experiential qualitative context, the major concern that my research shares with the

concerns of the critics of Schwartz' research is that of subjective validation. As described in the Skeptic Dictionary (<http://skeptdic.com/subjectivevalidation.html>), "Subjective validation is the process of validating words, initials, statements or signs as accurate because one is able to find them personally meaningful and significant." As can be seen from the above experiential descriptions of my various medium communications, I am quite aware of the problem of subjective validation in my own accounts and interpretations, and I will address this crucial issue in my concluding experiential analysis of medium communications.

EXPERIENTIAL ANALYSIS OF MEDIUM COMMUNICATIONS

When I think about all of my various formal and informal sessions with mediums over the past few months, both with independent mediums and mediums at the Spiritualist camp, there are a few highlights that stand out for me. But what actually stands out for me the most is not something I would have predicted. It is the brief medium communication I received from one of the mediums in training whom I was paired up with in my second medium workshop, as I have described above in the section entitled Medium Lecture & Medium Workshop #2. Specifically this is the communication of the medium in regard to my brother and tobacco. It is difficult for me to explain the tremendous impact hearing the word "tobacco" in connection to my brother Fred had upon me. My brother's whole life revolved around him being able to smoke enough cigars to keep himself functional, with the constant economic and environmental challenges of being able to do so. If there were any kind of communication from my

brother that would be believable to me, certainly cigars would be at the top of the list. But this is all primarily “visceral” to me; i.e. I felt a sense of physiological intensity and connection to my brother when the medium in training said this to me. Of-course there are straightforward mathematical probability formulations that can explain her communication of the word “tobacco” to me in connection to my brother, and I am well aware of how I “subjectively validated” her communication. But the fact remains that this had an intensive experiential effect upon me, and it contributes to enticing me to stay open to experientially exploring medium research, in spite of the above research and interpretation concerns that I mentioned.

The other medium in training in that same workshop had mentioned to me that she saw images of flowers and my mother, and once again I felt a strong physiological reaction of connection, as quite recently I had bought flowers to put on my mother’s grave in her cemetery in New Jersey. I realize that flowers can probably be even more easily explained than tobacco, as a word that may stimulate emotional feelings in the context of medium communications. But regardless of this, I felt the effect of what the medium communicated to me and my experience was conveying to me to stay open to medium communications. This same medium in training also conveyed to me that she was picking up a connection to a brother figure who was angry and upset. This had additional impact upon me, as it fit very well my oldest brother Marvin, whose grave I also had recently visited in New Jersey. Uncanny coincidences, “cold readings” (Hyman, 2003) picking up on my sensitive preliminary reactions, subjective validation, etc. are all standard psi critic explanations for these medium communications.

Nevertheless what I experienced was meaningful enough to me to keep my mind open to the possibility that these medium communications were based upon something beyond that of the ordinary senses.

What other medium communications stand out for me? My whole medium session with Medium #2 was certainly impressive and impactful to me, as I have described above, but once again quite explainable intellectually in the same ways as the medium communications that I have described in my second Spiritualist camp medium workshop. The medium in my group medium session at the Spiritualist camp telling me my last name (as well as an accurate message about my brother Marvin) was quite interesting to me, though I suspect that this medium may very well have seen my photo and name on one of my flyers, although I believe that she was not consciously aware of this. The medium in training in my séance communicating to me her image of me needing to “pick up the top hat and put it on my head” in order to see and join all the “beautiful people” was refreshingly striking to me, but of-course she had ample opportunity to observe and sense many characteristics of me during the séance. And then there were the abysmal medium failures, inclusive of Medium #1, Medium #4 who conducted my Spiritualist camp group medium session, and the many blunders of Medium #3 in spite of the strong impactful connections she had made with both me and Dorothy.

