

ABSTRACT

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PERFORMANCE OF BELIEF: SPIRIT
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CENTURY AMERICA

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Spiritualism is an alternative religion focused on establishing contact between living participants and the spirits of the dead, dating to the mid nineteenth century. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic research at the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment in Falls Church, Virginia, I analyze the three primary rituals of Spiritualist practice—spirit messages, spirit healing, and unfoldment—and argue that performance is central to Spiritualists' ability to connect with the spirit world in a way that can be intersubjectively confirmed by more than one participant. Spirit messages are performed by mediums to a congregation or audience in order to prove to individual spectators that their deceased loved ones have continued to exist as disembodied spirits after their deaths. Spirit healing is performed by healers who channel the energy of the spirits into participants in order to improve the participant's mental, physical, and spiritual condition. And unfoldment is the process whereby

Spiritualists study and practice to be able to make their own direct personal contact with the spirit world. Spiritualism purports to be a science, religion, and philosophy. I consider the intersection between criticism of empirical evidence and entertainment in order to establish how Spiritualists attract newcomers and the intersection between religious belief and ritual participation in order to establish why newcomers choose to become converts. I consider Spiritualism's early history in order to discover the nature of the delicate balance that criticism and belief have established in Spiritualist practice. And, in my analysis of contemporary Spiritualist ritual, I trace the path of the convert from a newcomer with a primarily critical attitude toward Spiritualism to a believer pursuing an increasingly direct connection with the spirit world. I conclude that the live, personal interaction of Spiritualist performance is central to Spiritualists' ability to negotiate a cooperative integration of scientific criticism and religious belief.

SPIRITUALIST RITUAL AND THE PERFORMANCE OF BELIEF:
SPIRIT COMMUNICATION IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY AMERICA

By

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In order to protect the identity of some of my informants, pseudonyms have been used in place of their names. Informants who gave their consent to have their actual names used have been cited accordingly.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: The Performance of Spiritualist Identity

Performing with Spirits

Behind me, a woman was quietly sobbing. She had just received a message from the spirits, translated through the medium standing at the lectern at the front of the room. The medium had given the woman three names—all of whom the woman could identify as belonging to friends or relatives who had “passed to the spirit side of life.” These individuals—now spirits—had communicated their advice and love to her. They wanted her to know that they were with her and that she need never feel that she had been left alone to handle her problems all by herself. Judging by her tears, this woman was completely convinced of the message's accuracy. And her husband, wrapping an arm around her, had been similarly impressed. The medium faced out onto a congregation of just over forty eager listeners, each hoping to be the lucky recipient of the next message from the other side. “The gentlemen a few rows from the back. You're wearing a white shirt.” I glanced up from my notebook. “Good morning,” I said. “Yes. Good morning,” the medium replied. This wasn't my first time receiving a spirit message. I had been attending Spiritualist services, workshops, and classes at the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment (CSE) in Falls Church, Virginia for over fifteen months and had received messages many times before. At first, I had been self-conscious about being singled out in this public forum, but over time I had grown accustomed to the ritual. “There is a woman with you standing behind you with a hand between your shoulder blades as if to encourage you. In life she was very

spiritual but she was very private about it. By that I mean she knew God in her heart. She didn't wear her religion on her sleeve. She'll be assisting you, helping you to break down obstacles. You're already on your way, but she'll be with you." I thanked the medium for the message and, as she moved onto the next recipient, I began to reflect (service, 22 April 2012, CSE).

Ordinarily a message like this, lacking so much in detail, would not have been especially persuasive to me. But this was not the first time a spirit had been described at my back—nor would it be the last. It seemed to me that this particular spirit had visited me before, speaking through other mediums. In the past she had brought the name Mary. I learned from my mother that this was my great grandmother's middle name, and—as I found out after receiving this message—she didn't go to church but she regularly tuned in to religious broadcasts on television. Although she had died before I was born, it seemed that she was often with me, standing at my back, directing me and offering encouragement. Or was she? The name Mary was common enough in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that it should not be persuasive in and of itself. And, although I might interpret the promise to break down obstacles as spiritual assistance with my research and writing process (both well underway), everyone sitting around me that morning must have had their own projects underway and obstacles to overcome.

Was the recurrence of this female spirit at my back whose various descriptions roughly matched my mother's memory of her maternal grandmother enough to prove that the spirit of my great grandmother was with me, or that any spirit at all was

communicating with me for that matter? The vagueness of the message rendered it less than persuasive; however, my previous experiences receiving similar messages from a seemingly similar spirit at other services, séances, and readings from this medium as well as others lent this message some credence. Insofar as I could doubt the medium's veracity, the message opened itself to critical evaluation. But, insofar as the message was performed as a positive assertion without qualification or hesitation, it also called out to be believed. Critique—directed inward toward the self and outward toward the performance—and belief are both central to Spiritualist practice, and they negotiate a tense but productive coexistence through the fact and manner of their performance.

Performance is a defining feature of Spiritualist practice. It was significant that this message had come to me through a live interaction in a forum that was open to the public. The emotional affirmation of the woman who had received the message just before mine coupled with the rapt attention of the group around me made my message seem more believable. But, the fact that these messages were open to anyone (there were a few newcomers seated around me that morning) invited a critical outsider's perspective into the proceedings. And the public nature of the medium's performance tacitly communicated that she had nothing to hide. The act of performing creates an interplay between criticism and belief. Belief rests on confirmation, and confirmation depends on an audience of interlocutors who sit in judgment of the performance. Ideally, the medium intended that her message should

create the same response in me that it had in the woman before me. This would then lead me down a path toward a more general belief in spirit communication.

For Spiritualists, performance is an essential outlet to discover, practice, and expand on belief. But what does it mean to say that Spiritualists perform? Performance is a broad and encompassing term that almost always requires qualification. It is generally defined as a way of behaving or being that is distinctly expressive. According to Victor Turner, “[t]hrough the performance process itself, what is normally sealed up, inaccessible to everyday observation and reasoning, in the depth of sociocultural life, is drawn forth” (1982: 13). Mediums draw forth a hidden world of spirits in order to share them with their congregations. But this emphasis on expressivity would seem to suggest that performance is necessarily linked to presentation or display as in most conventional performing arts like theatre or dance, requiring a designated performer and audience. In fact, Turner's definition is much more expansive. As Marvin Carlson points out, performance based in a “display of skills” is only one way of thinking about what it means to perform. Acting self-consciously, for example, is also a way of performing. According to Carlson, “we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this brings in a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance” (1996: 4). In this way, Carlson opens up a place for ritual in the pantheon of performance. Ronald Grimes argues that ritualizing “is an attempt to activate, and become aware of, preconscious ritualization processes” (1995: 61). Ritualizing raises awareness of rote or automatic behavior through action. A ritual is oriented toward a group of participants who are

meant to engage in an experience rather than an audience who is meant to have a reaction. Rituals draw forth sealed up dimensions of experience through participation as in the collective singing of a hymn. In such a performance, there is often a less obvious distinction between audience and performer. Richard Schechner argues that all performances can be placed on a continuum with theatre on one side and ritual on the other (1977: 130). Theatre is presentational, oriented toward entertaining its audience. Ritual is participatory, oriented toward effecting its participants, often by incorporating them into a community of believers.

Like all types of performance, Spiritualist practice is neither pure ritual nor pure entertainment. Rather, it falls somewhere between these poles, drawing on both functions. Spirit messages are presented before an audience of on-lookers, but those on-lookers can also become active participants when the medium selects them to receive the next message. For newcomers experiencing the service as a curiosity, the messages serve as a form of entertainment. But, for converts, they are a reminder of the power of spirit communication and serve as a form of ritual. Spiritualist performance is a productive outlet to explore the interconnection between theatre and ritual in the way that it layers both together in a single event. Newcomers become initiates and then eventually converts¹ as they come to believe in spirit communication. But spirit communication must prove its validity to them in order to

¹ Some Spiritualists are uncomfortable using the word “convert.” Conversion suggests persuasion, and Spiritualists are meant to judge the efficacy of Spiritualism's rituals for themselves and determine on their own whether or not they accept them as valid. While “believer” might be an apt substitute, I prefer to use the word convert as a means of distinguishing belief in the rituals' efficacy from commitment to living as a Spiritualist. A believer might be convinced that there are such things as spirits and that Spiritualist mediums communicate with them, but a believer is not necessarily a converted member of a Spiritualist congregation pursuing a distinctly Spiritualist religious path.

inspire belief. One must experience Spiritualist practice as an entertainment before one can experience it as a ritual. And the act of moving nascent Spiritualists from the role of spectator to that of participant is central to the meaning and function of the performance. In this investigation, I explore how Spiritualist performance transforms a critical audience member into a converted believer and how the role and function of performance changes as individuals take up an attitude of belief rather than criticism. How do mediums perform spirits in such a way that they are able to persuade congregants of their legitimacy, and what do these performances have to offer once they have proven the reality of spirit communication to their participants? What draws newcomers to a medium's performance, and why do converts continue to attend once they believe?

A History of Stigmatization

Where does this interplay between criticism and belief stem from?

Spiritualism first began as a popular movement in the mid-nineteenth century. Suddenly, people across America and in some parts of Europe were awakened to an inherent ability to make contact with the spirits of the dead. During this period, a group of paranormal pioneers developed the concept of spirit mediumship. These early Spiritualists received messages from the spirits through disembodied taps, communicating by answering yes or no questions or identifying letters on a planchette—the prototype for today's Ouija board. Some mediums also channeled the voices of spirits while in trance or caused tables to tip and tap through the power of the spirits.

While these mediumistic performances began in private homes, over time they made their way to increasingly public venues, inspiring both wonder and derision in the popular press and among intellectuals and clergy.

Criticism dogged Spiritualism almost from its inception, with skeptics decrying the movement as a deceptive fraud and Christians labeling spirit communication a blasphemous sin, inspired by the devil. Although popular interest in mediumship was fervent in the period before the American Civil War, by the turn of the twentieth century Spiritualism's various detractors had taken their toll. A series of prominent mediums had been exposed for manufacturing their supposedly supernatural spirits, and the public's interest in spirit communication had waned significantly. Even among Spiritualism's devoted believers, sectarians inspired by the feats achieved in Spiritualist séances branched off and formed new movements that departed from spirit communication. Theosophy and New Thought in the latter half of the nineteenth century and much of the New Age movement in the twentieth century grew from the seeds planted by the early Spiritualists.² But Spiritualism itself did not disappear. Rather, it transformed. Having more or less retreated from the public spotlight, some of the movement's more respected mediums and philosophers gathered together to organize an association of Spiritualist churches. With the establishment of the National Spiritualist Association in 1893, the once incendiary popular movement became a small, alternative religious practice.

² Spiritualism has had an impact on the development of Christian Science and opened the door for many Neo-Pagan and modern esoteric practices as well.

If Spiritualism was banished to the cultural fringe more than a century ago, why should it interest us today? Although the concept of a Spiritualist movement has all but vanished from contemporary popular consciousness, a widespread fascination with spirits, mediums, and spirit communication persists. Through ghost-themed reality television series, scripted films and television dramas, documentaries, paranormal tourism, and genre fiction, Americans continue to indulge their nagging curiosity for spirit mediums. But these various forms are generally entertainment-driven and, by their very nature, trivializing. In their effort to present mediumship as real—albeit through the deeply suspect lens of reality television—many of these programs reflect a broad base of viewers who want to believe. But, unlike the Spiritualist Church, the programs make no demands on their viewers as far as owning, asserting, or committing to belief. The Spiritualist Church is one of the few places in contemporary America where spirit communication is practiced as a serious undertaking, calling out for a vested commitment from its participants, and working to forge the bond between Spiritualist performance and ritual. For contemporary Spiritualists, knowledge of the continuity of life after death—proven through spirit communication—is a fundamental concept that profoundly influences how individuals understand the meaning and purpose of their lives. At weekly church services, workshops, book clubs, lectures, and séances, Spiritualists negotiate a place and a community for spirit mediumship to function as a legitimate and meaningful practice in contemporary culture.

The Study of Spiritualism

What inspired me to take Spiritualism seriously as a subject for academic study, and why focus on Spiritualist practice as a form of performance? In addition to my life as a researcher, I am an experimental theatre artist. My small ensemble of actors tour the country and the world performing at “fringe” festivals on the edges of mainstream culture, often stirring controversy wherever we arrive with our unorthodox stories and unconventional methods. As an artist, I have pursued a self-consciously independent practice because I believe that art has the opportunity to make the most interesting and worthwhile discoveries when it is not beholden to the homogenizing demands of a popular or mainstream audience. Art can be most honest when it is not concerned with the breadth of its appeal. Spiritualism has always interested me as a similarly avant-garde religious practice, devoted to utilizing performance as an outlet for discovering new possibilities for existence and reality. Controversial from the outset, Spiritualists have doggedly pursued a mission to explore the intersection of empiricism and belief, even though it has meant banishment to the far corners of American culture and religious practice. My project has been to explore the discoveries that mediums and their congregations have made, unbothered by the hoi polloi, in the relative obscurity of the religious fringe. I came to Spiritualism with the assumption that something valuable, complex, and meaningful was taking place in their spiritual centers. The longevity and ambition of the practice were enough to draw me, but the joy Spiritualism gives its practitioners and the complexity of its rituals affirmed me in my fascination. As an ethnographer, my

approach has been to encounter Spiritualism from a Spiritualist perspective in order to understand how and why it works. My goal in my analysis is to explicate this practice and to show its nuance so that I can reveal its inner workings and reflect on the contribution Spiritualists make to larger conversations about empiricism, belief, and performance.

My focus on Spiritualist performance is a unique contribution to the existing literature on the study of both Spiritualism and ritual. Although scholars have explored Spiritualism, none have focused on the significance of performance to Spiritualist practice. And the community of Spiritualists that has continued to practice after the end of the Spiritualism's widespread popularity in the nineteenth century has not been well documented by scholars. Up until forty years ago, very little academic scholarship was undertaken on Spiritualism. Spiritualism was generally dismissed as too trivial to warrant academic study despite the high degree of attention it garnered during the height of its popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. R. Lawrence Moore (1972) was among the first historians to address Spiritualism. Moore was highly critical of the movement. He argued that Spiritualism represented a site for the struggle between a rising scientific consciousness and traditional religious faith, but concluded that Spiritualism ended up making no substantial contribution to this debate. According to Moore, in Spiritualism's emphasis on creating empirical phenomena, Spiritualism failed to deliver any meaningful religious teaching to its participants. However, in Moore's willingness to take Spiritualism as a subject for

academic analysis, he lent legitimacy to the movement as a significant aspect of American culture.

Although Moore rejected the notion that Spiritualism had any meaningful legacy, later historians left aside the question of Spiritualism's contribution to science or religion and concentrated on the movement's political and philosophical impact. Anne Braude (1989) focused on the implications for Spiritualist practice on women's enfranchisement. Noting the preponderance of female mediums practicing in the nineteenth century, Braude argued that Spiritualism was among the first to allow women to take on roles of religious authority. Bret E. Carroll (1997) analyzed Spiritualist theology in order to explicate the idea that Spiritualist theology was an important outlet for working through American ideals about individualism and republicanism. From Carroll's perspective, Spiritualism's refusal to organize as a church until the end of the nineteenth century, for example, was an effort to incorporate American egalitarianism into the religious sphere.

For these historians—as well as chroniclers of American alternative religion more broadly conceived—Spiritualism is understood as a practice that has come and gone. Philip Jenkins (2000) identifies Spiritualism as a nineteenth-century religion with no suggestion that, like Mormonism, Christian Science, and Adventism, Spiritualism has persisted as a religious movement to the present day. Sarah M. Pike (2004), acknowledges Spiritualism as the most significant progenitor for the various New Age and Neopagan religions that gained prominence in the twentieth century. But, for Pike, these various practices have eclipsed and replaced Spiritualism.

Similarly, Mary Bednarowski (1989) is only interested in Spiritualism as an early influence on Christian Science and Theosophy. Jenkins, Pike, and Bednarowski give the impression that Spiritualism was a disconnected collection of religious experiments that gave way to more directed and organized efforts. Theosophy, Christian Science, and the New Age become the place where the initial conflicts and struggles of the early Spiritualists continue to be worked out. In fact, Spiritualists themselves have continued to wrestle with the integration of science and religion on their own, following a path that has remained much more closely linked to the efforts of Spiritualism's pioneers. Theosophy and the New Age are not the evolution of Spiritualist practice but rather departures from a practice that remains relevant to contemporary American culture. Only by acknowledging that Spiritualism has persisted as a distinct practice into the present day can we truly understand the contribution that Spiritualists have made and continue to make to American religion and culture.

A small body of literature has developed around contemporary Spiritualist practice. John J. Guthrie, Jr., Phillip Charles Lucas, and Gary Munroe (1997) published a collection of essays on the Cassadaga Spiritualist community in Florida. Their volume documents the community, the beliefs, and the general practices of contemporary Spiritualists. Much of what they discuss resonates with my experiences at the CSE, which suggests that there is a standardized practice throughout contemporary Spiritualism. An article by Micahel P. Richard and Albert Adato (1980) on Spiritualism's northern community at Lily Dale, New York is less

concerned with documenting Spiritualist practice but does an excellent job of outlining the demographics of the movement, revealing the relative popularity of Spiritualism in the late 1970s as well as the diversity in age range and level of education among participants. Much of what Richard and Adato observed at Lily Dale continued to apply to the community I observed when I visited in 2011. The most in-depth analysis of contemporary American Spiritualism was written by Thomas Kingsley Brown (2000) in his unpublished dissertation, "Religious Seekers and 'Finding a Spiritual Home.'" Brown concluded that, "people wanted to tap into the spiritual realm, but were generally even more concerned with helping themselves and others to live spiritual lives than with connecting psychically with the dead." Brown offers an excellent interpretation of how a community of believers forms around Spiritualist practice, but he stops short of analyzing the role that the rituals themselves play in this process. Focusing on the congregation of believers rather than the rituals that bring them together, Brown leaves an opening to consider the role that performance plays in bridging psychic connection and the development of a spiritual community.

The closest study to my own is Michael F. Brown's *The Channeling Zone* (1997), an analysis of contemporary American channeling, a practice in which "channels" are more or less voluntarily possessed by spirits or gods in order to receive supernatural messages. Channeling identifies itself with the New Age movement. In trance, channels give lengthy seminars—akin to the kinds of events hosted by motivational speakers—in the voice of the channeled god or spirit. By

necessity, Brown gives a great deal of attention to the diverse and complex theology espoused by channels. This displaces the performance itself as the center of the religious experience. The fact and manner in which channels perform drifts to the background as the details of their philosophy take precedence. My analysis, in line with the way Spiritualist practice functions, considers Spiritualist philosophy only as it informs the performance. For Spiritualists, the performance and its ability to demonstrate its own validity to its participants is the central fact, and the philosophy comes second. As such, Spiritualists maintain a steadier concentration on the intersection of science and religion than the more philosophically-minded channels. Spiritualist belief is rooted in performance whereas channels are constantly referencing a philosophy beyond the performance itself in order to win converts.

Anti-Theatricality at the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment

If Spiritualist belief relies on performance, to what extent do Spiritualists understand their efforts to contact the spirit world as rituals, let alone performances? When I first arrived at the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment I was surprised to hear the Center's pastor, medium Anne Gehman, deny that Spiritualism had any rituals. We had gathered for a book club meeting about Joseph Campbell's *Power of Myth*. In the context of a discussion about what 'myths' Spiritualism held, Gehman said, "what we miss as Spiritualists is the ritual. The music, color, and symbolism." Her husband, Wayne Knoll—a member of the Center's board of directors—shrugged and said, "nobody has it all" (14 January 2011). Gehman's wistful notion that Spiritualists

“missed” ritual was in reference to her own affinity for the grandeur and beauty of Catholic ritual, with its robes and golden crucifixes, altars, and towering cathedrals. Spiritualists, by contrast, prefer to keep both their services and their place of worship very spare.

By asserting that Spiritualism lacked any ritual, Gehman was not suggesting that Spiritualists did not gather regularly to observe and practice their shared beliefs. Rather, she was referencing the fact that Spiritualists understand their services as an exercise in enacting, rather than representing, participants' spirituality. For Spiritualists, there is nothing symbolic or referential about a medium's communication with the spirit world. Spiritualist ritual brings its participants into actual contact with spirits. When a message proves its validity, it is through the medium's skill, not through any extraneous form of persuasion. Any sort of ritual symbolism or theatrical embellishment might be covering for some lack, which raises doubts about the medium's ability to provide a convincing message. And so, this aversion to “performing” is a defining feature of the context that Spiritualists weave around their practice.

For Spiritualists, their rituals are genuine connections with the spirits, and so they are averse to the association that performance and ritual often have with “faking it.” As religion scholar Rebecca Sachs Norris argues, “ritual is often suspect because it is seen as insincere or empty” (2003: 176). But ritual can also operate in what the authors of *Ritual and its Consequences* call “the sincere mode of behavior” in which the participant “seeks to replace the 'mere convention' of ritual with a genuine and

thoughtful state of internal conviction” (2008: 103). Primitive Baptists—a sect located primarily in Appalachian regions of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia—practice a distinctly informal form of spontaneous preaching delivered by a minister extemporaneously in front of a congregation and inspired by God's direct influence. This is an example of a sincere ritual (Peacock and Tyson 1989). Richard Schechner identifies a genre of performance that he calls “actuals,” which include “consequential, irremedial, and irrevocable acts” (1977: 49). Schechner cites a performance in which mice are killed and a piano destroyed—two distinctly irrevocable acts, but there are also less destructive examples of actuals. For example, Erika Fischer-Lichte describes a performance action created by the artist Joseph Beuys at an art gallery in New York. For several days, Beuys lived with a coyote in an enclosure installed at the gallery. At any moment, Beuys could have been badly injured or killed by the animal, and so the performance was, at least in part, a demonstration that he could coexist peacefully with the coyote. Beuys was not faking this peaceful coexistence but actively realizing it through his performance (2008: 102-105).³

The Primitive Baptist elder's sermon and Beuys' performance action are both actual expressions of something the performer considers to be genuine. Both are also performed in the presence of an audience who serve to lend meaning and purpose to the expression. When a Spiritualist heals through the power of the spirits or conveys a

³ According to Fischer-Lichte, Beuys' interaction with a wild animal was, by necessity, beyond the realm of artistic representation and mimesis: “In Beuys' action the animal body emerged as an energetic, living organism—a body-in-becoming. There was no difference between the materiality of the human body and that of the animal. Neither could be shaped or controlled at will in order to create a work of art” (105).

message from the spirit world, the healing or communication are intended to be a genuine action, but the performer relies on an audience or a co-participant in order to experience, evaluate, and give meaning to the act. According to Ronald Grimes, “[w]hen meaning, communication, or performance become more important than function and pragmatic end, ritualization has begun to occur” (1982: 41). Rather than ascribe to Grimes' hierarchy, I suggest that Spiritualist performance is a combination of meaning, communication, and function presented with or for a group who is meant to experience and interpret the act. A Spiritualist performance requires a functional effort on the part of the medium or healer to connect with the spirits, but the meaning and purpose of that connection relies on the experience of an interlocutor. This balancing act that takes place between function and meaning informs the entirety of Spiritualist practice at the CSE from the aesthetics of the building to the mediums' and congregants' presentation of self.

Falls Church, Virginia is a relatively affluent suburban community just outside of Washington, DC. The Center is in a busy neighborhood along a busy thoroughfare, North Washington Street, that helps to contextualize the Center as a site for entertainment. The State Theatre, a popular concert and comedy venue, is next door, and Clare and Don's Beach Shack, a tropical-themed restaurant occupies the next building down. On a typical Sunday morning the adjacent restaurant and theater are dark and unoccupied, and the CSE is the social highlight of the area. At night and weekend events, however, the CSE's neighbors provide a bustling atmosphere and crowded parking lot that situate the Center's participants into a sort of nightlife. On

my way into one of the CSE's Friday night book clubs, for example, I passed a line of young adults in their early twenties that stretched past the CSE's main door and around the corner, waiting to see a popular comedian perform.

But the building itself is spare like a Quaker meeting house, with an emphasis on functionality that belies the festive atmosphere provided by the surrounding community. The Center is housed in a white building dating to 1879, with a tall sloped roof and a red brick chimney that dominates its street-side view. Visitors enter through a door situated under a porch roof. They walk into a modest 1500 square foot room which comprises most of the building. Inside, the Center is simple, rustic, and functional. The ceiling slopes upward with the roof, showing dark-stained exposed wood beams. Three simple brass chandeliers hang from the center beam. When I began my research the floor was plain white linoleum tile, but in the last months of my fieldwork was carpeted as part of a modest renovation initiative. The front of the room features the hearth. Over the mantel hangs a small rectangular tapestry with a picture of an angel blowing a horn (see Figure 1). For Sunday services, a lectern is brought out with a second tapestry adorned with the image of an angel feeding robins. Cushioned yellow chairs are set in rows with an aisle down the middle. An organ and an upright piano stand side by side in the front corner of the room, and a ficus sits in front of windows on either side of the chimney.



Figure 1: The hearth and lectern at the CSE. Photograph by the author.

The Medium's Performance of Self

Spiritualists meet at the Center every Sunday for a service that includes spirit healing, a lecture, and spirit messages. The healing is conducted by healers and student healers who perform a laying-on-of-hands ritual at the front of the congregation for the first half-hour of the service. Lectures are given by members of the Center or visitors who speak on religious or moral issues varying widely in topic. And messages are given by one or two of the Center's mediums or visiting mediums who arrive at the Center roughly once a month to give workshops. The Center is governed by a board of directors, elected each year from the Center's membership, and a ministerial council consisting of six mediums (see Appendix C).

The ministerial council is led by the Center's pastor Anne Gehman (see Figure 2). A small woman in her mid seventies, Gehman is gentle but intense. When she addresses the congregation she is soft-spoken but clear, her voice filling the room despite its small, almost child-like quality. With her students, she is encouraging but



Figure 2: Wayne Knoll and Anne Gehman at the dedication of the CSE and unveiling of the Center's sign. Photograph courtesy of the CSE.

exacting, coaxing them to tap into their higher spiritual selves and admonishing them for characterizing their experiences as “strange” or “weird.” When she scolds or criticizes—which is rare—she assumes a kind of maternal disappointment and often masks the bite of her commentary with her sense of humor. More often, she is cheerful and welcoming, greeting new friends and hugging old friends each week at the Sunday service.

Gehman discovered her mediumship at an early age, attended by phenomena like taps and tilting at her family's kitchen table in rural Florida. Her father and mother were both Mennonite, but exhibited their own supernatural abilities which they attributed to the power of Christ. Gehman's mother often had premonitions, and her father was known within his community for being a spiritual healer—in one instance healing the severed fingers of a farmer by cupping them in his own hands and praying. At the age of fourteen, Gehman left home, struggling with a profound

sense of disconnection. She felt that she neither belonged with her Mennonite family nor the secular world that she had ventured out into and attempted suicide by taking pills. During her near-death experience she was visited by a spirit who led her to the door of her mentor, Spiritualist medium Wilbur Hull. She became the youngest person to be certified as a registered medium with the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC) and began touring with Hull, lecturing and giving messages. She established a ministry offering readings and teaching mediumship classes and started a popular radio program in her home outside of Cassadaga, Florida where she practiced until a growing clientele in the Washington, DC area persuaded her to move to the nation's capital in 1980. And in 1988, she founded the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment. (interview, 22 January 2013, Gehman house).

Gehman's leadership is unlike what many associate with a pastor at a more conventional religious institution. At Sunday services, she occupies a place of honor, seated behind the lectern at the front of the room facing the congregation, but she never gives the weekly lecture. She only ever addresses the congregation with spirit messages, performed during the last part of the service. But, she often shares this time with her assistant pastor, the medium Patricia Stranahan. And, when an out-of-town medium is visiting the congregation, she will cede the Sunday messages to the visitor and remain silent for the entire service. Giving messages, Gehman employs a simple and direct style. There is very little showmanship in her self-presentation. And yet, Gehman possesses a power and authority within the Center that lends her what Max Weber (1947) calls "charismatic authority." She has a personal magnetism that

prompts congregants to greet and embrace her as a close friend. Her congregation loves and respects her as a kind of living treasure, often expressing privately to each other how lucky the Center is to have her. But, given the fact that Gehman makes no conscious effort to cultivate this personal following, how do I account for the CSE's collective adoration?

By choosing to identify herself more as a sage than a performer, Gehman's self-presentation places the emphasis entirely on her skill. At a Sunday service, Gehman's messages achieve a level of detail that other mediums do not. And many members and visitors seek Gehman out for private readings. The evidence that I have been able to collect of her accuracy is anecdotal at best—accumulated over time in the form of comments from congregants and the responses of participants to Gehman's messages during services and workshops—but suffice it to say that most congregants believe Gehman to be an accurate medium. In classes, she often validates whatever claim she is making through a demonstration. If she is talking about the ability to discern psychic impressions from an object, she borrows an object from a member of the class and shows how it is done. If she is talking about spiritual healing, she brings a volunteer to the front of the room and has the volunteer report when they feel the influence of her healing touch. Her personality complements this emphasis on her mediumistic skill by refusing to augment her persuasiveness as a medium with any of the flair or bravado employed by evangelists or entertainers. Gehman is a competent speaker and sociable person, but mediumship—not her speaking skills or personality—is the accentuated fact in her public self-presentation. If her messages

persuade, it is through her skill as a medium, not through her talent as a performer. That they persuade without embellishment then raises her authority in the eyes of the community that much more.

Six other mediums serve at the Center on the ministerial council. Two of those six attend regularly: Assistant Pastor Patricia Stranahan and the Reverend Gloria Saide. The others appear occasionally to give the day's lecture and spirit messages. The CSE regularly brings mediums from across the country to lecture, teach, and give messages. During the course of my research I heard messages from nineteen different mediums at the Center. These mediums ranged in age from thirty to eighty. Twelve were women and seven men. Fifteen of the mediums were white and three were African American. Some had day jobs as artists, entrepreneurs, administrators, and engineers. Others were full-time mediums, having either retired from the secular workforce or discovered enough of a private following to support them. Almost all of the mediums were also healers, including several reiki practitioners.⁴ Six mediums wrote columns or books focused on Spiritualist themes, and eight were the pastors or assistant pastors of their own churches.

The Spiritualist Congregation

The clergy lead a congregation of just over eighty converted members, twenty of which can be found at the Center on a Sunday. In an average congregation of 40

⁴ Reiki is a Japanese healing technique that involves a transfer of the healer's energy through the healer's palms into the patient in order to cure physical ailments. There are three levels of training for a Reiki healer, ending in the healer's earning the designation "Reiki Master." These levels are attained through learning the technique of placing the hands on and around the patient's body in order to relieve blocks within the patient's non-physical energy and through the development of the healer's spiritual awareness and being (vanderVaart, et. al. 2009).

attendees, around twenty are long-term members who have been attending for five years or more, another ten are regular attendees who have been coming for less than a year and may or may not be converts, and another five are attending for the first or second time. I have identified three categories of participants at the CSE: newcomers, initiates, and converts. These terms are my own since Spiritualists have no categories separating their participants' levels of belief. A newcomer is a participant who is attending for the first or second time and is unsure about Spiritualists' truth claims. Newcomers are visitors or “tourists,” serving as temporary participants in the Center's community. An initiate has decided to convert but has not completed the process required for conversion. Initiates believe in the basic tenets of Spiritualism, but their belief is incomplete insofar as they have not experienced the full range of Spiritualist performances which includes spirit messages, spirit healing, meditation, and the home circle—a ritual in which members gather privately to attempt to make personal direct contact with the spirit world. Spiritualists attend a six-week course, make a public pledge of their belief in Spiritualism, and pay a small fee to become members of the Center. The six-week conversion course—which requires its own tuition fee of between two and three hundred dollars—is significant because it affords participants the opportunity to experience Spiritualist rituals they may not have had the opportunity to participate in otherwise; especially the home circle and variations of Spiritualist meditation not performed at weekly services.

But participants need not join the Center after taking the classes. In the unfoldment course I attended, roughly two-thirds of my classmates chose to become

members. The difference between converts and initiates is that converts have experienced and believe in all of the major rituals of Spiritualism. It is possible to believe without paying membership dues and joining, but membership is often the choice made by practicing Spiritualists. To be a practicing Spiritualist is to continue to pursue increasingly deep and comprehensive contact with the spirit world. Generally, this is achieved through participation in a circle and attendance at workshops and events that allow participants to explore aspects of Spiritualism not addressed at weekly services: more advanced techniques for healing, meditations for getting in touch with spirit guides and angels, an understanding of the relationship between near-death experiences and Spiritualist practice, etc. These events all charge a fee to participate and members receive a discount such that, for an active member, membership ultimately pays for itself.

Most CSE members are not from Falls Church, Virginia. A majority reside outside the town in Northern Virginia, and just under thirty percent of the membership lives in Southern Maryland or Washington, DC. Outlying members visit from as far away as Florida, North Carolina, and West Virginia. Since there are just under ninety NSAC affiliated churches in the entire US, some members must travel if they want to be a part of a Spiritualist congregation. The congregation at the CSE is diverse. There are more women than men, but at most services men represent at least a third of those attending. Also, while there are more white congregants than any other ethnicity attending on Sundays, at least a third of the congregation is non-white including African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. I have also

met recent immigrants among new and frequent attendees hailing from countries including Germany, the Philippines, and Nigeria. Most congregants are over thirty-five, but younger congregants comprise between ten and twenty percent of a weekly congregation. Younger members tend to dress more casually and older members tend to dress more formally. There is no dress code at the Center so some participants arrive in jeans and others in full suits or dresses. Roughly half of the congregation attend alone or with friends that they have made at the Center. Others attend with a domestic partner, parent, or adult child. Young families with children attend only occasionally. Members and visitors are predominantly middle class, many have college degrees, and several have or are pursuing advanced degrees in subjects including nursing, law, history, and literature.

Members pride themselves on the sense of community that they have created at the Center. One Sunday, Wayne Knoll addressed the congregation on the nature of the CSE's community: “[t]here is an energy, there is a vibrancy about our community... we are special.” (service, 15 January 2012, CSE). Knoll—also in his mid seventies—is respected among congregants as both a church elder and an intellectual. He is a former Jesuit priest and professor of literature at Georgetown University, a spirit healer, and the moderator of the CSE's monthly book discussions. It is a frequent joke among congregants that the one-minute allotted for fellowship—when the Sunday service pauses for members and visitors to walk around greeting each other—always stretches much longer than a minute. The CSE is a supportive, friendly, and relatively tight-knit group considering that, for many, their only point of

intersection is the Center itself. Members don't generally join with spouses, families, or friends. They join as individuals, and they make friends with the Center's other members through their attendance at services and events. This lends the group a common purpose. Spiritualists can rest assured that they are all invested, to some degree, in the beliefs and practices at the heart of their religion. No one attends regularly out of a sense of obligation. This is a very different approach to religious commitment than Catholic and Protestant Christians and most denominations of Judaism, for example, many of whom observe the Old Testament commandment to “remember and keep the Sabbath day by keeping it holy” (Exodus 20). For many Christians and Jews, failure to attend the weekly service is regarded as a sin against God. The Spiritualist service is not a religious requirement. Rather, it is a voluntary opportunity to experience the CSE's community of fellow congregants and to pursue one's own spiritual growth.

The Center encourages the congregation to form bonds in several ways. In addition to the pause for fellowship, weekly services end with a potluck lunch that gives members and visitors a chance to meet and talk. And attendees at most classes and workshops are encouraged to get to know one another. For the most part, members are very welcoming of newcomers and aspiring converts, but—as with any close group—the intensity of the communal bond within the Center can be alienating for neophytes. Spiritualists tend to avoid proselytizing. They are wary of thrusting their beliefs onto others and, as long-time member Rita O' Conner observed during one Sunday lecture, this risks making newcomers feel as though the CSE's

congregation is unwelcoming (service, 27 November 2011, CSE). Congregants often go out of their way to greet new attendees during fellowship, but actually becoming a member of the CSE's close-knit community takes considerable time and patience. It was just under nine months before I felt anything like the camaraderie of being “inside” the Center's community. Members gradually warm to visitors as they display increasing interest in becoming Spiritualists. This both protects the community from uncommitted participants and ensures that members join out of their own conviction in the validity of Spiritualist practice, not because of any relationship they might form with other members of the congregation.

It is also the case that, while the CSE's congregation is close, the community is not entirely homogenous. There are various smaller groups within the Center's larger community: long-term members, student mediums and healers, new members, etc. There are also outliers who were once regular attendees or only ever attended intermittently who continually move in and out of the CSE's social network. Even after fifteen months studying at the Center, I would occasionally introduce myself to people who greeted me as if I were attending for the first time. These people may have been attending services for a year or longer, but only sparsely, experiencing the CSE's community as a kind of distant relative. Ultimately, these fragmentations—while noticeable to anyone willing to take a close look at the congregation—did not seem to detract from the general feeling of unity and communal commitment that I both witnessed and experienced as a CSE member.

The Meaning of Membership at the CSE

The creation of community at the CSE reveals the degree to which the Spiritualists' approach to conversion differs from the dominant models in larger mainstream practices. According to Stark, the most effective method for conversion is one in which “interpersonal ties, or social capital, are the primary factor in conversion” (2005: 23). Stark argues that Mormons' success rate, for example, is far lower when they attempt to convert non-Mormons by going door to door, but “when the contact was arranged and hosted by a Mormon friend or relative of the potential recruit, conversion took place quite often” (ibid.: 24). The CSE's congregation allows newcomers to evaluate Spiritualism for themselves, self-consciously avoiding any effort to coerce them into becoming members of the CSE's community. Unlike a Mormon, who may profess the positive influence Mormonism has had on her or his life, a Spiritualist remains silent and allows the messages to do the talking. By arguing for the central role that messages play in conversion, I do not mean to dismiss the contributions made by the interpersonal relationships newcomers form as they move toward conversion. Some converts are brought to the Center by friends or relatives, many make friends in the congregation, and all of these relationships play a significant role in what makes a newcomer choose to become a Spiritualist. However, the messages remain central to the conversion experience.

In purporting to be able to actually demonstrate the validity of their beliefs through a live experience, Spiritualists distinguish their efforts from the more socially-based conversion tactics of the Mormons. Mormonism cannot fail insofar as

it does not attempt to demonstrate anything empirically verifiable about its belief system. If I am a happy Mormon with deep convictions, this is the source of my ability to persuade others to join my faith. In Spiritualism, however, belief is tested through live performance. If the demonstration fails or fails consistently enough, then the would-be convert has nothing in which to believe. Lewis R. Rambo contends that “conversion is usually not a single event but an evolving process in which many aspects of a person's life may be effected” (1993: 10). He observes a rising trend of “experimental conversion” in which “converts are urged to take nothing on faith but to try the theology, ritual, and organization for themselves and discover if the system is true (that is, beneficial and supportive) for them” (ibid.: 15). Most Spiritualist converts have formed bonds with others in the congregation, but all have affirmed the validity of spirit communication to their own satisfaction and determined that mediumship makes a valuable contribution to their lives.

In Stark's analysis, he is observing a trend that is fast transforming Mormonism into a large-scale world religion. Although Mormons are not generally considered mainstream believers, their presence in the national culture and growing membership mark them as a aspiring candidate for mainstream acceptance. I am observing a practice that has persisted almost as long as Mormonism but has spent much of that time on the cultural fringe. Spiritualists are—or at least seem to be—more content to be alternative rather than mainstream believers. To be a Spiritualist is to be a part of small, unique community, and, this is a hallmark of the practice's appeal. I argue that a significant part of what makes spirit messages and healing so

effective is the small scale on which they are enacted. The pursuit of fame is generally looked down upon by committed Spiritualists. According to Gehman, ego is a spiritually limiting factor that prevents personal growth (book club, 30 November 2012, CSE). Attention might accrue from being an effective spirit medium, but a good medium should never become attached to or preoccupied by the pursuit of that attention. Gehman had a popular radio show in Florida that she transitioned to Washington, DC when she moved, but she had no compunction about dispensing with it when it became inconvenient: “When I came up here I was doing a show and I got really tired of doing it because I didn't like to face the traffic. But now I know I could do it in my home if I want to. It's not at all about fame. Being famous is not my goal but it is a goal of many” (interview, 22 January 2013, Gehman house). The fact that the mediums at the CSE are volunteers who have very little to gain financially or otherwise outside of their authority at the CSE is significant to what makes them so persuasive.⁵ If the mediums could achieve greater fame either through their own skill or through their association with the CSE, it would provide a motive for faking messages. In other words, the pursuit of greater notoriety would render their performance suspect. And so, in order for the performance of spirit messages to remain an effective means for inspiring new and existing converts, the CSE must remain a relatively esoteric institution. If mediums sought to make substantial financial gains or garner fame through their practice, this would provide a motive for cheating or faking their mediumship.

⁵ Although instructors sometimes collect a portion of the entry fee for their workshops and classes, a majority of the funds are generally put into the CSE—a non-profit religious organization.

Spiritualist Philosophy: The Nine Principles

Is there a system of belief within which Spiritualist performance can be contextualized and understood? The “philosophy” of Spiritualism is often explicated at Sunday lectures, and it endows Spiritualist performance with a larger and more abstract purpose and meaning. Spiritualists understand their practice as a kind of ur-religion or source of all spiritual beliefs. According to Wayne Knoll, “Spiritualism is at the heart of all religions,” and Gehman echoes this idea when she contends that “Everyone is a Spiritualist” (class, 25 October 2011, CSE; book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). What Knoll and Gehman mean is that, if religions are stripped down to their most inclusive beliefs, the result is Spiritualism. This understanding of Spiritualism requires that the observer take the broadest possible view of the practice. It presumes that all religions seek to connect with a higher power, and that all religions develop a system of beliefs in order to better the individual and to bring the individual closer to that higher power. Spiritualists connect with the spirits of the dead and through those spirits to a divine source of being. Insofar as they try to append the barest and most flexible set of beliefs to this practice, they are an ur-religion.

In Knoll's words, Spiritualists—at their best—do not demand strict adherence to any “creed or dogma.” And so, Knoll can practice as both a Catholic and a Spiritualist without experiencing any inner conflict: “why should I give up anything that brings me closer to God?” (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). For some

believers, Spiritualism is a kind of addendum to their first religion, appending spirit communication and healing to Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist traditions. Although the CSE starts its services at 10am, there are still congregations in the US who meet at 2pm in order to allow their congregants to attend services at other non-Spiritualist churches. That having been said, Spiritualists do have relatively specific beliefs that often directly contradict other religions and mark out a unique place for Spiritualism beyond its commitment to mediumship. These beliefs are characterized as the best or most correct understanding that Spiritualists have been able to achieve, and they are not forced on congregants who disagree. For example, Spiritualists do not believe in the divinity of Christ. They believe that Christ existed and was a powerful and important healer, medium, and teacher, but they do not believe that Christ was the son of God (class, 22 November 2011, CSE). Similarly, Spiritualists disagree with Jewish, Christian, or Islamic fundamentalist beliefs about the absolute truth of the Torah, New Testament, or Koran.

Any assertion of belief about Christ's divinity or any other widely held religious doctrine is always qualified as subject to change. Rita O'Conner—a longtime member of the CSE and spirit healer—explained Spiritualists' approach to doctrine:

I have chosen Spiritualism for many reasons. It respects everyone's spiritual journey. Each of us decides what to believe. Some may believe in reincarnation, for example, while others do not. Unlike the Catholic Church, it is not hierarchical. The elected delegates to the annual convention vote on not just the practical aspects of the religion, but proposed changes to the Declaration of Principles itself. We do not need a clergy to intercede with the divine on our behalf. We are each already divine (pers. comm., 26 November 2012).

Officially, Spiritualists—unlike Hindus or Buddhists—do not believe in reincarnation. Gehman herself does not believe because she “has never communicated with a spirit who talks about other lives or being reincarnated.” She is open to the possibility of discovering, through her mediumship, that reincarnation is valid, but considers it unlikely. And yet, Gehman does not insist that all Spiritualists agree with her: “We do not teach reincarnation but we are open. We probably have a few members who believe and that's fine. Hold on to it as long as you need to” (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). Spiritualists are permitted to believe whatever they like. But, according to Gehman, the official Spiritualist perspective is probably more correct and, with the accumulation of more knowledge and spiritual understanding, those who disagree with the official beliefs will come around to them.