But before stating my final conclusions from my medium communications of life after death exploration, I would like to briefly describe a related “synchronicity” (Jung, 1985) experience that I had soon after I attended my first medium session. Synchronicity, which can be defined as “meaningful coincidence” (Jung, 1985), is

described further by Dean Radin in his book *Entangled Minds* as “some form of non-local memory permeating time and space that we can relate to.” (Radin, 2006, p. 248). My personal experience of synchronicity related to life after death is involved with the trying situation of Dorothy’s dog dying, which I have mentioned a few times in the context of a number of my medium sessions. I was working with an 11 year old mental health client at the time, and the context of my working with him was in a youth community center twice a week. The following is the written record I made on May 2, 2008 of two of my community center visits around this time.

“As I walked into the youth community center to work with my 11 year old client, while being very much taken up with the whole tragic situation of Dorothy’s dog dying, my client told me that the little girl next to him had some neat pictures she could show me. Sure enough, the little girl proceeded to show me a picture of a dog who looked very much like Dorothy’s dog, and then a puppy who looked very much like the puppy Dorothy had put a deposit on the day before. And at my next visit to this youth community center I ended up watching two movies that the recreational counselor decided to show to the children. The first movie was about a man who died in a car crash, and then became reincarnated--as a dog. And not to be discounted, the second movie was a cartoon movie entitled “All Doggies Go To Heaven.” Now I know in my head that this is all quite explainable ordinary phenomena that any skeptic would have a good time arguing about. But in spite of the rational knowledge in my head, this “moves” me; this feels like “something” to me. I believe that an alternative explanation for my experiences at the youth community center may involve synchronicity in the

context of Jung's description of "meaningful coincidence." So perhaps all is not lost in my preliminary explorations of life after death. Perhaps the answers may be found in directions that I am not particularly looking in."

Putting all of this together, what are my conclusions regarding my question about the existence of life after death? If I think back nearly 35 years ago, my very first experience exploring the phenomena of life after death occurred soon after my mother died.

I attended a lecture on life after death in Boston, with a few hundred people present.

I can remember somehow making intensive eye contact with the medium giving the lecture, and the next thing I knew, she was singling me out along with a few other people in the audience, and conveying to me in front of the whole audience that she was picking up that I had recently received a phone call that was very upsetting to me. Sure enough, I had recently gotten the phone call from my uncle telling me that my mother had died, and her communication went right through me--my whole body was shaking. This felt like "something" to me, something that had some kind of uncanny meaning for me, although I did not know if it was some form of telepathy, synchronicity, or just plain old coincidence. She didn't tell anyone else that they had a very upsetting phone call, but somehow she felt the inclination to say this to me. But we have already seen lots of psi critic explanations for this kind of medium communication, and I won't repeat these here. However, I will also say that when I saw my mother's dead body in the cemetery, something inside of me somehow felt like I "knew" that my mother was still there. And once again, I know fully well how all of this has absolutely no rational value whatsoever. I am primarily conveying this to give a bit of my preliminary motivation and interest in

this whole topic.

But getting back to the conclusion of my present exploration of medium communications and the phenomenon of life after death, on one side there are the well-formulated, analytical, insightful arguments of a number of psi critics and skeptics to explain away any and all medium claims that something beyond the ordinary senses is going on in medium communications. On a second side there are the super-psi theories involving telepathy, clairvoyance, and field energies to give alternative explanations to a veritable life after death interpretation, even if “something” is indeed going on in certain medium communications. But on yet another side there is my own experience in the context of phenomenology, that somehow speaks to me and tells me to stay open to exploring communications from mediums and trying to understand what this “something” is all about. And my subjective experience resonates with the subjective experiences of countless others throughout human history who have felt “something” is going on in their metaphysical inner waters. It is the age-old question of mind vs. experience, or intellect vs. gut. If all my medium experiences were on a par with my very first medium session, then my gut would have nothing further to say. But given what my medium experiences have been, in all fairness I choose to keep an open mind to the life after death question I began my investigation with, while retaining a healthy skeptical awareness in the process of continuing to experientially explore if “something” is indeed going on here.

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