Spiritualist philosophy is recorded and recited at the Sunday service in the form of nine principles:

1. We believe in Infinite Intelligence.
2. We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are the expression of Infinite Intelligence.
3. We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression and living in accordance therewith, constitute true religion.
4. We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death.
5. We affirm that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.

6. We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

7. We affirm the moral responsibility of individuals, and that we make our own happiness or unhappiness as we obey or disobey Nature's physical and spiritual laws.

8. We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any soul here or hereafter.

9. We affirm that the precepts of Prophecy and Healing are Divine attributes proven through Mediumship.⁶

Spiritualists (1) "believe in Infinite Intelligence" and (2) "that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual are the expression of Infinite Intelligence." For Spiritualists, the concept of God is nebulous. The word "God" surfaces regularly in prayers, lectures, and classes, but the word does not mean the same thing for a Spiritualist as it does for most monotheists. Many Spiritualists prefer the term "Spirit" to "God." When used as a proper singular noun, Spirit can refer to either the entire spirit world or to the Spiritualist concept of God. And, for some, these ideas are synonymous. God is not necessarily a single, personified entity. God is the organization of the universe and the force that breathes divinity into all things. This is the thrust of the second principle, which holds that everything emanates from an infinite source. Spiritualists rarely explicate the meaning of God or Spirit, in part because they do not claim to have any direct knowledge of God. Only three of the nine principles—the first, second, and sixth—are stated as beliefs. The others are affirmations. And the principles relating to God or Infinite Intelligence are two of those three beliefs. This is not to suggest that Spiritualists do not have experiences

⁶ nsac.org/principles.php (accessed 1 November 2012).

that they understand as encounters with God, but that they cannot know firsthand what it means to experience God. Any experience with God is less verifiable and therefore less certain than encounters with lesser spiritual beings like angels and spirits.

Spiritualists (3) “affirm that a correct understanding” of the expression of Infinite Intelligence in its physical and spiritual forms “and living in accordance therewith constitute true religion.” Spiritualists believe in a series of Natural Laws, which are constantly being discovered and discussed. These laws often straddle both the physical and the non-physical world. For example, the Law of Cause and Effect is both an observation of how events happen in the world and the source for the belief that “thoughts create things.” The Law of Attraction follows from the Law of Cause and Effect by suggesting that “creations of like vibration are drawn by a like affinity” (class, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). A “correct understanding” of Infinite Intelligence is an acknowledgment that non-physical forces, including our own thoughts, effect our physical circumstances. By recognizing the spiritual dimension to our being and orienting our thoughts toward self-improvement and spiritual development, we come to live within “true religion.”

The fourth and fifth principles get to the heart of Spiritualism: (4) “We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death,” and (5) “that communication with the so-called dead is a fact, scientifically proven by the phenomena of Spiritualism.” The continuation of the individual after death is referred to as the “continuity of life;” death is a transition

after which the individual maintains her or his personality, memories, and consciousness as a non-physical spirit. Spirits exist in a plane of being that Spiritualists refer to as the spirit world that overlaps the physical world but is, by and large, not available to our physical senses. By developing a series of non-physical senses, living mediums can achieve direct sensations from the spirits and the spirit world. Interestingly, this concept—the fifth principle—is the only one expressed using the words “science” and “fact.” Many spirits are motivated to assist the living by demonstrating the proof of the continuity of life, offering advice and guidance, and providing spiritual healing for physical, psychological, and existential ailments. Spiritualists endeavor to improve their own physical, psychological, and spiritual condition as well as the condition of others through contact with the spirits. This contact is achieved through a variety of rituals, the purpose of which is to form a connection between participants and the spirit world.

The sixth principle is a basic statement of ethics: (6) “We believe that the highest morality is contained in the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This hearkens back to the notion of Spiritualism as an ur-religion. The concepts of right and wrong as well as good and evil are pared down to their simplest form. If you treat others well, you are a good person. If you treat others poorly, you are not a good person. Consequently, Spiritualism does not believe in divine retribution in the form of a heaven or hell (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). The seventh principle states that (7) “we make our own happiness or unhappiness as we obey or disobey Nature's physical and spiritual laws.” If we do not treat others well,

we will attract around us spiritual and living beings who are similarly selfish or destructive. And, when we die, we will find ourselves surrounded by these same forces. If we do treat others well, we will attract positive spiritual and living beings and these will uplift us in this life as well as in the afterlife (class, 25 October 2011, CSE).

Although this may seem like a version of heaven and hell, the Spiritualist afterlife differs from traditional Christian doctrine in that Spiritualists do not believe in eternal damnation. According to the eighth principle, (8) “the doorway to reformation is never closed against any soul here or hereafter.” Gehman does not believe in evil. Rather, she understands evil as “good evolving” (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). Spiritualists accept that people often do things to each other in violation of the Golden Rule that can be classified as evil. But those people are not themselves evil. Rather, they are at a lower place on their spiritual evolution. If these people do not choose to reform during their lifetimes and enter an afterlife that surrounds them with other negative forces, they are not doomed to this state of being forever. They can grow, learn, and evolve as spirits. Having surrounded themselves with negative forces, this will certainly be more difficult than it will be for individuals who have achieved a higher spiritual evolution in their lifetimes. Consequently, Spiritualists are encouraged to develop an increasingly strong link to their own spirituality and the spirit world during their lifetimes.

The last principle states that, (9) “the precepts of Prophecy and Healing are divine attributes proven through Mediumship.” Spiritualists' belief in prophecy is not

a commitment to fatalism. Gehman told a story of a woman who had visited her for a reading when she lived in Florida. Gehman warned the woman that there would be trouble on the ride home and that she should avoid a certain road. The woman didn't listen and ended up dying in a car accident. As Gehman explained, the woman could have chosen to avoid the road and survived, but she did not (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). Mediums see glimpses of things that may come to pass based on the direction that a given situation is tending, but those visions depend on the choices made by the individuals involved. People can always choose a different path. Healing, which is practiced by many faith traditions including Evangelicals and Catholic Charismatics, is differentiated from those religions in its pairing with mediumship. Healing and prophecy—when they are at their best—are achieved through the power of the spirits. And, like spirit communication, they are “proven,” albeit as second-order phenomena that derive from the more foundational fact of mediumship.

The Sunday Service: Outline of a Ritual

By and large, Spiritualists frame their practice as a religious ritual rather than a theatrical entertainment in order to endow their efforts with a seriousness of purpose.⁷ The service is patterned after the proscriptions of the NSAC. The Center is chartered by the NSAC, the most geographically expansive of the seventeen major Spiritualist organizations in the United States. Like most Christians, Spiritualists meet

⁷ Although Spiritualists attempt to understand their service this way, as Schechner (1972) and Turner (1982) observe and as I will argue in the coming chapters, ritual and theatre are fluid concepts that inhere within all genres and instantiations of performance, including Spiritualist performance.

every Sunday. Often, this meeting takes place at a hall or church. The Spiritualist service follows the basic structure of a Judeo-Christian service, including prayers, hymns, and a lecture (akin to what Protestant Christians call a sermon) with two major exceptions. A Spiritualist service begins with thirty minutes of meditation and spiritual healing and ends with thirty minutes of spirit messages, communicated through mediums to several members of the congregation. At 10am, congregants arrive at the Center for the healing service. They take their seats, on which are placed the Spiritualist Hymnal and the day's bulletin, listing the order of the service, biographies of the week's speaker as well as the next week's speaker, and upcoming events (see Appendix B). The days' mediums, healers, speaker, and chairperson gather at the back of the church and process down the center aisle. Circling at the front of the room, the group says a prayer. The chairperson—who emcees the morning's proceedings—takes the lectern to welcome everyone and invite them to turn to the day's first hymn. Everyone rises, sings, and sits again to recite the “Prayer for Spiritual Healing,” printed on the back cover of the hymnal.

After reciting the prayer together, the chairperson invites the congregation to assume a comfortable pose in order to begin the day's meditation. The meditation is focused on healing. First, the chairperson directs participants through a guided meditation that involves picturing a healing light entering themselves, those around them, friends and relatives, and the whole world. Then, the congregation sits for a silent meditation during which anyone who wishes to receive spiritual healing is invited to the front of the room. A series of benches are placed at the front of the

congregation, and the day's healers take their places behind them. Congregants sit to receive healing, and the healers—beginning with their hands on the sitter's shoulders—move their hands around to various parts of the participant's body for the laying-on-of-hands ritual as the chairperson looks on. Once everyone who wants to receive healing that day has had the opportunity to sit with a healer, the chairperson returns to the lectern and gently informs the meditating congregation that the healing service is drawing to a close. Fellowship follows and marks a break between the healing service and the devotional service. The chairperson invites the congregation to stand for a minute or two and greet their neighbors. Regular visitors and members make their way around, greeting people they know and welcoming newcomers—who are often seated at the back of the congregation.

After the healing service comes the devotional service. The devotional service begins with the week's announcements: upcoming events, fundraising drives, and membership deadlines. Often, the chairperson will take this opportunity to welcome newcomers and invite them to the afternoon's potluck lunch. The congregation rises to sing the second hymn of the day and the chairperson gives the invocation—a prayer, generally composed spontaneously that tends to focus on a request for spiritual guidance on behalf of the entire congregation. Following the invocation, congregants sit to recite Spiritualism's “Declaration of Principles,” printed on the front cover of the hymnal. The chairperson then introduces the day's speaker by reading a short list of the speaker's accomplishments and the congregation rises to “greet” the speaker with a hymn. The speaker's lecture lasts between fifteen and

twenty minutes. There is a different speaker every week, and the topics of the lectures range considerably. In January, the Center celebrates “World Religions Month” and speakers are invited from other faiths to discuss their beliefs. In February, the Center celebrates “Black History Month” by inviting African American speakers to talk about black history and civil rights. Guest lecturers from outside the congregation also speak on the intersection of religion and medicine, Native American spirituality, metaphysical philosophy, moral responsibility, and a host of other topics. Lectures given by Spiritualist clergy or members can be specific to Spiritualist practice or more general, centering on questions of compassion, community, and spirituality broadly conceived. Lecture titles have included, “Preparing for the Transition,” “Patriotism,” “The Seventh Principle,” “Earth Day,” “Spiritualism in Canada,” “Evolution and Progression,” “Buddhism, Spirituality, and India,” and “Misconceptions about Islam.” Once the speaker sits down again, two ushers bring baskets through the congregation to collect donations for the Center while the organist or pianist plays a short song. The baskets are brought to the front of the room, the chairperson says a prayer for “the gifts and the givers” over them, and the devotional service draws to a close.

The congregation stands again and sings a hymn to welcome the day's medium or “message minister” to begin the message service. The chairperson's tone shifts as she or he addresses the congregation with a warning: “the message service is the most sacred part of our service. If you haven't already done so we ask that you please turn off all electronic devices as any sharp noise may disturb the medium. We

also ask that you refrain from getting up during the service as this may distract the medium and interrupt the connection with the spirit world.” The chairperson introduces the medium and the medium takes the lectern. At some services there is one message minister. At others there are two, but there are never more than two. The medium—inspired by the spirits—selects members from the congregation to receive messages. At the CSE, between four and ten congregants receive messages depending on the time remaining and the medium's concentration. Other congregations offer messages to everyone who attends, but the CSE prefers to give fewer longer messages rather than many shorter messages.

Although the Sunday service is the only regular, weekly event on a Spiritualist's calendar, there are a number of other events that take place within the Center (see Appendix A). The six-week conversion course is offered once or twice a year and meets once-a-week in the evening. Various workshops are given for all levels of believer on Friday evenings and Saturdays. Friday workshops generally last three hours and Saturday workshops last three or six hours. Topics tend to focus on developing one's own spiritual abilities as a psychic, medium, or healer. Occasionally, the Center invites instructors to teach alternative spiritual practices that don't necessarily fall within the boundaries of Spiritualist practice including Qi Jong and Tai Chi, both movement-based Chinese practices meant to encourage healing. The CSE also hosts gallery readings twice or three times a year in which one or two mediums spend between ninety minutes and two hours giving messages to as many members of an audience as they have time to reach. In a similar vein, the Center has

an annual Victorian séance at which mediums dress in Victorian costumes and sit around tables with participants to give spirit messages. The Center also holds a monthly book club, moderated by Wayne Knoll. The books selected range from Joseph Campbell's *Power of Myth* to *What the Bleep do We Know?*, a book that addresses the intersections between quantum physics and alternative religion. Book clubs meet on Friday nights. All of these events are attended by both members and non-members, and many attract newcomers visiting the Center for the first time.

According to Spiritualist believers and mediums, to practice Spiritualism is to engage both the right brain and left brain in the pursuit of a deeper and more comprehensive spiritual existence. Gehman often makes reference the lateralization of brain functioning in which the left brain is associated with logical thinking and the right brain with creative thinking and, in the case of mediumship, the ability to achieve altered states of consciousness. In the weekly service, meditation and healing are right brain activities, and, to a lesser extent, the singing of hymns. Outside of the service, workshops on healing and mediumship that teach participants how to make contact with the spirit world are more right-brained in focus. The weekly lecture and monthly book club meetings are left brain activities. Spiritualists' concern with the spiritual development of both hemispheres of the brain is reflected in Spiritualism's effort to define itself as both a science and religion; science being a function of the left brain and religion a function of the right brain. But Spiritualists do not envision the hemispheres developing separately in different events or portions of the service. Rather, they work for their active collaboration in the performance of a single ritual.

Spiritualist Science, Magic, and Religion

Spiritualism came about in the mid-nineteenth century as a reason-based, mechanistic worldview began to trickle down to the masses from the elite intellectuals who first formulated its premises during the Enlightenment. As Keith Thomas (1971) argues, this period not only marked the rise of a scientific consciousness but also the decline of the magical thinking that had filled the world with witches, ghosts, angels, and demons in the centuries before.⁸ In the nineteenth century, Spiritualism sought to brand itself as both a science and a religion; a practice that continues to the present day. In fact, what they were offering was a “third way” that navigated around—or perhaps more aptly between—these two seemingly opposed factions.

In his comprehensive analysis of the rise of secularism in Western culture, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor contends that the notion of a mechanistic universe which took hold during the Enlightenment period, led to a feeling of control and invulnerability among its growing number of adherents. However, Taylor observes

⁸ The conflict between science and religion is just over four-hundred years old, beginning with Copernicus and Galileo and resurfacing with the discoveries of Darwin. Bertrand Russell (1935) contends that religion and science come into conflict when science appears to disprove religion's understanding of the natural workings of the universe. According to Russell, “[a] purely personal religion, so long as it is content to avoid assertions which science can disprove, may survive undisturbed in the most scientific age” (ibid.: 9). But certain vociferous religious factions have persisted to make claims against evolution (Antoun 2008 and Stevenson 2012). And, to make matters worse, certain scientists have begun to suggest that their theories have excluded the possibility for the existence of God in the universe (Stevenson 2012 and Krauss 2012). Enlightenment pioneer Isaac Newton studied theology as well as optics and physics and even experimented with alchemy (Westfall 1993). And theoretical physicist Albert Einstein believed that religion was necessary to give meaning, purpose, and direction to scientific pursuits, arguing that “[s]cience without religion is lame, religion without science is blind” (1950: 26). But Newton's and Einstein's inclusive ideology has been eclipsed by more polarizing forces in the contemporary debate.

that this invulnerability “can also be lived as a limit, even a prison, making us blind or insensitive to whatever lies beyond this ordered human world and its instrumental-rational projects” (2007: 302). Tempted by a scientific worldview, individuals remained reluctant to depart with the religious systems that gave meaning to their lives and experiences. And so, “in the face of the opposition between orthodoxy and unbelief, many... were cross-pressured, looking for a third way” (ibid.). Thus Spiritualism—while it sought to identify itself with both science and religion—was, in fact, a third way around orthodoxy and atheism that sought to provide meaning and purpose while taking into account a more mechanistic or scientific understanding of the universe.

In America, the notion that science contradicts religion has been the focal point of what is popularly called a culture war.⁹ Anthropologist Stephen J. Gould (1997) and cultural theorist Barbara Herrnstein Smith (2009), have sought to reconcile the warring factions by arguing that science and religion have their own separate contributions to make to humanity and need not disagree. Gould contends that science and religion are “nonoverlapping magisteria:” science concerns itself with the “empirical constitution of the universe” and religion with the “proper ethical values and spiritual meaning of our lives.” Smith argues that, contrary to the notion that science is inherently logical and religion based on irrational belief, both science

⁹ Richard Dawkins (2006), a prominent atheist and evolutionary biologist, has argued that the theory of evolution negates the possibility for the existence of God and undermines the premise for religious faith. For Dawkins, religion is a harmful delusion and an excuse for bigotry that should be dispensed with because it has been disproven by science. Dawkins' views have been supported and expanded upon by cultural critic Christopher Hitchens (2007) and anthropologist Scott Atran (2002) among many others. Some of the more scholarly responses to Dawkins' claims contend that Dawkins fundamentally misunderstands religion and so is not properly equipped to adjudicate its truth claims or cultural value (Eagleton 2009 and McGrath 2005).

and religion are founded on assumptions “that cannot be tested empirically” and so are a matter of “ontological taste” (ibid.: 124).

Spiritualists see no need for science and religion to exist in conflict, but they are not content with the solutions offered by scholars like Gould or Smith. Rather than allowing these categories of human endeavor to exist separately, Spiritualists seek to bring them together, redefining them in the process. Spiritualists understand their practice to be both a science and a religion. According to the NSAC website, “Spiritualism is the Science, Philosophy, and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World.”¹⁰ The terms “science” and “religion” reference conventional academic understandings of these concepts but they are practiced in a way that renders them more flexible and cooperative. And so there can be said to be a more or less distinctly Spiritualist understanding of these two terms.

J. Wentzel van Hussteen and Khalil Chamcham critique the tendency of combatants in the religion and science debate to characterize both as “monolithic blocks of unchanging nature” (2012: 5). In fact, science and religion are deeply variegated in practice and perspective depending on the discipline or denomination in question. Spiritualists work through their own conceptualizations of science and religion in order to develop a cooperative model that incorporates their understanding of both. These concepts differ in significant ways from their definition in academia, and so the Spiritualist use of the words “science” and “religion” need to be understood from a Spiritualist perspective. From an academic standpoint, religion

¹⁰ www.nsac.org (accessed 18 October 2012).

tends to be founded on faith, realized or actualized through rituals, the reinforcement of a community of believers, and the interpretation of religious doctrine. Religion scholar Rodney Stark roots religious belief in an “assumption” and Eagleton argues that “the certainty appropriate to faith is not, to be sure, of the same kind as that of well-entrenched scientific observation” (2001: 112 and 2009: 112). Spiritualists trace their belief back to a judgment of what they understand to be empirical evidence. Spirit messages purport to demonstrate the legitimacy of spirit contact in a way that can be affirmed through rational evaluation. As medium and CSE minister John Otey told the congregation one Sunday, “I don't believe in God. I know there is a God” (18 September 2011). This is the basis for Spiritualists' assertion that their practice is also a science. Science, in the Spiritualist context, is the pursuit of objective proof.

But Spiritualist objectivity is not absolute insofar as Spiritualists assume the truth of spirit communication. Stark argues that “[s]cience is a method utilized in organized efforts to explain nature, always subject to modifications and corrections through systematic observations” (2001: 105). Spiritualism is an organized effort to explain the supernatural. And, insofar as it is able to access divine truths, it limits the degree to which its concepts can be modified. While Spiritualists maintain a general avoidance of specific dogmas and creeds, their practice is based in an unshakeable commitment to the idea that the spirits of the dead can and do communicate with the living. Having contacted the spirits, the reality of the spirits becomes a firmly held belief, a supernatural knowledge that transcends all doubt. The effort to objectively prove the reality of spirit communication is, in fact, an effort to test whether an

experience that is subjectively true for the medium is also subjectively true for the individual receiving the message. Thus, Spiritualist science is better thought of as the pursuit of intersubjective experience—confirmed through the consensus of two or more participants—rather than objective proof. Just as the concept of religion bends in Spiritualist practice to admit empirical confirmation of divine truths, the concept of science bends to allow for intersubjective rather than objective proof. Spiritualist mediums do not prove the way that a scientist proves by charting a well-reasoned and documented case but rather amaze like a trapeze artist by overcoming spectator's capacity to doubt their skill.

The Spiritualist concepts of science and religion owe their flexibility to the fact that they are almost always experienced through live performance. Admittedly, there are volumes of Spiritualist theology and formal investigations of spirit phenomena that Gehman, Knoll, and others reference at book clubs and in debates about Spiritualism's claims (see Appendix A). But these books are meant as a buttress to the performance, which is responsible for demonstrating Spiritualism's validity. Newcomers almost never arrive at the CSE with any knowledge of the literature on mediumship or Spiritualism. Rather, their first encounter with Spiritualism's scientific and religious dimensions is through the performance of the message and healing service. And this experience—not any reading or well-reasoned argumentation—is meant to form the basis for their belief in Spiritualism.

In the context of Spiritualist performance, science and religion have their counterparts in entertainment and ritual. As a science, Spiritualism seeks to offer

empirical proofs of its claims for its audience to judge. Entertainment precipitates criticism, and so when newcomers engage with Spiritualism as a science, seeking to have something proven to them and judging the evidence provided, they are engaging with a kind of entertainment. This connection is made more explicit if we imagine removing the spirit messages from a church service and placing them in a theater or on a midway—sites where messages were often performed in the nineteenth century. The performance persuades through a show of skill which creates a feeling of amazement similar to the kind of response inspired by daredevils or circus performers. Like a mind reader or carnival guesser, the medium's accuracy amazes the audience and this serves as a source for entertainment. I use the term “amaze” rather than “prove” because of the connection that Spiritualists implicitly draw between entertainment and the evidential function of their rituals.

The effort to amaze connects Spiritualists to the tradition of magic. “Magic” is a term anthropologists use to identify practices that achieve verifiable results in the temporal world through the use of supernatural power. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah defines magic as “ritual action that is held to be automatically effective, and ritual action that dabbles with forces and objects that are outside the scope, or independent, of the gods” (1990: 7). In their work with spirits, mediums' “automatically effective” demonstrations seem to fit Tambiah's conceptualization. The resemblance is even more striking when one considers Kenneth Burke's definition of tribal magic as “primitive rhetoric.” According to Burke, magic was a “pragmatic device that greatly assisted in the survival of cultures by promoting social cohesion” (1969: 43). Magic is

a persuasive tool used to assuage anxieties by allowing supernatural powers to intervene in temporal affairs in order to maintain order. The fact that mediums utilize their spirit performances in order to persuade participants to release their anxieties over their mortality and become converted members of a church could also be interpreted as a form of rhetoric.

Both Spiritualism and certain shamanic practices rest on the belief that the spirits can make actual, verifiable changes in the temporal world either through healing or messages, and both rely on rituals to achieve those transformations. Margaret Stutley (2003) identifies three features central to all forms of shamanism: “belief in the existence of the world of spirits,” “the inducing of trance,” and the treatment of psychological physical disease. Belief in a world of spirits and the treatment of disease in the healing service are both easily recognized in Spiritualist practice. The inducing of trance is less obvious, especially since shamanic trance tends to be ecstatic, i.e. dramatic and uncontrolled. However, as I shall explain in the coming chapters, the ability to enter an altered state of consciousness is central to the medium's ability to communicate with and heal through the power of the spirits. The notion of the shamanic calling, recorded by various scholars including Joan Halifax (1979), Michael Harner (1980), Merete Demante Jakobsen (1999) and Richard Schechner (1973) among many others, is another significant facet that many mediums share with traditional shamans. Shamans are called by visions. These visions are generally brought on by illness or personal tragedy, and they will haunt the shaman until the shaman answers the call by taking up the shaman's profession. Gehman's

near-suicide is one of several stories I have collected from mediums who similarly identify a moment of calling. Otey was in a plane crash that brought him into a direct and immediate relationship with a higher power, and Saide was visited by spirits with increasing frequency throughout her life until she finally relented and began to pursue mediumship.

The difference between Spiritualist performance and magic begins to show itself when we consider the role of a divine power in Spiritualist practice. In his seminal essay, "Magic, Science, and Religion," Bronislaw Malinowski stressed the immediacy of magic as opposed to religion: "while in the magical act the underlying ideal and aim is always clear, straightforward, and definite, in the religious ceremony there is no purpose directed to a subsequent event" (1948: 38). Similarly, Rodney Stark argues that magic "locates its rewards here and now, while religion locates its most valuable rewards... in another realm" (2001: 112). However, for Spiritualists, the spirits request an extended commitment from participants and provide rewards like spiritual growth or encouragement that cannot be placed in the here and now. A more distinctly magical Vodou ceremony, for example, might promise to bring an errant lover home after an affair whereas a Spiritualist meditation might connect the participant with the spirits so that the participant will become a more spiritually evolved individual in this life and in the afterlife.

For newcomers, a medium's spirit messages may have little consequence beyond its capacity to amaze, but for initiates and converts, the ritual performance of spirit messages is a way to connect with a higher power in order to become more

spiritually attuned. The spirits may be able to help with quotidian problems, but their real purpose is to assist the living in realizing divine truths about the order of the universe. Unlike circus performers or mind readers, Spiritualists amaze in order to inspire religious conviction. As a religion, Spiritualism is oriented toward an audience of participants who no longer experience the performance of spirit messages or healing as something to be judged but rather as something to be believed. According to Gehman, “Spiritualism is first a science and philosophy and then it becomes one's religion” such that, over time, “mediumship comes to be understood as sacred” (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). Spiritualist science is for newcomers, and Spiritualist religion is for converts. Religion is understood as the pursuit of personal or subjective belief. Spiritualist religion assumes maximum belief and minimum criticism on the part of its participants. The closer a performance comes to functioning in the religious mode, the more it incorporates its participants into the performance. It no longer demonstrates for an audience but rather practices with co-performers.

The Intersubjectivity of Spiritualist Belief

Spiritualists begin at the place of subjective human significance in order to reveal the objectivity of individual human meanings. While their evidence, rooted as it is in the realm of subjective human experience, can never attain to the level of objectivity that tends to be attributed to observations of the natural world, they reveal the objectivity that rests within human meaning. In other words, Spiritualist ritual

discovers the science within religion. Maurice Merleau-Ponty—a seminal philosopher in the field of phenomenology—argues that, “mythical consciousness does indeed open on to a horizon of possible objectifications” (1962: 341-342). As such, myth is not “an explanation of the world and an anticipation of science” but rather “a projection of existence as an expression of the human condition”(ibid.: 341). Myth, like spirit communication, reaches for objectivity through its projection into the world and finds the linkages between human meaning and the material conditions of existence. The movement of faith that allows Spiritualists to accept mediums' proofs is an abandonment of absolute objectivity as a condition for knowledge, but that does not imply the acceptance of absolute subjectivity as the only possible condition for understanding. As Edith Turner argues, neither subjective belief nor objective rationality are an adequate path to understanding purportedly supernatural phenomena: “It has to be said that rationality by itself cannot come up with an explanation of these matters. 'Belief' is also an unsatisfactory path toward it. Here in the problem of rationality and experience is revealed both the dual nature of the seer's perception and a picture of the slipperiness of the attempt to explain...”(1992: 174-175). Spiritualists discover spiritual truths within a space that Merleau-Ponty theorized as the only possible philosophical condition for the perception of any phenomena, material or immaterial—a space free of absolutes that recognizes the objective qualities of individual human experience.

Methodology: My Spiritualist Path

My research was conducted over the course of eighteen months from January 2011 to June 2012 with follow-up fieldwork in December 2012 and January 2013. During that time I attended weekly church services and participated in nineteen workshops and events at the Center and two workshops in Lily Dale. Workshops varied in length from several hours to a full day, and some were conducted over the course of several days or weeks. Topics included developing mediumship, spirit healing, physical mediumship, psychic and telekinetic skills, and the human aura. Book clubs were also a significant source of data. They were held several times in the Fall and in the Spring, and I participated in seven sessions. I spent ten days at the Lily Dale Assembly—a Spiritualist community in western New York state—where I attended healing services, messages services, and devotional services. And, in the last phase of my research, I joined a home circle—a ritual during which Spiritualists gather in order to achieve their own direct contact with the spirit world. I attended on Tuesdays from February 2012 through May 2012. I conducted informal interviews with twenty-four mediums and congregants and formal interviews with nine. Informal interviews took place after services or events or on breaks during workshops. Formal interviews were conducted online, over the phone, and in person. In addition to participant observation and interviews, I conducted archival research on the history of Spiritualism and Spiritualist ritual from 1848 to the founding of the National Spiritualist Association in 1893 and concluded my research with a three hour interview with Anne Gehman at her house in Springfield, Virginia.

When I first walked into the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment in Falls Church, Virginia one cold Sunday morning in January 2011, I had very few preconceived notions about whether or not the kind of spirit communication performed by Spiritualist mediums was legitimate. I believed that these communications were interesting, and that they opened up unique ways of understanding religion and ritual in contemporary America. I believed that Spiritualists believed in the power of their rituals to bridge the gulf between the living and the dead and establish contact with a world of spirits. This was enough to fuel my curiosity. I came to Spiritualism guided by the intention to discover how these rituals functioned and how they inspired belief in their participants. But I quickly discovered that learning how and why Spiritualists believed in spirit communication would require much more than interviews and observation. Indeed, as I found out my first day in the church, simply watching and recording would not be an option. Not only was group meditation an all-but-required part of the weekly Sunday service, but I was actively solicited into the ritual of spirit communication when I received my first public spirit message from my grandfather during the day's message service. If I truly wanted to understand how Spiritualism functioned, I would have to try the rituals myself, which necessitated my opening myself to belief.

A month into my research, the significance of full participation was brought to the fore when I attended a workshop at the CSE on auras—the nonphysical aspects of an individual that reflect their emotional and spiritual state—and auragraphs—pictures taken by a special camera through which the aura is made visible. Each

participant had an auragraph taken before a meditation and then again afterward. This exercise was meant to demonstrate how meditation can alter the aura by expanding it out from the body. It never occurred to me not to participate in this exercise. To sit back and watch would be to miss the crux of the workshop: the experience arrived at through meditation that causes the aura and auragraph to change. While I took notes on what my fellow participants shared about their meditations afterward, no account could capture the fullness of a firsthand experience of Spiritualist meditation. If I wanted to achieve the fullest possible understanding of how this exercise functioned and its relationship to belief, I had to experience the meditation for myself.

There has been a movement in anthropology over the past four decades to utilize a more reflexive stance toward the researcher's own subjectivity. This emphasis within the study of religion and ritual has tended to find a home within the disciplinary subset of cognitive anthropology, with researchers endeavoring to experience the mental and existential states of being that their informants achieve through their rites and ceremonies. Research on religious belief and ritual performance undertaken by Paul Stoller (1987) Karen McCarthy Brown (1991), Edith Turner (1992), and Katherine J. Hagedorn (2001), for example, has worked to create the deepest possible immersion into the experience of their informants, blurring the boundary between researcher and informant. In order to achieve this immersion, these researchers have often had to set aside their self-identification as researchers and “turn off” their observer function. As Edith Turner explains, to observe and analyze

would be to miss something significant about the practice at the center of any ritual study that includes supernatural phenomena (1992: 150).

The choice to abandon the researcher's consciousness in order to experience a given ritual requires that the researcher actively choose to believe as his or her informants believe. At the aura workshop, my choice to participate fully in the meditation required a willingness or intentionality to believe that there was such a thing as an aura, that the auragraph could be used as a tool to represent that aura, and that meditation could change my aura. If I had withheld belief on any of these points, I could not have experienced the ritual as my informants did and I might have corrupted the exercise by failing to effect the appropriate change in the auragraph. Shutting off or releasing my skepticism and doubt has been central to many of the meditations, exercises, and rituals that I have participated in since. Indeed, a general release of these distancing attitudes has been essential to my understanding of what it means to be a Spiritualist. For Spiritualists the analytical mindset—which they refer to as 'being in your left brain'—cuts off the individual's ability to experience the spirits. And a Spiritualist can be defined, in large part, as one who seeks to achieve contact with the spirits. In order to experience the spirits as my informants did and truly understand how and why this experience fosters their system of belief, I have had to follow an identical path.

My quest to understand Spiritualist belief is best characterized as an effort to follow the path of a Spiritualist convert. My first six months at the Center mirrored those of any new attendee pursuing an interest in Spiritualism. I attended services

every Sunday, signed up for Saturday workshops, and attended Friday book club meetings. During the ensuing year of fieldwork, I was able to advance from the experience of a newcomer to that of a convert. I learned that many members had traveled to Lily Dale—a Spiritualist community of mediums that offers workshops in all things Spiritualism from June through September—and so I arranged to spend ten days visiting and participating in workshops there. When I returned, I registered for Gehman's course in spiritual unfoldment and began spending my Tuesday nights learning the basics of healing and mediumship—a requirement for all who aspire to join the CSE as members. At home, I began to practice meditation and healing on a regular basis, as recommended by Gehman's teachings. In my second year of field work, I elected to become a member of the Center and joined a weekly home circle with some of my classmates in order to develop my ability to commune with the spirits.

These efforts have not only afforded me an insider's perspective on the rituals of Spiritualism, they have also been essential to my ability to gain access to the community at the center of my research. While there was never any direct resistance to my presence as a researcher, community members regularly voiced concerns about the nature of my project. A month into my research, Gehman approached me at a book club meeting to relay the concerns of some participants that I was taking too many notes, which gave the impression that I was “studying” the congregation. The implication was that I would be writing a judgmental or condescending account of Spiritualist practice. For the next month, I left my notebook in the car whenever I

attended CSE events and recorded my experiences immediately after each event as best as I could. When I finally decided to bring a notebook back into the Center, my pad was much smaller and I was more selective about how often I wrote in it. Indeed, community members' trust was sometimes difficult for me to earn. Even after a year of research, in which many members and regular visitors had come to confide in me, a Center board member voiced her hope—half-jokingly—that I would “write good things” about the community during my induction ceremony into the Center's membership.

Generally, despite my frequent requests, Spiritualists were not inclined to participate in structured and recorded formal interviews. This is not to suggest that they were unwilling to share their experiences with me once I had earned their trust. Rather, they preferred to talk at the Center after a service or on break during a workshop or before a meeting. The fact that I had difficulty arranging interviews had less to do with my informants' unwillingness to speak with me and more to do with their heavily-scheduled modern American lives. Indeed, many of the interviews I managed to conduct were performed over the internet, a forum that allowed my informants the greatest possible flexibility in terms of finding the time to address my questions. My informants weren't necessarily reticent to share. Rather, they were unmotivated. For most Spiritualists, there is no particular urgency as far as sharing or explaining their beliefs. Since Spiritualists lack a strong tradition of proselytizing, they believe that converts will find them and, consequently, make little effort to solicit or persuade others to join. While they frequently expressed their hope that my

project would help to share Spiritualism with a wider public, on an individual basis they had little motivation to publicize themselves or their practice.

A large part of Spiritualists' wariness and disinterest in proselytizing stems from their cognizance of the judgmental misconceptions that tend to be projected onto their practice. I have often heard members express their concern that non-Spiritualists label them as “kooks” or “occultists.” I struggled at first to earn the community's trust because, while Spiritualists are apt to welcome newcomers, they did not necessarily identify me as a newcomer. I was not, in their view, a spiritual seeker. I had come to study Spiritualism, not to pursue a spiritual path, and this suggested to them that I may have possessed a skeptical stance toward their practice. In order to earn my informants' trust, I had to prove that my research was also a step along my own personal spiritual journey. I learned early that participation, voluntary or involuntary, was significant to demonstrating my earnestness. When I received messages at services and events, members would often approach me to ask about my message and share their thoughts on receiving or giving messages. I had the same experience at workshops. After a meditation or exercise, participants would ask about my experience and then share theirs.

When I related my experiences to participants, I never articulated whether I had deemed a given ritual valid or invalid, and I never exaggerated or lied. Truthfully, my experience varied considerably in my time studying with the Spiritualists. Many of the messages that I received from mediums in the first months of my research were too vague to be especially persuasive. It wasn't until about six months into my

research—during which I had seen, heard, and felt a great deal of what it meant to be a Spiritualist—that I began to suspect that the mediums I was working with might possess an ability that exceeded anything I could do myself. However, these opinions did not matter as much to my informants as my full participation. The fact that I was willing to have these experiences indicated to my informants that I had, intentionally or unintentionally, entered onto their spiritual path. Spiritualists believe that their principles will be proven valid to anyone with an open mind. My ability to demonstrate an open mind suggested to my informants that I would eventually affirm Spiritualism's validity. I had to demonstrate to my informants that, in addition to being a researcher, I was also a potential convert to the community of Spiritualism.

I brought a series of questions to this research that I will explore in depth in my analysis. How does the phenomenology of performance explain the ways in which belief and doubt co-exist in a single ritual, and how does this interaction propel initiates along the path to Spiritualist conversion? The phenomenology of performance centers on the subjective experience of the audience or the performer or, in my case, both the audience and the performer and takes that firsthand experience as a jumping off point for an analysis. What participants in a performance think, feel, or sense is taken as valid and worthy of consideration no matter whether it has any corollary in the empirical world. What does it mean to convert to the community of Spiritualists? What role do spirit messages play in encouraging newcomers to convert? Is conversion simply a product of a persuasive message or does the choice to convert require something other or more than amazement? And what does

Spiritualism have to offer its converts once it has persuaded them of the messages' validity? What role do spirit healing and meditation play in the life of a Spiritualist? Is healing an effort to amaze as the messages do, or does it have another function? Finally, what does it mean to practice Spiritualism and to be a practicing Spiritualist?

In the second chapter, I consider the history of Spiritualism and address how contemporary practice formed out of the stigma attached to early Spiritualist performances. I argue that physical mediumship—which purported to make spirits objectively available in the empirical world—proved less persuasive as a means for attracting converts to a committed system of religious thought. Trance mediumship—in which mediums channeled the voices of the spirits through their own bodies and vocal chords—proved a much more effective means of developing and conveying a religious message that precipitated commitment among a group of believers. In the third chapter, I address spirit messages which are performed primarily for the benefit of non-converts or newcomers. I consider how the messages persuade participants of their legitimacy and how they transition willing newcomers into nascent Spiritualist converts. In the fourth chapter, I consider the healing service in which initiates become participants in the laying-on-of-hands healing ritual and, through their participation, are able to have a firsthand encounter with the spirits by means of physical sensation. In the fifth chapter, I address unfoldment or the process through which individuals become converted Spiritualists. I discuss how Spiritualists become agents in achieving their own firsthand encounters with the spirit world by

participating in classes and rituals that allow them to perform spirit communication with each other.

Chapter 2: History: Discovering Spirits that Could be Believed

A Contentious Legacy: Early Spiritualism

Spiritualism as a defined movement began on March 31, 1848 when Kate and Margaretta Fox first communicated with the spirit of a deceased peddler at their home in Hydesville, New York. It blossomed into a national and international movement through the 1850s but lost the public's interest with the advent of the American Civil War through a variety of factors which have been debated up through the present day. Some mediums attempted to recapture the public's fascination after the war with increasingly theatrical performances, but charges of fraud steadily drove the movement to the cultural fringe. Spiritualism came to be understood as a form of entertainment by the American public and an alternative religion by a much smaller group of dedicated adherents. In this chapter, I consider how and why Spiritualists developed a practice attempting to fuse their concepts of science and religion. Spiritualism has been a fundamentally performance-based practice from its inception, reliant on the act of performing spirits for groups of potential converts in order to maintain itself. But finding a place for the spirits within this practice that did not undermine their legitimacy from a religious or scientific perspective was a challenge that shaped the meaning and method of Spiritualist practice. I address how Spiritualists sought the acceptance of cultural authorities in the fields of mainstream science and religion and why, ultimately, they had to develop a practice that operated independently of both institutions. This rejection led Spiritualists to develop more

malleable conceptualizations of science and religion that they could join together through intersubjective belief.

Marilyn Awtry is a twenty-first century medium and a historian in her late seventies. Every year, she visits the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment (CSE) for the Victorian-themed séance held in honor of Spiritualism's birthday and is a member of the CSE's ministerial council. I first met her in Lily Dale where I took her class on developing mediumship. A prolific author who has written accounts of Spiritualist philosophy and history, she is currently developing a three-volume series on the pioneers of mediumship. When I asked Awtry how Spiritualism has changed since the mid-nineteenth century when the movement first began, she said, “the pioneers were devoted. They traveled across country on horse and buggy to promulgate Spiritualism. They sat consistently to unfold their mediumship. They established the motto '[a]s the Sunflower turns its face to the light of the sun, let Spiritualism turn humanity to the light of truth.' They sought to have Spiritualism become 'the light of the world.' I dare say most seem to have forgot that someone paved the way for what they have today” (pers. comm., 15 August 2011). Contemporary Spiritualist mediums often look back wistfully at the early days of Spiritualism as a sort of golden age of spirit communication, often with a focus on early Spiritualism as a time of intense commitment, purpose, and belief. These believers, as Awtry suggests, hoped to precipitate widespread conversion. Spiritualism first began in the late 1840s and rose to prominence in the 1850s. Mediums like Kate and Margaretta Fox,

Andrew Jackson Davis, and Cora Richmond traveled the country and toured Europe, giving demonstrations of spirit communication at lecture halls, theaters, and the houses of prominent aristocrats. According to historian Ann Braude, anywhere from 300,000 to 11 million Americans participated in some form of Spiritualist practice before the American Civil War (1989: 25-26). The incredible range can be attributed to Spiritualists' lack of institutional organization. Many practiced Spiritualism without necessarily belonging to a specific group or identifying themselves as Spiritualist.

Awtry estimates that only about 200,000 people in the world are members of a Spiritualist church or center today (2010). Historians tend to refer to the decades after the Civil War as the era of Spiritualism's decline, and they paint a picture of early Spiritualism that contrasts with Awtry's understanding. Geoffrey Nelson argues that “[f]ormal organizations came too late to prevent a decline, and were unable to recover many of the great losses that had already been sustained” (1969: 27). Spiritualists' inability or unwillingness to establish churches in the 1850s was a missed opportunity that resulted in an irrevocable loss.¹ R. Lawrence Moore offers another argument, based on Spiritualists' dedication to proving the validity to spirit communication to participants: “[i]n their craving for scientific respectability, they neglected philosophy. Had all their supposedly indisputable evidence proved true, they would have filled the world with spirits without illuminating at all a spiritual dimension in man” (1972: 498). In other words, Spiritualists were too preoccupied with the act of

¹ Bret Carroll attributes Spiritualists' unwillingness to organize to an egalitarian ethos that was averse to establishing hierarchical organizations (1997). Leaderless movements took on increasing popularity in the nineteenth century, particularly in the formation of communes. Agricultural communes like Brook Farm focused on shared labor, and some religious communes like the Oneida Community focused on overturning the patriarchy of the traditional nineteenth-century family (Preucel and Pendery 2006 and Sandee 1971).

spirit communication to consider what it meant. For Awtry, the nineteenth century was a heyday of committed mediums illuminating a new philosophy to the world and developing a committed following. For Nelson and Moore, early Spiritualists failed to cultivate any meaningful community or develop any philosophy worth ascribing to.

In their assessments of Spiritualism's legacy, Awtry, Nelson, and Moore differ fundamentally because they focus on the development of two different genres of Spiritualist performance. In Spiritualism's first days, there was an inherent tension between spirit communication as a source for entertainment and spirit communication as a source for religious belief which has persisted to the present day. Often, a performance of spirit communication served both purposes at once, although they rested uncomfortably together. This tension bifurcated the movement into two separate but interrelated performance practices: physical mediumship and trance mediumship. Physical mediumship sought to amaze by producing increasingly dramatic empirical spirit phenomena: disembodied taps, musical instruments played by unseen forces, and even visible spirits bodies. Trance mediumship, by contrast, focused exclusively on verbal performance. Trance mediums sought to persuade their audiences of the value and legitimacy of their communications through a lecture, given while purportedly under the control of a spirit. Both practices hoped to precipitate belief and conversion in their participants, but only trance mediums succeeded. Physical mediums, hounded by accusations of fraud, dissipated and more or less vanished both from the national stage and from Spiritualism. Trance mediums developed a following that ultimately became the National Spiritualist Association of

Churches, and their practice transformed into the mental mediumship practiced at Spiritualist churches across the country. Why was physical mediumship unable to inspire religious belief among its participants, and what was trance mediumship able to provide for its audiences that physical mediums could not?

The Birth of Modern Spiritualism

The Fox sisters received America's first Spiritualist messages in western New York state. In the nineteenth century, western and northern New York were essentially frontier territory, and served as remarkably fertile ground for the birth of new religions, ultimately earning special designation as the “Burned Over District” for the religious fervor displayed there. The Shakers, Perfectionists, Mormons, and Millerites (predecessors to the Seventh-day Adventists) all either got their start or found a home in New York state (Jenkins 2000: 31-38; Sandee 1971: 157-165, Cross 1950: 291). The Fox family—husband John, wife Margaret, and children Kate and Margaretta—moved in to their new home in Hydesville, New York—a rural farming community outside of Rochester—on December 11, 1847, and began hearing mysterious taps throughout the house shortly afterward. On March 31, the Foxes established contact with the “Hydesville rappings,” as the sounds came to be called and set off a series of events that led to an international movement. Kate, age 12, sounded a series of taps with her knuckle which were then repeated exactly by the mysterious taps. This prompted her sister Margaretta, age 15, to ask the taps to “[d]o as I do. Count one, two, three” to which the taps responded in kind (Dewey 15).

Following this first exchange, the Foxes' neighbors gathered in the house and the group proceeded to question the taps.² A neighbor by the name of William Duesler, who was present for much of what occurred in Hydesville, provided this account of what happened next: "I went into the cellar with several others, and had them all leave the house over our heads; and then I asked if there had been a man buried in the cellar, to manifest it by rapping or any other noise or sign? The moment I asked there was a sound like a falling stick... in the floor on the bedroom over our heads." The party searched the rooms but found nothing had fallen and no one had entered the house. They dropped a knife and fork in an attempt to replicate the sound, but to no avail. The group moved back down to the cellar where they dug until they hit water. The taps told them to wait until Monday to try again, and indicated that the party should dig in the center of the room (Dewey 1850: 17). The Fox's son, David, a farmer who lived two miles from of his parents' cottage, "went alone into the cellar" three weeks after the night of March 31 and called over the alphabet³ in order to discover that the spirit belonged to "a peddler who had been murdered in that house some years previous" (see Figure 3).⁴ The group's digging eventually turned up traces of human hair, quicklime, and fragments of hand and skull bones (see Figure 4).⁵

² *Saturday Evening Post*, 4 February 1860

³ The process of "calling over the alphabet" entails shouting out the letters of the alphabet one at a time and recording the letters that are answered with a tap. Spiritualists frequently utilized this method in order to discern messages from the spirit world.

⁴ *Circular*, 5 February 1866

⁵ *Saturday Evening Post*, 4 February 1860. For a more thorough report of the Foxes' initial spirit communications in Hydesville see Earl Wesley Fornell, *The Unhappy Medium* (1964).



Figure 3: The Lily Dale Museum where artifacts from the Fox home including the Fox family Bible and a peddler's case are preserved. Photograph by Katie Lesser.

The behavior of these first witnesses reveals the challenges that faced spirit communication from the outset. The people of Hydesville had no cognitive basis for understanding taps as spirit communication. This is not to suggest that they lacked an epistemological framework for the existence of spirits. According to cognitive psychologist Justin L. Barrett, “our natural cognitive systems find minded agency even where there is not any” which leads him to conclude that “humans have natural, intuitive impetus for postulating” supernatural beings like gods and spirits (2012: 148). In other words, it is not difficult to understand how the taps' first witnesses decided to ascribe them to a potentially supernatural agent; however, as these witnesses' behavior reveals, the novel nature of a supernatural agent choosing to communicate through disembodied taps was not especially persuasive and required

further investigation. In nineteenth-century America, there was no established tradition of communicating with the spirits of the dead. In other words, these first witnesses might have been inclined to interpret the taps as the product of a supernatural intelligence, but they would have had no predisposition to identify that intelligence as the spirit of a deceased person or to conclude that the taps were, in fact, a form of communication. In nineteenth-century America, spirit communication itself—let alone through these means—would have been largely unfamiliar, except as a fictional concept.⁶

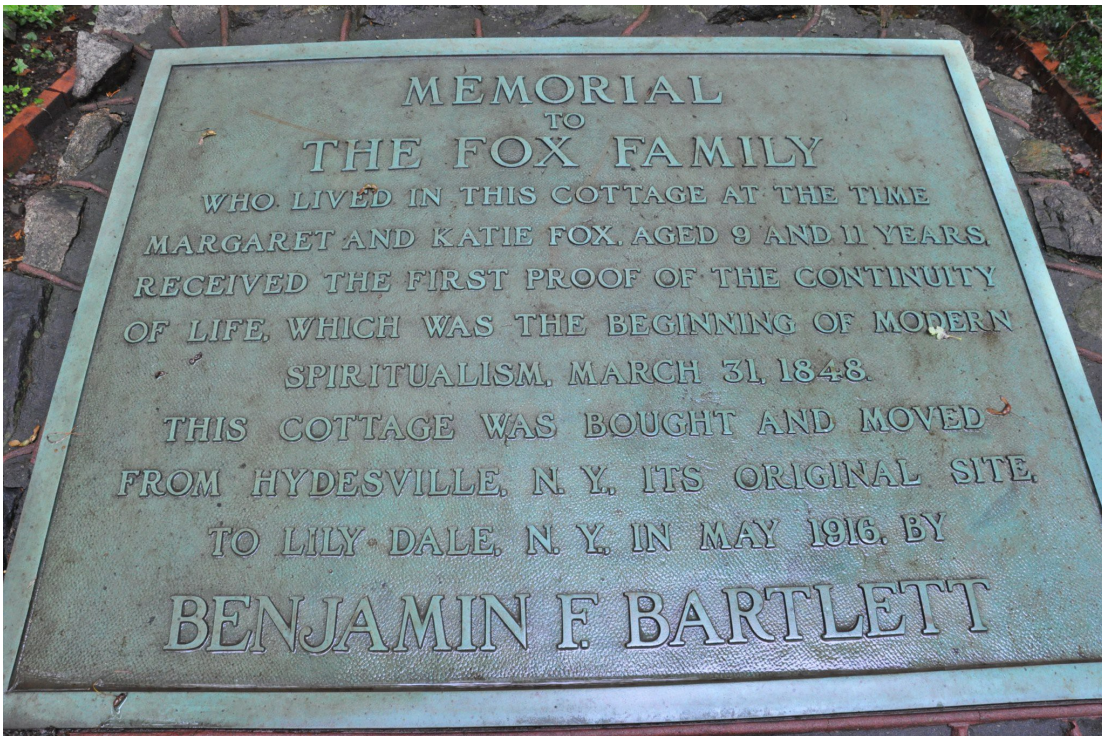


Figure 4: A plaque dedicating the former site of the Fox cottage which had been moved to the Lily Dale Assembly where it was preserved until it burned to the ground in 1955 under uncertain circumstances. Photograph by Katie Lesser.

⁶ This is not to deny the long-standing tradition of ghost belief stretching back through most of recorded time. What the Foxes introduced was the notion of volitional contact with the spirits of the dead to American culture. Rather than ghosts appearing entirely on their own terms, the Foxes were able to actively reach out into the spirit world as voluntary agents.

The taps lacked “ante-predicative” validity, i.e. they were not persuasive in and of themselves. According to Merleau-Ponty, underlying perception is a “realm of primary opinion” that either provides us with a certain faith in our perceptions “or which may, on the other hand, become bogged down in our private appearances” (1962: 400). The fact that the taps required further validation indicates that they were not substantial enough as evidence to stand on their own. The participants in these initial rappings did not trust their legitimacy and needed to investigate the taps' claims as far as they were able to before they could affirm them. The taps had to prove themselves by answering questions intelligently and producing hard evidence, i.e. the corpse in the basement. Then and only then could they begin to assume the identity they professed as spirit communication.⁷

In the period immediately following the taps' first sounding, the Foxes and their witnesses determined that the sisters possessed a supernatural power that was responsible for allowing the spirit of the deceased peddler to communicate with the living.⁸ This brought the taps more or less securely into the realm of what anthropologists call “magic.” According to Ronald Grimes, magic “is not a pejorative term but a way of referring [to] rites that aim to effect.... If a rite not only has

⁷ Although the taps were the act of a purported spirit, I prefer to speak of the taps as acting rather than the spirit in order to reflect the fact that the individuals interacting with the taps were unsure of their source, especially at their first sounding.

⁸ “It may here be remarked, that when the sounds first began to attract attention, and during the investigation at Hydesville, they were heard in the presence of any member of the family. They were also distinctly and repeatedly heard by persons who were examining the house when every member of the family was absent. It was not long, however, before the noises were made more freely in the presence of the two youngest girls...” Dewey (1850: 19-20). For those who accept the explanation later offered (and subsequently denied) by Margaretta Fox that the sisters had been defrauding their neighbors and were manufacturing the taps with their toes, the fact that the taps ever sounded without the sisters present is perhaps the greatest mystery related to these events. There is no account that explains in any greater detail how the sisters came to be associated with the taps as mediums.

meaning but also works, it is magical” (1982: 49). In the case of the Foxes' rappings, the effect was the exposure of a crime, but, throughout Spiritualism's history, participants sought relief from the loss of a loved one, reassurance about their own immortality, and even the recovery of buried treasure.⁹

What anthropologists call magical acts—sometimes called miracles—are a fairly common feature of the origin stories of a variety of religions. At the wedding at Cana, Jesus Christ turned water into wine. His other miracles, although often more serious in purpose, were no less magical: multiplying the loaves and the fishes, walking across water, curing blindness and leprosy, and raising Lazarus from the dead (John 2: 1-11, 6: 16-21 and 11: 1-44). Miracles abound in narratives recounting the lives of many religious founders including Moses, Buddha, and Joseph Smith. Moses parted the red sea and brought the plagues to Egypt; the Buddha sat under the bodhi tree for forty days and forty nights without food, water, or sleep; and Joseph Smith translated golden tablets revealed to him by the angel Moroni (Exodus 7-13, Rahula 1959, Pierce 1899). The fundamental difference between Spiritualism and these various practices is that Spiritualists have based their belief system on performing these early miracles—in principle if not in practice—over and over again. Spiritualists have worked to continue to achieve the miraculous effect of contacting the dead through mediums since 1848. This is what made Spiritualism innovative in the modernized West, but it is also what exposed Spiritualism to failure. According to

⁹ In this scathing criticism of Spiritualism's excesses, Davis says, “[i]t is an abuse of such exalted intercourse to try to make [mediumship] subservient to personal ends. The sad misfortunes which befall many mediums and *some* Spiritualists, can be traced directly to this outrageous selfish practice. With many the practical uses of mediumship are adopted as purely mercenary. Fortune-telling and treasure-hunting characterize the faith and conduct of too many believers. And the direful consequences of these crimes are upon us all” (1877: 212-213).

Stark, “because religion is able to confine its major explanations to a realm not subject to empirical inspection, unlike magic it can be immune to falsification” (2001: 114). Magical practices, although they are often a central feature of many religions' founding, “are unnecessary, and often inimical, to the success of religious organizations and as religions mature they tend to cease such undertakings” (ibid.).

The biggest problem for the early Spiritualists' commitment to magic was that their spirit phenomena came into existence over a century after the decline of magic. The Hydesville rappings were, essentially, an attempt at a resurgence or revival of a defunct mode of thinking. According to Keith Thomas, in medieval Europe, “belief in the potency of Church magic was often fundamental to popular devotion,” but around 1700, European and American colonial culture began to break with a long tradition of magical thinking and magical practice that explicitly accepted the existence of the supernatural (1971: 50 and 663). The supernatural was, by and large, relegated to the realm of religion which, according to Stanley Tambiah, was “first and foremost [understood] as a system of beliefs” (1990: 19). In his extensive study of the secularization of European and American culture, Charles Taylor observes that “we are widely aware of living in a 'disenchanted' universe; and our use of this word bespeaks our sense that it was once enchanted” (2007: 28).

Spiritualism and the Conflict with Mainstream Religion

According to Max Weber, American religious culture developed out of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination according to which, “[t]here was not only no

magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means whatever.” (1958: 105). God's purposes and motives were beyond the understanding of humankind, and God offered no miracles to bridge the gap between the temporal and the divine. Mainstream Christian clergy refused to accept spirit manifestations, despite the efforts of some of Spiritualism's most theologically gifted practitioners. Andrew Jackson Davis had visions predicting spirit communication nearly a year before the events at Hydesville, and the rise of mediumship in the 1850s proved the veracity of his clairvoyant powers to many of his contemporaries. Davis was born in a small town in New York. In 1846, he began a series of lectures delivered in trance to friend and scribe William Fishbough, and, in 1847, those lectures were published as *The Principles of Nature* (DeSalvo 2005). Having moved to the nearby city of Poughkeepsie, Davis's visions earned him the moniker “the Poughkeepsie Seer,” and his daily demonstrations were witnessed by many prominent New Englanders, including Albert Brisbane and Edgar Allen Poe.

Originally surfacing as an unaffiliated visionary, when Davis realized the connection between his philosophy and the spirit manifestations that had begun to surface throughout the country, he paused from his philosophical work on the five volume *Great Harmonia* to travel to the home of Eliakin Phelps in Stratford, Connecticut, where spirit manifestations attended both a young boy and a young girl. From his experiences there, Davis developed a philosophy of spirit communication and mediumship that he published as *The Philosophy of Spiritual Intercourse* effectively linking his prophetic vision into the wider movement. In his *Philosophy*,

Davis outlined the need for “a demonstration of the truth of immortality” to an increasingly scientific and religiously-deprived American culture (1875: 18). He argued that the recent advent of spirit communication had been brought on when a long-standing public fear of evil spirits was finally overcome by a “much more general and powerful...love of God;” a Christian God who Davis contended was also the author of mediumship (ibid.: 75). He also identified the mechanics of mediumship, the “material nature” of spirits, and best practices for a séance or circle. Many of these ideas have remained within Spiritualist practice and philosophy to the present day.¹⁰

Despite the roots Davis set down for Spiritualism's religious legitimacy, America's various religious authorities were scandalized by an interpretation of spirit communication which they derived, in part, from a disputed account of the Foxes' first communication with the taps. There were several interpretations of the details of that evening which Spiritualists have debated for more than a century. Robert Dale Owen—a Spiritualist adherent, diplomat, and politician—published an encyclopedic volume on paranormal history in 1859 which included the Hydesville episode. According to Owen, Kate recognized that the taps were replicating a noise her father was making with a window sash, prompting sister Margaretta to call out “Here, old Splitfoot, do as I do!” at which the knocking “instantly responded” (Owen 288). This seemingly innocuous request led to the theory that Margaretta had invoked Lucifer by calling out 'old Splitfoot,' a potentially nefarious reference to the devil's cloven

¹⁰ Although I might conclude that this maneuver was an effort on Davis's part to attain greater publicity by linking himself to Spiritualism's popularity, his long-standing connection to Spiritualism ever afterward and refusal of any central place of authority within the movement suggests a more complicated motive.

hooves. The Christian establishment latched on to Margaretta's 'Splitfoot' in charges that all spirit communication was, at root, the devil's work.

A concerned citizen sent a letter to the editor of the *Christian Union* when his wife and daughter went to visit a medium who came to his village in 1851. Persuaded of the legitimacy of spirit phenomena, he voiced his steadfast conviction that “I should resist all such demonstrations, as I do all disease, as from the devil.” The editors, affirming the writer's conviction cautioned that, “[u]nbelief, by making a false issue of the [spirit] invaders, i.e. denying their reality, instead of trying their character, is preparing itself for a fright.”¹¹ From a Christian perspective, the spirits were illegitimate, not because mediums were manufacturing them but because they were the work of Satan's minions. Religious critics grew so vociferous in their condemnation that mediums often felt compelled to profess their spiritual innocence, i.e. that their communications were neither consciously nor unintentionally evil. Margaretta Fox told the Spiritualist publication *The Banner of Light* that a Catholic cardinal in London had tried to persuade her to “abandon this 'wicked work of the devil’” and enter a convent (Awtry 2010: 63). From a Christian perspective, one had to believe in Spiritualist phenomena because they had to be actively and conscientiously labeled and decried by all true believers in Christ; to deny their existence would be akin to ignoring the devil's perilous influence in the world. These

¹¹ *Christian Union*, 7 December 1851. The editors align Spiritualists with contemporaneous heretics including Universalists and Perfectionists, a sect founded by John Humphrey Noyes that believed Christ had already established the kingdom of heaven on earth and humanity had simply failed to recognize it. R. Lawrence Moore elaborates the broad degree to which Spiritualism was dismissed on religious grounds, observing that “important newspapers crusaded against mediums, preachers denounced them, and politicians ridiculed them with thunderous rhetoric.” Moore quotes an oft-repeated sentiment in the *New York Times* that Spiritualism was a “subversion of all respect and devotion to the only true faith” (1977: 27).

denunciations assured that, if Spiritualism was to survive, it would have to do so outside the purview of the nation's dominant religion.

But, lacking the approval and authorization of an established institutional power, the rappings would be unable to overcome Americans' distrust and lend their phenomena credence. According to a classic definition by Malinowski, the efficacy of magic is based on the fact that it is “made by tradition” (1954: 19).¹² This leads Margaret Stutley to conclude that the shaman “is a conservative” who “supports the established order” and is a “completely integrated part of the culture” (2003: 6). Tradition was essential because it provided the system of thought that relieved the phenomena of their ambiguity. In the “realm of primary opinion,” community members were conditioned to accept the validity of whatever the shaman, wizard, or witch was performing and to trust in its efficacy. The feats of shamans were not attended by the kinds of doubts that drove participants to seek out further validation for the legitimacy of American mediums' spirit communications (Frank 1967: 42-44).¹³ According to Merleau-Ponty, all of our sensations are bound up with an intentionality such that we prepare ourselves pre-consciously for experiences we are about to have, thus coloring the experiences with our own unconscious attitudes and motivations (1962: 246).¹⁴ In contrast to the work of shamans, however, Spiritualist

¹² Malinowski specifically referenced Spiritualism, along with its sister movements Theosophy and Spiritism, saying of the three that they were “stale revivals of half-understood ancient creeds and cults” of magic (1954: 69).

¹³ Although shamans who had not yet proved their ability were subject to skepticism, participants' initial predisposition to any shaman's practice was to believe unless the shaman had proven her or himself incapable.

¹⁴ “The relations of sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleeper to his slumber: sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting... I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible take possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red.” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 246)

phenomena were born into a world in which most magical practices had “either disappeared or at least greatly decayed in prestige” (Thomas 1971: 668). And so, at the formative moment of their sensory reception, the taps foundered in phenomenological ambiguity.

Spiritualism and the Conflict with Scientific Authority

Unable to find validity in the established authority of Christianity, Spiritualism appealed to a new authoritative force that had enjoyed a relatively recent rise to prominence in the Western world: science. According to R. Laurence Moore, “Spiritualism became a self-conscious movement precisely by disassociating itself from any occult tradition and appealing, not to the inward illumination of mystic experience, but to the observable and verifiable objects of empirical science” (1972: 477). Stark defines science as “a method utilized in organized efforts to explain nature, always subject to modifications and corrections through systematic observations” (2001: 105) Science functions differently from magic in terms of the way it validates “perception.” Whereas magic incorporates magical phenomena into a system that precludes doubt before any perception occurs, science is a second-order system formulated on and after perception. From a phenomenological perspective, science posits itself as superior to the “subjective” perceptual phenomena it observes by positing derivative “objective” theories that claim to transcend immediate experience.¹⁵ At Hydesville, witnesses sought exactly this kind of second-order

¹⁵ Since we can never escape our immediate perception and all second-order knowledge is based on immediate perception, this superiority is largely illusory. Merleau-Ponty does not posit his philosophy as being antagonistic toward science. He considers himself to be properly contextualizing science so that humanity can enjoy a more honest interpretation of its findings. This

verification in the form of intelligent responses to their questions and the hard evidence of a corpse.¹⁶

But, the validation achieved in Hydesville was idiosyncratic and left too much to chance. Consequently, the Foxes turned to more rigorous scientific testing in order to affirm the sisters' abilities. In the months following the initial rappings, Kate and Margaretta were investigated by teams of scientific experts from various disciplines at public venues and colleges. An account in the *Liberator* describes one of these tests: “the young ladies were insulated on a platform sustained by glass yet the rappings were as palpable as ever. To prove, however, that they were not peculiarly charged with electricity, they approached their hand to extremely delicate magnetic needles.”¹⁷ Another report describes “an appointed committee of ladies, who took the young women into a room, disrobed them and examined their persons and clothing, to be sure that there was no fixtures about them that could produce the sounds” (Dewey 1850: 25).¹⁸ These efforts resemble the initial steps taken at the Fox home to prove that the unusual sounds were not made by dropping utensils: after the knife failed to match the sound, Mr. Fox and his visitors tried a fork. With each

is made especially clear in a series of radio addresses he gave in 1948 that were published in a short volume (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 31-36).

¹⁶ Bret E Carroll argues that the séance itself was a scientific act, designed to render the most technically effective religious experience possible: “[t]he scientifically designed séance exemplifies a nineteenth-century strain of religiosity that has been called 'technical religion.' That is, Spiritualists joined other Americans in a search for the best technical means of producing religious feelings” (1997:137).

¹⁷ *Liberator*, 16 July 1852.

¹⁸ This is an interesting inversion of the tactics and ideology of medieval and early modern witchcraft trials. Witches were stripped to discover the devil's mark which purportedly proved that they possessed supernatural powers (see, for example, the recommended procedures for a witchcraft trial in the *Malleus Malificarum*). The Fox sisters were stripped to assure that their supernatural power could not be explained through a natural mechanism. The witch was condemned for her supernatural ability. The Foxes would have been publicly excoriated if they had demonstrated that they did not have supernatural ability.

utensil, they were only proving what the taps did not sound like. Like the scientists attempting to locate an origin for the taps that attended the sisters, each guess represented a failure to enter the taps into an explanation.

Indeed, the scientists were unable to prove what the Spiritualists hoped they would prove: that the taps were evidence for spirits. When chemist Michael Faraday experimented with the phenomena of table tilting, in which mediums could make furniture move around a room through an invisible force, he hoped to discover a new physical force (Moore 1977: 27). Unable to pinpoint a specific force, Faraday ended up dismissing Spiritualist phenomena entirely, arguing that “the results obtained were due simply to unconscious muscular action” (Doyle 1926 I: 164). Spirits were beyond science's domain insofar as they were supernatural, literally beyond nature. Although they manifested themselves in empirical ways, thereby subjugating themselves to scientific testing, the scientists could only explain the raps by natural means, and no sort of spirit explanation existed in nature.¹⁹ Many Spiritualists considered science's inability to prove any natural cause for the taps to be a validation of the taps' spiritual origins. But skeptics continued to assert that a perfectly natural explanation existed, it just hadn't been found yet. Scientists' failure to explain the taps kept them from entering science's second-order, objective system such that they fell back into the world of immediate perception and remained as ambiguous as ever.

Ambiguity clung to the phenomena even when they attempted to take on perfectly natural explanations. On October 21, 1888, Margaretta Fox appeared

¹⁹ Although Merleau-Ponty is speaking of the individual, his thoughts on incorporating new ideas into one's worldview can easily be applied to the scientific paradigm: “[i]f I try to imagine Martians, or angels, or some divine thought outside the realm of my logic, this Martian, angelic, or divine thought must figure in my universe without completely disrupting it” (1962: 463).

onstage at the Academy of Music in New York City to expose the fraudulence of her own career as a spiritualist medium. Kate clapped approvingly in an upper balcony as Margaretta demonstrated to her audience how she had made the infamous taps with her big toe. According to one account, Margaretta “produced before the audience, with her feet, distinct rappings, which appeared to come from different parts of the house, and declared that the whole spirit-rapping was a fraud from beginning to end.”²⁰ But this confession, billed as the “Death Blow to Spiritualism,” turned out to be anything but the last word on the raps. In the immediate aftermath, Spiritualists blamed Margaretta's alcoholism, and a year later Margaretta recanted her confession in the *Banner of Light*, claiming that a need for a money and the influence of a Catholic cardinal had led her to falsely proclaim against the phenomena (Awtry 2010: 55-68).²¹ While the recantation may be explained as yet another bid for notoriety and money, in 1904, after both sisters' death, the initial rappings were validated when a headless skeleton was discovered in the basement of their former home in Hydesville (Awtry 2010: 75). Four decades after the taps first sounded they remained controversial and, to many, uncertain, perpetually bandied back and forth between skeptics and believers.

At its inception, Spiritualism sought to be both a science and religion and found itself rejected by both. This wholesale repudiation split the movement into two camps, each committed to overcoming one of the two major cultural authorities that denied Spiritualists' claims. In the science camp, mediums doubled down on their

²⁰ *Christian Union*, 25 October 1888.

²¹ Interestingly, from a nineteenth-century American Protestant perspective, the move to Catholicism would have been viewed as lateral; transitioning from a cult of spirits to a cult of idols.

efforts to produce verifiable phenomena by pulling the spirits further and further into the temporal world through what came to be called physical phenomena. Not coincidentally, these mediums developed increasingly theatrical displays that heightened their audiences' critical faculties and led to gathering charges of fraudulence. In the religion camp, mediums like Davis allowed spirits to retreat almost entirely from the empirical realm into the trance experience of individual mediums. These mediums focused on developing a comprehensive philosophy of Spiritualism that could provide a persuasive foundation for spirit communication independent of any Christian authority. Their performances were more staid than theatrical and incorporated prayers and hymns that their nineteenth-century audience identified more closely with religious ritual than entertainment; inspiring belief rather than criticism. These efforts, operating toward separate ends within the same movement, negotiated the roles proof and belief would occupy in order to allow Spiritualism to become a sustainable practice.

The Rise and Fall of Physical Mediumship

Unable to satisfy science's second-order tests, physical mediums appealed to the more primal convictions of the senses. If objective observation could not find a place for the spirits, physical mediums sought to locate them at the more immediate level of direct perception. In this way, they hoped to subvert scientific authority by addressing themselves directly to common sense. Whether or not science could validate the phenomena, physical mediums implicitly held that their audiences could

not deny a firsthand sight, sound, or touch. There are two primary qualities that Merleau-Ponty identifies as giving validity to our sense impressions: intersubjectivity and “a consummate fullness” (1962: 394-395). Intersubjectivity, a given perception's ability to be perceived and confirmed by all co-present with it, inhered from the outset of the spirit phenomena. At Hydesville, the taps were as present for the Fox family as they were for the scores of neighbors who came to visit and question them. Consummate fullness, on the other hand, was not as apparent. Merleau-Ponty describes consummate fullness this way: “[m]y eyes and my hand know that any actual change of place would produce a sensible response entirely according to my expectation, and I can feel swarming beneath my gaze the countless mass of more detailed perceptions that I anticipate, and upon which I already have a hold” (ibid.: 395). Thus a “fullness” of perception, preferably a confluence of perceptions coordinating and confirming each other. Confined to a merely auditory perception, the taps at the Fox home lacked the substance afforded by a more complete sensory experience.²² And the vast majority of revisions that practitioners made to these initial communications appear to have been a direct response to this specific lack.

Following the events at Hydesville, the rappings quickly escalated into a series of increasingly fantastic and theatrical phenomena, purportedly achieved through the influence of spirits. One of the earliest and most common forms of these phenomena was table tilting in which furniture would move and levitate seemingly of

²² Merleau-Ponty says that “[t]he majority of hallucinations are not things with different facets, but short-lived phenomena, such as pricking sensations, jolts, explosions, draughts, waves of cold or heat, sparks, points of bright light, glowing lights or silhouetted shapes.” (1962: 397). Even though the taps were confirmed by scores of witnesses as audible, their affinity with these sorts of “short-lived phenomena” very likely made them more susceptible to doubt in the minds of Spiritualism's adherents and participants.

its own accord. John Townsend Trowbridge—a popular American poet, novelist, and playwright who famously toured and wrote about the former Confederate States in the first years of Reconstruction—published his experiences with a rapping session that included an episode of table tilting:

It was a heavy centre table. The doctor [Hayden] and I were on opposite sides of it, the medium at my right hand. I have quite forgotten what had been going on when the raps became so unusually loud that the doctor said, jokingly, 'Can't you knock any louder than that?' Instantly there came so tremendous a blow in the massive mahogany that I cried out, excitedly, 'Hayden, you kicked it!' 'Did I?' he said, at the same time moving his chair back two or three feet another resounding blow followed, towards the wall. Immediately the table, as if impelled by it, rolled towards him on its casters and tilted over upon him, the leaf resting on his knees (1908: 530).

British novelist Arthur Conan Doyle, an avid Spiritualist who composed a two-volume history of the movement, reported tables levitating during a séance, sometimes independently of any direct physical contact from the medium (1926 I: 57-58).

Tables were not the only objects that spirits were capable of moving. The Davenportes, a pair of touring brother mediums, would allow themselves to be tied down into a chair and locked in a cabinet with musical instruments. Their participants would listen as the instruments made noises while the brothers were supposedly immobile.²³ Daniel Dunglas Home—who could make tables rise high above sitters' heads and even dance across the room—gained prominence through his demonstrations of spirits' influence on his own body.²⁴ Viscount Adare, a close confederate of Home's and attendee at over seventy séances, recorded a series of

²³ *Flag of Our Union*, 18 February 1865.

²⁴ For an account of Home's furniture moving, see "Stranger than Fiction," *Cornhill Magazine* 2 (July - December 1860).

superhuman feats achieved by the medium with spiritual assistance including elongating his body, handling hot coals, and levitating (Dunraven 1871).²⁵ Occasionally, Home was even able to cause these phenomena to occur in participants at his séances, in one instance making a young woman become “palpably elongated to the extent of, perhaps, three inches” (ibid.: 23). And, in his greatest and most controversial supernatural feat, Home floated out of a third-story window and in again at another window, levitating in the open air above a London street (ibid.).

While these exploits were impressive, for the most part the spirits remained invisible. A new generation of mediums sought to satisfy this difficulty with manifestations: visible and tangible entities perceptible to all séance participants. Home served as a transitional figure in this regard. Throughout his career, he produced spirit hands that his participants found most impressive for their tactile presence. An account from *The Springfield Republican*, for example, describes that a spirit touched the writer's hand through a handkerchief, then removed the cloth and “the hand was laid on my bare hand.”²⁶ In another report from *Cornhill Magazine*, the writer grabbed a hand floating before him and discovered that it did not belong to any of the participants in the room.²⁷ These phenomena were attributed to what Spiritualists called ectoplasm.²⁸ Doyle describes ectoplasm as “the basis of all

²⁵ While the specific events at the séances that Dunraven attended were rarely reported on by other observers, they match the general tenor of earlier and later reports on Home's practice. See D. D. Home, *Incidents in My Life* (London: Longman, Gree, Longman, Roberts, and Green: 1863, Reprint, Secaucus: University Books, 1973); William Crookes, “Experimental Investigation of New Force,” *Scientific American* 25, no. 7 (12 August 1871); *Republican* (Springfield), 21 October 1854; and *Saturday Evening Post*, 2 April 1864.

²⁶ *Republican* (Springfield), 21 October 1854.

²⁷ “Stranger than Fiction,” *Cornhill Magazine* 2 (July - December 1860) 220-223.

²⁸ The word “ectoplasm” appears to have been borrowed from cellular biology in which it was used to refer to the behavior of single-celled organisms. The term suggests the turn that physical mediumship took toward science (“ectoplasm, n.”. *OED Online*. December 2012. Oxford

physical phenomena,” emanating from the spirit world that “takes on in an instant any shape with which it is impressed by the spirit” (Doyle 1926 I:16). Visible ectoplasm began to surface in the photographs of William H. Mumler as early as 1861 (Doyle 1926 II:128). In a séance, ectoplasm issued from various parts of the medium's body in a murky cloud and, in some cases, took on a discernible form like Home's spirit hands (*ibid.*: 96-97). By the 1870s, full-form mediums like Florence Cook had taken the practice to its natural conclusion. Cook was among the first to regularly produce the full spectral body of a spirit (in her case, a spirit named Katie King) who would float around and interact with participants while the medium was confined.²⁹

In what might be described as the climax of this endeavor to produce increasingly impressive physical phenomena, the Eddy family constructed their own séance room on their homestead in Chittenden, Vermont, where they purportedly produced the full spectral bodies of more than three hundred spirits.³⁰ These spirits would appear one at a time, numbering around a dozen at each séance. They included American Indians, the Eddys' relatives, relatives of séance participants, and famous Spiritualist mediums. They emerged in near-darkness and only occasionally came near sitters, but were generally described as looking more or less as they would have in life. William Eddy, following a procedure observed by most full-form mediums, produced these materializations by first entering a “cabinet,” the term Spiritualists used for any area sequestered away from the séance's spectators, hidden from their view. From within this cabinet, spirits would emerge in full visible form for the

University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/59446?redirectedFrom=ectoplasm> [accessed January 25, 2013].).

²⁹ *Oneida Circular*, 29 July 1874.

³⁰ *The Daily Graphic*, 3 November 1874.

spectators to interact with while the medium remained in the cabinet purportedly in trance, channeling the necessary energies to produce these beings. The Eddys were not the first to create materializations, but the ambitious degree of their practice made them an anomaly even among full-form practitioners. With full-form manifestations still fairly new to Spiritualism, the striking nature of the Eddys' séances made them pioneers in the genre.

On September 17, 1874, Colonel Henry Olcott arrived at the Eddy farm to research the validity of the Eddys' manifestations. Olcott, a signals officer for the Union during the Civil War who served on the committee to investigate Lincoln's assassination, was on an errand for one of several New England newspapers that had taken an interest in the unusual happenings at the Eddy homestead. Olcott's choice to conduct his investigation at the Eddys' home on the Eddys' terms marked a shift in the scientist's approach to spirit phenomena. Spirit phenomena often fell outside the purview of scientific investigation because they required investigators to examine the phenomena under less than sterile conditions. As Moore notes, many scientists—especially chemists and physicists—complained that their “training in observation... left them no better equipped than anyone else to detect” if spirit phenomena were fraudulent, particularly since spirit phenomena required a degree of freedom that precluded investigators from establishing the more precisely controlled conditions of a laboratory (Moore 1977: 27). Spirits had to be experienced on their own terms if they were to be experienced at all. Home contended that if his audience was focused too intently on listening or watching for spirits that they would not appear and

encouraged sitters to engage in conversation as he fell into trance (Dunraven 1871: 7). Similarly, Doyle reports that manifestations could not occur in direct white light and that “[i]f a light is used, red is the colour which is best tolerated” (Doyle 1926 I: 260). While less than ideal for direct observation, these conditions had to be met for the phenomena to arise.

Olcott, following a path more akin to an anthropologist than a physicist or chemist, was willing to abandon the strictures of the laboratory setting and pursue his investigation in the environment that was most conducive to the phenomena. While still committed to uncovering the truth value of the Eddys' manifestations, Olcott was open to experiencing and testing them on the Eddys' terms. Olcott utilized the scientific process-of-elimination tests and observations that characterized the initial Hydesville episode—thoroughly searching for trap doors around the séance room, weighing and measuring spirits, etc.—but he incorporated these tests into a wider narrative of his own firsthand experience. He emphasized this shift in focus away from the purely scientific report by calling his letters to the press a narrative: “[m]y narrative, being in fact a narrative, not a mere report, of researches in the phenomena of Spiritualism, will embrace things personally experienced and things reported to me by credible witnesses.”³¹ Olcott did not identify himself as a scientist but rather as a layman observer. Indeed, he often pitted himself against scientists who would visit for a couple of days and then leave convinced that the various spirits produced were simply the medium William Eddy in disguise. To counter these scientists, Olcott referenced his own firsthand witnessing, citing the great variety of spirits that he had

³¹ *The Daily Graphic*, 20 October 1874.

seen at the Eddy homestead as his proof that William Eddy could not possibly impersonate them all. According to Olcott, these scientists' failure to account for the significance of immediate perception is what prevented them from grasping the spirits' presence. Olcott mockingly noted that “Alfred Wallace, of London, told a friend of mine that if a new fact were presented to Tyndall³² he would smell it, look at it, taste it, turn it over, handle it, bite it, and then wouldn't believe.”³³ From Olcott's perspective, scientists had lost their faith in perception and, by extension, lost touch with reality—dwelling exclusively in the limited realm of their second-order abstractions and generalizations. Spirits, whose validation rested most comfortably in the realm of immediate perception, were in this way beyond the scientists' ken.

To justify his opinion that the Eddy manifestations were legitimate, Olcott relied primarily on personal and second-hand reports of direct sensory contact with the spirits in order to create for his readers a sense of a legitimizing consummate fullness. Visual perception, which reached its greatest fullness for Spiritualists in these materializations, garnered a great deal of space in Olcott's narratives. In the case of the appearance of Achsa Sprague, a deceased trance medium, Olcott highlighted her visibility: “her form and the very play of her features [were] clearly revealed in the moonlight.” To further accentuate this visibility, Olcott noted that another spirit carried a Spiritualist journal whose title could be read by the audience.³⁴ The height, weight, complexion, general attractiveness, hair color, costume, and features of spirits surfaced regularly in Olcott's reports as he attempted to prove that these spirits could

³² John Tyndall, British physicist, conducted experiments in diamagnetism and thermal radiation and made a number of discoveries related to processes in the atmosphere.

³³ *The Daily Graphic* 23 October 1874.

³⁴ *The Daily Graphic*, 9 October 1874.

not possibly be William Eddy in disguise. And some spirits even took special care to display themselves. Honto, an American Indian spirit whose hair length and style varied considerably from night to night, exhibited her hair at one of her appearances: “[h]er hair tonight hung loose down her back and was unusually thick... This evening its great length and thickness were remarked by a lady spectator, whereupon Honto turned her back [and] let her luxuriant tresses hang over the platform railing.”³⁵

Although the visual nature of these spirits was significant to their believability, the Eddys' audiences often experienced more substantial sensory engagements. On the first evening of Olcott's stay at the Eddy homestead, Honto was performing her usual trick of producing shawls from thin air when “[s]omebody in the audience then asked if she would allow Mrs. Cleveland to feel the beating of her heart; whereupon she opened her dress and Mrs. Cleveland laid her hand upon the bare flesh.”³⁶ Like Home's spirit hands, the Eddys' spirits possessed a tangibility that made them available to multiple senses at once. These séances were also attended by aural phenomena far more spectacular than the Foxes' initial taps. Olcott described sounds of skirmishes, sailors at sea, and American Indian dances “so hideous that one easily fancies himself caught in the melee of a dance of live redskins about starting on the warpath.”³⁷ The intensity and frequency of these sensations formed Olcott's primary case for the legitimacy of the spirits, and these seemed to be the factors that most influenced Olcott's personal conclusion that the spirits were genuine.

³⁵ *The Daily Graphic*, 17 November 1874

³⁶ *The Daily Graphic*, 27 October 1874.

³⁷ *The Daily Graphic*, 13 November 1874.

But the sensory spectacle of these spirits was not enough to convince all of the Eddys' visitors. George M. Beard, a neurologist, was sent by the *Daily Graphic* to engage in his own investigation of the Eddy materializations. He concluded, with the unnamed scientists cited by Olcott, that the materializations were actually just impersonations performed by William Eddy. But his reasons for this conclusion had nothing to do with scientific abstractions. Rather, they rested on the same perceptual experience that Olcott appealed to in order to legitimize the spirits. According to Beard, the sensory fullness of the séance was far less satisfying than Olcott's narratives led readers to believe. First of all, the spirits did not come as close to spectators as Olcott described. Beard asserted that they always remained at least ten feet away on the platform where the Eddys' cabinet was located behind a railing. Second, the materializations took place in very poor lighting: "I saw that it was possible to personate [sic] any number of forms in that way and deceive almost any audience who would be content to sit in darkness."³⁸ Thus, no matter how far the Spiritualists went in attempting to provide a "consummate fullness" of sensation to validate the legitimacy of their empirical spirits, a shadow of ambiguity always lingered, in large part because the notion of what constituted a "consummate fullness" sufficient to legitimate a spirit's presence was a subjective judgment. Thus, Honto and her fellow spirits were no different from the simple taps in that they could not bridge the gap in tradition left by the end of magical culture. Instead, these displaced magical phenomena found themselves always already subjected to the doubts of participants. It seems a wonder, given this perceptual ambiguity, that anyone—let alone an

³⁸ *The Daily Graphic*, 9 November 1874.

esteemed investigator like Olcott—should have come to believe that these spirits were genuine.

After eighteen months of my own field research with contemporary Spiritualists, I suggest that a significant part of the reason Olcott, the people of Hydesville, and the countless others who affirmed the legitimacy of spirit communication came to believe was a result of the temporary community they formed with their fellow participants. It is important to note that Beard and the several scientists who visited the Eddys and left unconvinced came, according to Olcott, “skipping in for a day or so, and skipping off again.”³⁹ Olcott asked that “any fair man stay here a week or two, take his time to hear both sides of every story, and watch what occurs, and my word for it he will carry away food for reflection to last him the rest of his natural life.”⁴⁰ Over the course of several weeks, part of the experience participants came to have was that of their fellow participants. Immersed in a collective experience, they joined their perceptions to those of their fellows. In my field research, if the group around me at a séance or reading responded to a given phenomena as a legitimate spirit communication, I was more inclined to perceive the phenomena as they did. And if I disagreed, in the face of such a consensus I at least attempted to re-evaluate my position.⁴¹ It may be that, in the course of the séance, the group experienced what Victor Turner calls *ideological communitas*, binding them as a community committed to an affirmative interpretation of the Eddys' spirits

³⁹ *The Daily Graphic*, 23 October 1874.

⁴⁰ *The Daily Graphic*, 23 October 1874.

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty says, “[t]he perceived world is not only *my* world, but the one in which I see the behaviour of other people take shape, for their behaviour equally aims at this world, which is the correlative not only of my consciousness, but of any consciousness *which I can possibly encounter*” (1962: 394, italics in original).

(Turner 1969). It is no surprise that Beard characterized the participants at the Eddy séances as credulous fools or that this was one of the few accusations that Olcott was willing to honor with a response, passionately defending his fellow believers.

The trouble for Spiritualists was that this kind of legitimacy, based on a momentary interaction with a particular phenomenon, was fleeting. According to Spiritualism scholar George Lawton, “[i]n the attempt to meet the inadequacy of other faiths and techniques which promise too little, [Spiritualism] promises too much. Since magical prophecy and guidance must ultimately fail, Spiritualism must necessarily lose a great part of its clientele” (1930: 50). Speaking about magic in general, Stark warns that “compared with religion, magic [being subject to failure] is *very risky goods*” (2001: 114). Even though physical phenomena could only be validated through subjective experience, the fact that they manifested in an empirically perceptible form suggested an appeal to objective verification which they could never attain. These theatrical physical demonstrations called out to be judged rather than believed, and, as Olcott and Beard demonstrate, subjective belief was necessary to their affirmation. Olcott chose to trust his perceptions whereas Beard chose to doubt them. The trouble for physical phenomena was that they did not inspire the kind of trust that could endure and become religious conviction.

Olcott's trust, for example, did not result in an abiding commitment to physical mediumship or Spiritualism. While conducting his investigation, Olcott met the rising mystic Helena Blavatsky, who had come to experience the Eddys' manifestations for herself. Together with Blavatsky, Olcott founded a new religious

organization blending Western and Hindu mysticism, the Theosophical Society, sailing for India in 1878 to establish an international headquarters. Then, after growing disenchanted with Theosophy, Olcott abandoned American alternative religion entirely and became one of the first Western converts to Buddhism and a vocal defender of the religion in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), helping to found over four hundred schools, and rising to prominence as a national hero who continues to be honored to this day (Washington 1995: 27-28).

Why would Olcott, who was such a committed defender of the Eddys' phenomena, so quickly sever his relationship with Spiritualism and, ultimately, end his life as a Buddhist convert? Trance medium Andrew Jackson Davis provided one possible answer to this quandry. In his analysis of spirit communication, written after the rappings in Hydesville garnered national attention, Davis described a father who paid a visit to the Fox sisters in New York and communicated through them with the spirit of his deceased children:

many gloomy and erroneous thoughts associated with the realities of the 'world beyond the grave,' had frequently overshadowed and bewildered the brighter hopes and contemplations of the father; and those thoughts were, on this very impressive occasion, swept away; his hopes, no longer obscured, were converted into blissful realities, and already he had met his children on the threshold of the spirit-land (1875: 38).

In this way Davis acknowledged an important place for the empirical act of spirit communication in Spiritualist practice, i.e. to move believers beyond their despair and fear of death to a faith in the existence of spirits. But Davis warned that a faith based entirely in these phenomena could not stand for long:

Now, unless he be a man well versed in the philosophy of the soul's constitution and immortality...it is almost certain that the perplexing interrogations put by positively sceptical [sic] minds will eventually succeed in dissipating from the father's affections and judgment the beautiful, truthful, and soul-expanding conviction, that his children really spoke to him from higher spheres. ... In truth, without the requisite amount of philosophical knowledge, his faith could be rendered 'sure and steadfast' only by continual *additional* evidence in the *form* of [a] miracle; because miracle, and not philosophy, was the original cause, and would continue to be the foundation, of his beautiful conviction (ibid.: 40).

According to Davis, Spiritualists had much cause to worry if they did not succeed in establishing a philosophy that moved beyond the individual idiosyncratic "miracles" of spirit communication (Delp 1967: 43-56). Spiritualists had to create a system of belief that incorporated and elaborated upon these phenomena, giving them greater and more comprehensive meaning for their participants.

The Manifestations' Legacy

Physical mediumship has all but disappeared from contemporary Spiritualist practice. Today, demonstrations like the Eddys are unheard of and even less ambitious performances of physical phenomena are very rare. Physical phenomena have been all but dismissed as a fraudulent hoax, even within the Spiritualist community. While many mediums ascribe to the belief that physical manifestations are possible, they also contend that there are few if any mediums capable of producing them today. According to Awtry, "[p]hysical mediumship today is 99% people thinking they are doing something they are not. To me a lot is fraudulent. I haven't seen a true trance, trumpet, or materialization since the mid 1980s" (pers.

comm., 15 August 2011). According to Gehman, an industry persists in developing tools for false mediums to perform fraudulent séances.

I never have physical mediumship [at the CSE] except I might do a demonstration of table tipping or some of those things but with an explanation of what it is and the gist of it.... One time I got a catalog in the mail that sold ectoplasm, they sold blindfolds for billet work they sold all that stuff. Boy I sent that back and I said don't send me anything again. Take me off your mailing list. I want nothing to do with this. And I called also and the woman said 'Well, aren't you a medium?' And I said, 'Yes I am and that's why I don't want any of this. The people you're selling this to are not mediums.'... So I don't allow any physical mediumship (interview, 22 January 2013, Gehman house.)

It was not sufficient for Gehman to simply throw away the catalog in order to keep her name and reputation clean. The threat of fraud clings so closely to mediumship today that for Gehman to even be on the mailing list for such a company would incriminate her enough to discredit her. Gehman told me that she has never participated in a legitimate public physical séance, but, despite the fact that fraud runs rampant in physical mediumship séances even today, she believes that physical phenomena continue to have a place in contemporary practice:

Because I think it's a wonderful way for people to feel the energy and to see it. And for a lot of people it can give to them proof or evidence and they do that in their home circle and they're successful with it it gives even more meaning. I see it as sort of an elementary phase of mediumship but it's a nice way to start in unfoldment for some people.... I always like to point out too that there's never a counterfeit or a fraud unless there's first a real thing. So every time a phenomena is produced fraudulently there's first the real thing. And I have seen materializations. I have seen a table levitate completely. I have seen transfiguration. I have seen etherealizations. I've seen apports. Every type of physical phenomena I've seen and experienced but never in a public séance (ibid.).

I witnessed two physical phenomena performances in the course of my research: a transfiguration demonstration in Lily Dale and a table tilting séance at the

CSE. Transfiguration is a performance wherein the medium causes her or his face take on the appearance of various spirits, illuminated by a red light. At the demonstration I attended, the medium first entered a trance state, then we sat in darkness with a red light shining on the medium's face and called out whenever we saw a change in the medium's face. Although the strain the red light put on my eyes made it difficult for me to discern any changes, the group around me called out a variety of physical shifts. The medium aged and became younger. Some mentioned seeing earrings and glasses. The bald medium's hair got longer and shorter and sometimes the medium, who had no facial hair, sported a beard or a moustache. Purportedly, this was all achieved through the influence of ectoplasm which shaped these features around the medium's face (workshop, 2 August 2011, Lily Dale).

The table tilting was performed as part of a series of classes for Spiritualist initiates seeking to become CSE members. Gehman served as the medium, and we sat in groups of six to eight around a small round three-legged table with our fingertips resting lightly on the tabletop. After singing a song or two, the table began to tilt in every direction. The group put questions to the spirits controlling the table's movement, and the table responded by tapping out a response with one leg. One tap for no, two taps for yes. Participants began by inquiring after the identity of the spirit communicating through the table: whether the spirit was a relative of anyone present, who the spirit was related to, and the gender of the spirit. They would then ask if the spirit was happy or whether other spirit friends or relatives were also present. When one woman inquired whether her father was present, the table tilted far into her, and

Gehman said that this was a sign that the spirit of her father was hugging her. Gehman encouraged us to reach under the table after the séance to feel the “cold rods”—spirit emanations that caused the table to move and could be perceived as spots of cold air by the table's legs. (class, 8 November 2011, CSE).

The difference between these contemporary manifestations and the séances performed by nineteenth century mediums is the context. Today, physical mediumship is only ever performed for an audience of Spiritualist believers. At Lily Dale, almost all of the audience for the transfiguration demonstration were members of a Spiritualist congregation on pilgrimage to further develop their spirituality. And at the CSE, the participants were aspiring Spiritualist converts. Both demonstrations were preceded by an extensive lecture on the mechanics and meaning of physical phenomena. Physical mediumship is no longer practiced as an exercise in amazing and proving the validity of spirit phenomena but rather as an esoteric revelation of the power of the spirits to committed believers. In this way, Spiritualists have come to recognize the important role that belief has to play in validating spirit phenomena and communication. According to Gehman, “while it may have an entertaining quality to it, [table tilting] is not entertainment... Make sure you have a connection with the spirit and the infinite and with each other when approaching these things” (class, 8 November 2011, CSE). For Gehman, the purpose is the connection, not the phenomena. In the nineteenth century, physical mediums placed so much emphasis on proving the validity of their phenomena that their performances became a kind of magic show, seeking to amaze their audiences for the sake of amazing them. There

was no meaning or purpose beyond producing phenomena that they hoped would not be disproven. Contemporary Spiritualists have rethought physical mediumship by withdrawing it from service as an exercise in validating or proving the merit of Spiritualism. Rather, it is now an outlet for expressing and experiencing an already developing belief.

Geoffrey K. Nelson argues that, “[o]n a superficial level of analysis the Spiritualist movement declined as a result of exposures of fraud and deception which were made on a large scale during the later [eighteen] fifties” (1969: 82). He goes on to cite the rigor of Spiritualism's critics as well as the movement's lack of organization and alignment with unpopular social issues as the underlying causes for its decline. (ibid.: 82-83). Following Davis, I argue that fraud became a significant problem for physical mediums because their practice failed to establish a foundation of something to believe in that could stretch the significance of spirit phenomena beyond their immediate experience. In both mainstream and alternative religion, the effort to establish a philosophy from the outset has been a hallmark of sustainable practices. In addition to performing miracles, Christ also preached sermons and taught parables; following his own enlightenment, the Buddha developed the foundations for what would become the four noble truths and the eight-fold path to enlightenment; and Joseph Smith won converts and created a lasting religious practice through the distribution of the Book of Mormon (Matthew 5-7 and John 10; Rahula 1959; and Pierce 1899).

Without such a foundation, Spiritualism's phenomena were unable to inspire the commitment necessary for adherents to withstand criticism or form the kind of organization that might sustain the practice. Magic-based cultures possessed often elaborate belief systems to incorporate the phenomena produced by their adepts. Vodou, for example, has a pantheon of divine beings or loa, each attending to different aspects of human existence, and each requiring specific rituals for invocation and worship (Brown 1991). When Spiritualism came up against charges of fraud, there was no such philosophical foundation to defend or maintain it. Spiritualism suffered, yet again, from a disconnection to a more substantive tradition. But how could a philosophy and tradition arise when Spiritualism's adherents were so focused on immediate experience? How could any sort of philosophy or religious system come out of a movement so dependent upon empirical phenomena?

Trance Mediumship and the Quest for Belief

In *The Fountain with Jets of New Meaning*, published in 1877, Andrew Jackson Davis declared that “SPIRITS EVEN NOW RARELY COMMUNICATE WITH MEN” or women for that matter (1870: 212, 219, capitalization in original). Even more damningly, Davis asserted that the spirits were exhausted with physical mediums and were retreating from the world of the living: “Thus the grand use of spiritual intercourse—‘a living demonstration’—is rapidly passing into recorded history. The refreshing shower from the spiritual skies is well-nigh over.” (ibid.: 214) Davis argued that Spiritualism may go on, but only under the condition that it

abandon physical phenomena in favor of a more philosophically grounded practice: “ideas and indestructible Principles, and *not* the wonders of communications with persons residing beyond the tomb, are the seed-causes of progress and reconstruction.” (ibid.: 231). Davis—who ultimately went on to found his own separate religion, Harmonialism—objected primarily to Spiritualism as a magical practice. He argued that the lack of any higher power in its dealings and the emphasis on solving temporal problems cheapened the spirits and degraded their potential to function as a source for enlightenment. Davis's complaints were merited, given the state of Spiritualism in the popular media. Over the series of months that Olcott reported from the Eddy homestead, he began to receive letters from readers, and disdainfully scorned their writers for requesting the sorts of information one might ask of a boardwalk fortune teller. One writer asked to know “the number that will draw the capital prize [sic] in the Louisville lottery next November,” and a female writer asked “what year and day in the month myself and my sister next oldest to me will be married.”⁴²

Spiritualism is understood as a progenitor of a variety of contemporary alternative religions and religious practices, particularly New Age religions (Pike 50-56). For Spiritualists like Gehman, what differentiates contemporary New Age practice from Spiritualism is Spiritualists' focus on spirituality: “We are not a New Age movement,” she said at her class for Spiritualist initiates, “I hope you recognize that since we go back to the 1800s. New Age is a stepping stone. It focuses on the ego. What I want. What I can get through the Law of Attraction. In Spiritualism we

⁴² *The Daily Graphic*, 9 October 1874.

expand our consciousness for love and life and joy” (class, 25 October 2011, CSE)

From Gehman's perspective, Spiritualists turn to the spirits in order to develop a more compassionate attitude toward the world whereas New Age practitioners utilize spirituality for selfish ends. While Gehman's attitude is somewhat reductive given the wide diversity of New Age practices, it speaks to the way contemporary Spiritualists conceive of the tradition on which their practice is founded. Gehman does not identify the venal, materialist use of spiritual power as an aspect of Spiritualism, historical or contemporary. Rather, it rose up in the twentieth century, wholly unconnected to Spiritualism. According to Gehman, today's Spiritualists are the inheritors of a religious legacy focused in achieving non-material spiritual enlightenment for the betterment of human kind, and she makes no link between her practice and the kind of Spiritualism lambasted by Andrew Jackson Davis. But, if the physical mediums were not the founders of the tradition that Gehman owns, who did develop a more distinctly philosophical Spiritualist practice?

Rising almost in tandem with the spirit rappings was a very different kind of mediumship: trance speaking. Davis was the first American trance speaker, channeling spirits roughly a year before the Hydesville rappings. He was also one of the relatively few men to practice spirit trance. Following Davis, trance communication was mostly performed by women. As Ann Braude pointed out in her feminist analysis of historical Spiritualism, “[i]n mediumship, women's religious leadership became normative for the first time in American history” (1989: 82). Women, who were thought to have “special spiritual sensitivities” were considered to

be natural outlets for spirits to communicate through. Normally barred from speaking publicly, the claim that spirits were speaking through them allowed women the opportunity to speak publicly without stigma. While many of these women began their careers working to prove the validity of their communications, over time they turned their focus to spiritual matters. Trance speakers were central to the creation of a uniquely Spiritualist philosophy and the organization of Spiritualism as a distinct religion during the period when the popular movement, dominated by the physical mediums, was in decline. Trance speakers were at the forefront of a movement within Spiritualism described by historian Bret Carroll: “many Spiritualists considered scientific proof as merely the starting point of their religiosity and devoted much more attention to the theological and metaphysical functions of spirits” (1997: 11). Why were trance communications better suited than physical manifestations to the formation of a religion, and how were trance speakers able to develop their own religious authority in the midst of a predominantly Christian culture that was hostile to their practices?

Cora L. V. Richmond was one of the earliest trance speakers to gain prominence and, ultimately, assumed a central role in the formation of the National Spiritualist Association (today, the organization continues as the National Spiritualist Association of Churches or NSAC) (Awtry 2010: 103). I take Richmond as a case study whose career traced a path very similar to fellow trance mediums including Victoria Woodhull and Emma Hardinge Britten, both of whom gained comparable prominence in Spiritualism's efforts to organize. Richmond was born Cora Scott in

1840 near the town of Cuba in Allegany County, New York. Her family subsequently moved to Wisconsin where she was raised (1895: 1-6). She discovered her mediumship when she fell into a trance state while writing on her lesson slate and composed a message from her mother's deceased sister (ibid.: 8-9).⁴³ Soon afterward, Richmond began channeling the spirit of a German physician and people from around the state converged on her father's house for treatment. She began trance speaking in 1851 when she was only eleven years old. At fourteen, she became a regular speaker for a Spiritualist society in Buffalo, New York, and at seventeen, she made a major tour of the country (Braude 1989: 86).

Trance speaking was almost exclusively a public event, performed on community stages, at concert halls, and in theaters. The public display equated trance performances with theatrical entertainment, in no small part because the act of judging the performance was sewn into the fabric of the demonstration itself. But there was also the suggestion of religious ritual in the way the performance was framed. After a short introduction, often including a prayer and hymn, the medium would take center stage channeling one or more spirits who would proceed to address the crowd. Usually, this central lecture or discourse was followed by a question and answer session. R. Laurence Moore describes the scientific frame that bracketed these events:

They invited the audience to choose a jury from among themselves that would in turn select a topic of discourse for the medium. Announcing the subject to the medium, the audience then gave her a few moments to enter trance. Once

⁴³ Richmond was fortunate for her parents' spiritual open-mindedness. By contrast, Daniel Home, who was raised by an aunt, was scolded for communing with devils.

in a trance, she would proceed to talk, usually for longer than an hour. The address constituted the test of her powers (1977: 113).

The topics chosen for trance lectures tended to be scientific (chemistry, physics, naturalism, or agriculture); theoretically beyond the medium's knowledge and intellectual capacity. From the audience's perspective, this assured that the medium would have to rely on the spirits—whose knowledge exceeded that of the medium herself—in order to adequately address the topic at hand. Jordan Paper, a scholar of mysticism, speculates that trance

mediums are frequently perceived as ignorant, if not mentally deficient. In part, this may be due to the fact that most mediums worldwide are female, and this valuation of mediums reflects traditional Western misogyny. Moreover, modern Westerners value individualism over subordination to society and tend to dread any state that would lead to their loss of personal identity, no matter how temporary (2004: 42-43).

If the medium could demonstrate a knowledge beyond her perceived intellectual ability, this would amaze her audience and prove her mediumistic ability.

On the surface, trance speaking was no different from spirit rapping or materialization in that it asserted its legitimacy as an empirical phenomenon. In one of Richmond's earliest published discourses, given at City Hall in Newburyport, Massachusetts on November 22, 1857 when she was just seventeen years old, her spirit voices were very clearly focused on proving their validity. Mindful of the critical gaze of her interlocutors, Richmond's spirits were careful not to make any absolute claims about their knowledge: “we shall endeavor to take an impartial view of the subject, not giving our opinion as infallible, but simply as our own, in

accordance with our highest conceptions of truth.”⁴⁴ The test rested primarily in the reason and logic of her verbal performance: “We think this will be conceded by all minds who reason from the strict rule of philosophy and of logic. We think it must be conceded by all who view the human soul as being the child of Deity, by all who claim to worship a heavenly Father and a divine God.”⁴⁵ Thus, Richmond's spirits professed to have a verifiable, philosophical basis that the assembled should be able to confirm. Indeed, her success with agriculturalist and chemist, James J. Mapes—who received “marvelous scientific answers” to the questions he put to Richmond's spirits—was essential to the initial recognition and fame she garnered as a trance speaker (Doyle 1926 I:134).

Although Richmond's spirits subjected themselves to “scientific” testing, they assumed a more authoritative space in her audience's perceptual experience than the spirits manifested by physical mediums, and this inherent power ultimately served as a springboard to elevate Richmond's performance beyond the display of empirical and evidential amazement and into the realm of religious belief. After all, the spirits set their own distinctly religious terms for her interlocutors: her audience had to accept the existence of the soul and worship God if the message was to hold any validity for them. It is significant that, in the context of the trance speech, the spirits never produced any sort of physically perceptible sign. There was no mysterious spirit sound as in the case of the rapping. The spirit made no sound of its own, it used

⁴⁴ Richmond characterized her possession as a displacement in which her body was occupied by several spirits at once. Her spirits consistently refer to themselves in the plural “we” in her discourses and addresses. This discourse can be accessed online at the Cora L. V. Richmond archive. The archive is far from comprehensive, but allows access to rare early discourses. <http://www.interfacing.com/ImmutableDegreesFreeAgencyMan.htm> (accessed 21 March 2010).

⁴⁵ Ibid.

the medium's vocal cords. And there was no visual or tactile spirit body as with the materializations, the spirit hid completely within the medium's body. The signs of spirit presence were entirely confined to gesture and language, a system that, according to Merleau-Ponty, is itself the surplus of being beyond the natural world (1962: 229). Jacques Derrida took Merleau-Ponty's concept a step further when he contended that language in fact intervened between the individual and the natural world (1974: 70-71). Binding themselves to language allowed the spirits to maintain a strictly supernatural ontology. Science posits itself as superior to the phenomenal world, creating more persuasive “objective” judgments that are meant to transcend subjective, perceptual experience. By entering the world as perceptible phenomena, physical mediums' taps and materializations subjugated themselves to this higher-order scientific system. They became part of the world that science bases itself on and sets itself as superior to through its abstract theorizing. Trance speech, by contrast, was its own kind of abstract theorizing. It remained at the level of discourse in that surplus of being above natural existence. As such, it put itself on an even playing field with scientific theory and demanded to be judged in the same way that scientific theory was judged: through abstract argumentation.

Today, spirit messages are the predominant form of spirit communication among Spiritualist mediums, practiced weekly at Sunday church services and at public and private readings. Healing and home circles—the two other widely performed rituals—are, by contrast, practiced less frequently and by fewer participants. Like trance communication, spirit messages are a form of mental

mediumship. Mental mediumship is a product of the subjective experience of the medium whereby “information is impressed on the medium to give evidence of the” communicating spirit (workshop, 2 August 2011, Lily Dale). As opposed to physical mediums, mental mediums do not manifest any evidence from the spirit world that can be subjected to empirical judgment or analysis. For a spirit message, spirits communicate a sense experience that only the medium can feel and then the medium translates the message in her or his own words to an interlocutor. Spirit messages push the spirits even further from the empirical realm than trance communication. In a trance performance, audiences could hear the actual unmediated words of a spirit spoken through the medium's mouth. Spirit messages relegate the spirit to a dimension of being that is entirely unavailable to the audience such that they can only ever hear reports of the spirit rather than gathering any information from the spirit directly. In this way, Spiritualism has followed the trend first established by trance mediums in order to elevate the spirits to an increasingly abstract and transcendent designation.

Cora Richmond's Emergent Religious Authority

As Richmond's discourses developed from a science-driven theatre into religious rituals, they underwent another significant change. Early in her career, Richmond and her spirits had yet to establish their authority and, as a consequence, subjugated themselves to the dominant Christian framework. The prayer from a discourse given in 1857 began, “INFINITE JEHOVAH! Thou who hast ruled, and

who rulest, and who shalt rule forever; Thou who art our God, and our Father; who hast seen the end from the beginning of all time and eternity! We would bless and adore Thee tonight.”⁴⁶ Later she advised “that they who speak the name of the meek and lowly Jesus may follow in his footsteps.” But these ovations failed to garner the support of Christian authorities. A reporter from the *Christian Inquirer*, reviewing a performance given in 1858, found her discourse to be “chiefly a prolonged school-girl's essay, with allusions to the fragrant flowers, and bespangled with talk about the glittering stars. Now and then there was a striking sentence, but as a whole it was vague, sentimental and exceedingly weak.”⁴⁷ Despite American Christianity's censorious and even condescending attitude toward her trance lectures, Richmond continued to draw audiences and accumulate supporters which allowed her public practice to persist. In 1864, a Spiritualist report from the *Banner of Light* praised “the unusual ability which characterizes [Richmond's] efforts on the rostrum” and the “beautiful and practical lessons for a progressive life” that occupied her afternoon lecture.⁴⁸ Sixteen years later, after a farewell discourse ending a tour of London, the *Banner* reported that “the audience were much moved during the deliverance...and an expression of regret overspread the countenances of all when Mrs. Richmond's voice ceased.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶ It is worth noting that “Jehovah” is inclusive of a Judeo-Christian rather than strictly Christian perspective, although Richmond's next religious reference in the prayer explicitly excludes a Jewish perspective. <http://www.interfacing.com/ImmutableDegreesFreeAgencyMan.htm> (accessed 21 March 2010).

⁴⁷ *Christian Inquirer*, 21 August 1858.

⁴⁸ *The Banner of Light*, 24 December 1864

⁴⁹ *The Banner of Light*, 11 December 1880

Operating outside of the dominant religious authorities' approval, Richmond began to assume that her audience similarly considered their beliefs to fall beyond or exceed the boundaries of mainstream Christianity. In a discourse given in 1880, Richmond addressed her opening prayer to “thou Elemental Splendour! thou Light and Life! thou giver of every gift!,”⁵⁰ a much less explicitly Judeo-Christian identification of God than the earlier address to Jehovah. Her break with a strict Christian paradigm was even more apparent in her vision of a heaven in which she saw “among and with the angels Moses, Jesus, Brahma... praising God” and asked for a little child like Jesus or Krishna to be born to lead a spiritual revolution. Brahma and Krishna, Hindu religious figures, represented Spiritualism's universal acceptance of divergent religious ideals and established Richmond's authority beyond a strictly Christian base. By positing that God was universal and not strictly Christian, Richmond was able to lend validity to her more marginal Spiritualist practice with her own unique conceptions of divinity and God. In her teachings published as *The Soul in Human Embodiments*, Richmond further broke with the Christian patriarchy by suggesting a female aspect of the divine: “In all religions, either veiled or openly, there is the feminine Deity co-equal in Power, perfect in Love, half of the Dual life of the Deity” (Richmond 1888: 16). By the time Richmond took part in the National Spiritualist Association's founding in the 1890s, she had been giving discourses for four decades.⁵¹ These discourses essentially formed the philosophical and religious

⁵⁰ *The Banner of Light*, 25 December 1880

⁵¹ The National Spiritualist Association of Churches began with a convention held in Chicago, Illinois in September 1893, coinciding with the World's Fair. Richmond served as the vice president of the convention and was a co-signer for a document requesting the recognition of Spiritualism by the federal government (Awtry 1983: 5-7).

foundation for her own tradition such that, over time, her practice became self-validating. By appealing to the intellectual and spiritual faculties of her audiences, Richmond could develop and maintain adherents in a way that physical mediums could not. By proving her ability to her audience, Richmond was acknowledged for having “the gift of illumination,” which, according to I. M. Lewis, is a form of compensation “for a surrendering of the self or part of the self” that “is part of controlled spirit possession everywhere” (1971: 50). In this way, Richmond was able to assume religious authority, revealing both the feminine aspect of the divine and her own long-earned status as a spiritual leader.

According to Bret Carroll, for early Spiritualists “[r]eligious belief was essential, they felt, but to accord any belief the status of final truth was to set boundaries on knowledge and to require adherence to them as the basis of membership in a religious body was the stifle future growth” (1997: 40). Richmond espoused a system of belief, but those beliefs were realized through her performances and, as such, were always changing. Thus, her concept of God could transform from a strictly Christian concept to a more encompassing deity spanning multiple faiths, and her concept of spiritual authority could shift from a more patriarchal to a more gender inclusive theology. Richmond's trance lectures evolved along with her personal evolution and the cultural change she was able to both participate in and advance through her lectures. The quality and character of the belief encouraged by her lectures was malleable, open to alteration with each iteration. For Richmond, belief was an unfixed ever-evolving and changeable experience rather than a set dogma or

creed. The concept of discovering, exploring, and developing an evolving or transforming set of beliefs has become a central tenet of contemporary Spiritualist performance. Beginning with mediums like Richmond, Spiritualism developed as a religion whose meaning and philosophy were changeable, realized in the malleable and transforming crucible of live performance. But how did Richmond utilize the flexibility of performance to establish a unique Spiritualist system of belief and practice?

The Language of Trance: Transcending Speech

As her career progressed, how was Richmond able to work within the discourses to shift the focus away from the amazing empirical wonder of spirit possession to the philosophical theories set forth within the discourses? Richmond's discourse given in Boston on 12 December 1880 argued that Spiritualism was on the cusp of a new birth, and encouraged Spiritualists to turn away from questions of legitimacy to questions of religion: "Spiritualism is a not an external form. It is not that which appears to the eye or the sense. It is not that which clothes itself in fine raiment for appearance to the senses. Spiritualism is the soul of immortal life, and the consciousness made manifest in human flesh of existence beyond death."⁵² The spirits had something to share that was more significant than the fact of their communication. According to her spirits, Richmond's audience would be wise to focus on the content of her lectures as a source for spiritual understanding and

⁵² *The Banner of Light*, 25 December 1880.

enlightenment. In this way, Richmond attempted to move her spirits from wonder show or freak entertainment to a genuine source of spiritual enlightenment.

But, while Richmond's lectures may have been able to garner recognition through the quality of their argumentation as valid philosophical ideas, they needed to take another step and transcend language itself in order to assume spiritual significance. If the spirits were truly a source for spiritual enlightenment, they had to possess knowledge beyond human understanding. According to Emmanuel Levinas, “[i]nfinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is absolutely other. The transcendent is the sole ideatum of which there can be only an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite” (1961: 49). And language, by articulating that idea, drags the would-be transcendent being out of the infinite realm of transcendence rendering a spirit a mere finite entity. While language may attempt to generate its own world separate from perceptual experience, the fact that it is always based on and representing that world pulls language back from transcendence. Similarly, Ludwig Wittgenstein contended that the ultimate truths of religion and philosophy were beyond articulation. This led him to conclude that, “God does not reveal himself in the world” (1975: 149).

Richmond's spirits⁵³ answered this difficulty by locating their highest truths in a place beyond language. Richmond said, “[r]evelation proceeds from the unknown, the *absolute*, to the known; from the boundless, limitless, to the limited, the relative, the enchained” (Richmond 1888: 10). These “enchained” revelations are

⁵³ Richmond characterized her possession as a displacement in which her body was occupied by several spirits at once.

incapable of teaching any of the most significant truths about the spirit world: “No external thing can reveal God. The Soul alone, being of the nature of God, perceives God. Nothing can teach that there is God” (Richmond 1888: 13). While in the spirit world, language does not function as a medium for meaningful communication. Richmond recounted from her mystical journeys there: “Conversation in that state is not by means of speech or even language; sometimes before the thought is formulated the answer comes.”⁵⁴ And so, not only is the experience of the spirit world beyond language, but revelation, knowledge, and answers from the spirit world are largely incapable of expression through language. The transcendent truths of the spirit realm are bounded and limited by language, always greater than the words that seek to describe them. Richmond's spirits incorporated the concept of their own transcendence into Richmond's discourses from the very beginning of her career. In Newburyport, Richmond cautioned her audience about the limits of their ability to comprehend her spirit guides' teachings: “[m]en forget, in their views of this subject, that they are judging from a finite stand point; they are liable to forget that they are not God, that they are viewing it but in the light of the comprehension of their own minds.”⁵⁵ Essentially, Richmond was telling her audience that there was a limited degree to which she could establish her point through reason, and they must move beyond their scientific frame if they were to truly understand her. Richmond's audience might have demonstrated empirically that her logic was flawed, but they could not similarly demonstrate the invalidity of truths that, by their very nature, were

⁵⁴ *The Arena*, July 1897.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

beyond the grasp of their finite, mortal reason. In this way, her audience was left to make a subjective choice as to whether or not she had adequately demonstrated her awareness of this supernatural knowledge.⁵⁶

How then, if language is incapable of revealing spiritual truths, did Richmond's discourses attempt to convey a meaningful religious message to her audiences through language? According to Steinbock, imagery and metaphor are the primary means employed by mystics in their attempts to convey messages about or from their mystical experiences (2007: 36). James Fernandez corroborates this idea when he argues that “metaphor is one of the few devices we have for leaping beyond the essential privacy of the experiential process” into an intersubjective understanding of experiences like the mystical which might otherwise be purely subjective and inaccessible (1986: 6). Many of Richmond's metaphors were culled from the natural world. At her Boston lecture on 12 December 1880, Richmond described Spiritualists as “standing on the borderline, as the chrysalis may when it is ready to burst the shell” and said that the human's essence or soul consists of “pure drops of dew” as opposed to the bodily imperfections we leave behind at death. With Spiritualism, she argued that a tree of life will grow out of a river of truth, giving rise to a new king and a new era.⁵⁷ In a much earlier discourse on the decrees of God, given in 1857, Richmond compared the soul to “a fleeting breath of wind” and argued that the human's “physical form” could no more “exist without a soul, than could the

⁵⁶ According to Judith T. Irvine, in cases of spirit possession, “the behavioural evidence is ambiguous, and the principles of interpretation are flexible.” She argues that “interpretation is a creative process, incorporating a historical trajectory, and involving active collusion among participants.” (1982: 256-257).

⁵⁷ *Banner of Light*, 25 December 1880.

flower blossom, unless the germ is planted in the soil. On the individual's relation to God, she made an aquatic comparison: "as does the drop of water, when thrown into the ocean, cause the circle on the surface to expand, in beautiful undulations, over that vast extent of waters, until they reach the shore; so each thought, and each pulsation of your life vibrates through the great ocean of His being."⁵⁸

How does this natural imagery function in Richmond's attempt to explicate the divine and mystical? Fernandez says, "[m]etaphor is, like synesthesia, the translation of experience from one domain into another by virtue of a common factor which can be generalized between the experiences of the two domains" (1986: 12). Romanticism and Transcendentalism, which rose to prominence separately but concurrently with Spiritualism in America, focused on spiritual elements of nature. Figures like Thoreau and Emerson advocated communion with nature as a means for engaging with a kind of divine experience. In his essay, "Nature," Emerson contended that, "[i]n the woods, we return to reason and faith.... my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space... I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (2004: 12). Although Richmond's audience was not privy to the same mystical experience Richmond underwent through her trance, they likely had experienced a sunset, a walk through the forest, or time at the seashore. Thus, the experience of awe in the face of natural beauty—the flower, the newborn butterfly, the eagle in flight, the ocean—was used to help the audience relate to the spiritual truths underlying Richmond's metaphors. Since language was unable to convey the true nature of spiritual experience and

⁵⁸ <http://www.interfacing.com/ImmutableDegreesFreeAgencyMan.htm>. (accessed 21 March 2010).

understanding, metaphor served to refer Richmond's audience to a correlative experience that they were more likely to have had.

In addition to the direct correlation between spiritual and natural concepts, Richmond employed metaphoric strategies in order to place her spiritual truths on a continuum. Fernandez says that metaphor can be employed in order to “make it appear that the incumbent occupies a desirable or undesirable place in the continuum of whatever domain he has chosen” (1986: 10). Richmond says in her discourse that the spiritual truths contained therein “will clear out the charnel-houses, it will make room for the flowers of immortal hope and splendor.” Again, natural imagery is tied to the spiritual realm's higher offerings. But what is this spirituality with its natural beauty being pitted against? What does the charnel-house represent? Other images of violence surface in the discourse. Arguing that the soul must be immortal, otherwise earthly things must be valued above more spiritual things like poetry, music, and religion, Richmond says, “[c]onsider how soon the blood-stained laurels of the battlefield perish. Unassociated with patriotism, they become the murderer's badge.” The theme of the battlefield recurs: “Plato is remembered while Caesar is forgotten. The songs of the poets are sung while battlefields are buried in kindly oblivion.” Richmond metaphorically links the world of the spirit not only to nature but to poetry and philosophy as well. In contrast, the nonspiritual is linked with violence, bloodshed, and war. It follows that the result of realizing one's own immortality and discovering belief results in flowers and beautiful art. Atheism, on the other hand, leads to an unhealthy devotion to immediate gratification which in turn results in war.

In contrast to the awe of nature, used to explicate the spiritual world, Richmond uses an equally awe-inspiring and emotionally powerful metaphor to explicate the meaning of the absence or denial of spirit. In 1880, when this discourse was given, memories of America's Civil War would still be relatively fresh for Richmond's audience. The volume of the loss of human life and the violence that attended those losses allowed the audience a very visceral sense of what the experience of atheism meant and why it should be avoided at all costs.

Richmond did not believe that it was possible to become informed about spiritual matters. Rather, knowledge or awareness of things spiritual could only be arrived at through experience or perception. In her teachings, Richmond implored her students and readers: “do not try to think, simply *perceive*; for not all that is thinkable is true; that is most true which you can not speak nor think but can *perceive*” (Richmond 1888: 13). Thus, if Richmond sought to give spiritual guidance through her lectures, it could not possibly have been through the didactic messages within the words themselves. The audience was not intended to listen to Richmond's words, reflect on them, and arrive at spiritual knowledge as one might arrive at scientific or philosophical knowledge. Rather, Richmond's lectures should be thought of as an effort guide participants toward an experience of the spirit that transcended speech and thought.

As opposed to the Eddy brothers, Richmond encouraged a perception that took place through an abstract engagement, allowing her audience to experience her lectures in a way that might begin as a kind of scientific proof but open onto a more

sacred religious encounter. Thus, the role that Spiritualist philosophy and reasoning played was that of a gateway. The argument opened onto an experience that transcended its linguistic meaning, but the possibility for this transcendence was dependent upon the fact that the spirits confined their presence to language. According to Wade T. Wheelock, in religious ritual, language “produces situations that are difficult to recognize from their mere appearance” because of the presence of invisible, spiritual beings (1982: 63). By identifying a higher meaning and purpose for her lectures beyond an informative lesson, Richmond's spirits sought to convey the significance of the fact of spirit presence and communication above any didactic meaning the audience might glean. In this way, Richmond's discourses shifted her audience's understanding of the event from a scientific demonstration to a religious ritual.

They also pointed toward the significance of making personal contact with the spirit world, a concept that receives tremendous emphasis in contemporary Spiritualist practice. According to Braude, “Spiritualists' radical vision for reformation of society... was antithetical to institutional religion because it asserted that truth came directly to the individual without mediation by minister, Bible, or church” (1989: 57). Today, Spiritualists must learn the rituals of unfoldment before they can become members of a Spiritualist congregation (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). Unfoldment is any effort to expand one's own ability to make direct contact with the spirit world. This is generally achieved through meditations and “home circles” or weekly gatherings at which participants share their impressions from the

spirit world with each other. In the nineteenth century, many mediums discovered an innate ability to make contact with the spirit world but there was less emphasis on all Spiritualist believers developing their own ability to connect with the spirits. Today, many mediums teach that everyone has a degree of psychic and mediumistic ability that can be developed in order to allow for a direct personal engagement with a higher power.

Summary and Further Questions

Physical mediums were unable to inspire a sustainable practice because they refused to acknowledge the significant place that subjectivity played in affirming the validity of their practice. Caught up in their own ability to amaze their audiences with their theatrical séances, they lost sight of the fact that some of their spectators remained unimpressed and amazement was a fleeting experience. Trance mediums, by contrast, recognized that live performance is not the ideal outlet for positing absolutes like objective proof; it is more suited to creating an unfolding, open-ended exploration of new ideas, philosophies, and beliefs. With this understanding, trance mediums were able to organize a Spiritualist church that ultimately adopted the form and content of their performances because they recognized that religion relies on belief and belief is the product of subjective judgment. By revealing the spirits through argumentation rather than empirical demonstration, trance mediums were able to establish a philosophy for believers to latch on to.

This is not to suggest that magic and amazement had no place in trance performance. Trance audiences still expected the spirits to speak to them directly through the mouth of the medium, and they passed judgment on whether or not the performance adequately demonstrated the spirit's presence. In this way, the trance performance served as a precursor to contemporary message services and readings. In the next chapter, I address the intersection of empirical judgment and religious belief in the performance of spirit messages. I consider how contemporary spirit messages—like nineteenth-century trance performances—rely on live interaction to establish the validity of their magical claims and inspire participants to commit to a system of belief that encompasses and exceeds the act of spirit communication.

Chapter 3: Messages: Persuading Newcomers and Calling for Believers

Sitting for Messages

Spirit messages are the most recognizable and accessible Spiritualist ritual. Consequently, they are the ritual that draws the most newcomers to the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment (CSE). Messages are given by a medium who conveys them from the spirit world to one or more “sitters” in an effort to prove intellectually that the individual's consciousness continues after her or his physical death, a concept that Spiritualists refer to as “the continuity of life.” Participants who receive messages are called “sitters” because they “sit for messages.” To sit, in Spiritualist parlance, is not necessarily a reference to a participant's physical position, although participants often receive spirit communication while seated. To sit is to choose to engage with a Spiritualist ritual for one's own personal benefit. Mediums and healers working to serve others are not “sitting” but the people that they are working on behalf of are. From the perspective of a newcomer, messages are essentially an empirical and evidential demonstration; an attempt to validate spirit communication for non-believers. Ideally, mediums communicate information that they could not have by any means other than a direct interaction with a spirit. Since the spirit interaction is only perceptible to the medium, the sitter must judge the veracity of the medium's purported spirit communication based solely on the information the medium conveys about that exchange. If the sitter is convinced of the message's accuracy then,

according to Spiritualist ideology, the medium successfully proves the continuity of life to the sitter.

The path to becoming a Spiritualist almost always begins with receiving a spirit message. But it is not true that every Spiritualist conversion begins with a persuasive message nor that every persuasive message precipitates a conversion. The rituals that mediums observe in giving messages from the spirit world are a difficult and delicate balancing act. In order to perpetuate Spiritualism's ranks, messages must appeal broadly. But, in order to inspire an interest in Spiritualism as a system of belief, they must also offer something greater or deeper than popular appeal. The familiarity and popularity of spirit messages around the world speaks to the success mediums have had in achieving broad appeal. The relatively small roster of converted Spiritualists in the world speaks to the challenges of translating this appeal into a vested interest in the philosophy and religion that Spiritualists have developed around these communications. Why are mediums' spirit messages so appealing to a popular audience, and why is it so difficult for Spiritualists to utilize messages in order to inspire conversions?

In this chapter, I explore how spirit messages serve as both an entertainment and a ritual. The content of most spirit messages can be broken down and identified as either directed toward amazement or conversion. I argue that live interaction is key to both the mediums' ability to entertain with a message and their ability to solicit converts, especially insofar as mediums intuitively adjust the content of spirit messages to fit the spiritual needs of the individual. I argue that the proof offered in

science-driven messages—in the Spiritualist sense of the word “science”—is neither purely subjective nor purely objective. In order to affirm a message, the sitter must be willing to believe in the message's validity, but a willingness to believe comes with conditions that must be met in order for the medium to successfully persuade. This then sets the stage for select individuals to take up a religious conviction. Science-driven messages work to overcome doubt and amaze through an overwhelming demonstration of proof. Religion-driven spirit messages inspire conversion by assuming the sitter's belief and abandoning any effort to amaze; encouraging the sitter to pursue a deeper spiritual commitment.

A Twenty-first Century Séance

Spirit messages have served as a form of entertainment since Spiritualism's founding, but to what extent do they continue to function as a popular entertainment today? John Edward, James Van Praagh, and Sylvia Brown are just some of the mediums who have managed to make a career out of giving spirit messages to studio audiences on television. Mediums also appear regularly on reality television series including *Ghost Hunters* and *Paranormal State*. But mediumship's presence in popular culture is not confined to television. Ouija boards, first developed by early American Spiritualists as a tool to receive messages from the spirit world, have been mass marketed by Parker Brothers and sold in toy stores across the world since the company bought the patent for the product in 1966. And most towns and cities in America, Canada, and Western Europe have at least one if not many psychics and

mediums operating small businesses devoted to giving messages, not to mention the vast variety of psychic and mediumistic services that can be purchased online and over the phone.

Gallery readings and séances—Spiritualists' most popular events—tend to follow the models set out by these popular cultural manifestations by putting nearly all of their emphasis on spirit communication and allowing messages to be interpreted as a form of entertainment. At readings and séances mediums give messages to sitters for an hour or more, and often little else happens at the event. By contrast, a Sunday service offers messages for about twenty minutes at the conclusion of a ninety-minute service that features meditation, hymns, recitations, and a lecture. A séance tends to draw between sixty and seventy participants. Readings draw crowds of thirty to fifty. At a reading or séance, roughly two thirds of the audience is non-Spiritualist. By contrast, the average Sunday service attracts around forty congregants, half of which are converted Spiritualists. In short, readings and séances which place all of their focus on giving messages attract a significantly larger audience of non-Spiritualists than a Sunday service which features but does not emphasize spirit communications.

Every year, the CSE hosts a Victorian séance, a large benefit fundraiser, the last weekend in March to mark the birth of modern Spiritualism. The Center is intricately decorated to resemble a Victorian parlor for the event with period-style curtains over the windows and antiques on the walls and displayed throughout the main room. Mediums and guests arrive in Victorian-era costumes; a band is hired to play traditional nineteenth-century popular music and lead participants in renditions

of 'Bicycle Built for Two,' 'Oh Susanna,' and 'She'll be Comin' 'Round the Mountain;' and volunteers fill a table with historically-themed refreshments. The event is very popular and brings the Center a significant amount of money to help support its services and activities. To accommodate the crowds of interested participants, the CSE invites mediums from Philadelphia, North Carolina, and Florida to attend. In 2011, participants paid \$50 to sit at a table. A year later, the price had gone up to \$65 for members and \$75 for non-members.

None of the seven people seated at my séance table in 2011 were members of the CSE. Cary—a health care provider in her early thirties—had attended Sunday services intermittently over the past year but did not consider herself a Spiritualist. Greg—a man in his late thirties who frequently sat with me at the back of the congregation on Sundays—had been attending the CSE for months but had not converted. The Victorian séance was also one of my first interactions with Kathy Riley—a computer technician at the World Bank in her forties. Riley was one of my key informants throughout the course of my research. She grew up in Jamestown, New York and was first exposed to Spiritualism at Lily Dale, where she would occasionally visit as a child and teenager. She started attending the CSE's services two months before I began my research and five months before we shared a table at the Victorian séance. Also at our table was a woman who had traveled from Philadelphia with one of the séance's mediums but was not a medium or Spiritualist herself. Another woman had discovered the event online and came both to hear messages and for the opportunity to dress in costume. Our table's medium was the

Rev. Patricia Stranahan—the assistant pastor at the CSE. Stranahan, a woman in her sixties, was the owner and operator of a natural healing center and held a doctorate in Naturopathy. Stranahan did not discover her mediumship until adulthood, but she came from a family that included several generations of Spiritualists and mediums.

As Stranahan took her place at our table, the lights were lowered and a moderator instructed all of the attendees to stay seated, turn off our phones, not touch the mediums, and follow any additional instructions our individual mediums might have for us. Stranahan asked that we confirm, deny, or ask questions about her messages because this would help her to make her connection with the spirit world stronger. The first message came to me from my great grandmother. Stranahan saw her behind me, holding my arms, as if to tell me that I was rushing or too anxious and should slow down. Then my grandfather wanted to congratulate me for a decision I had made in regard to an upcoming trip in August, and more distant relatives named Harold and Margaret wanted to be acknowledged to me. Stranahan continued around the circle, focusing on one person at a time but moving in no particular order. Most of the sitters received messages from three or more spirits, and everyone's message lasted at least five minutes. Stranahan asked Riley if she was training to become a spirit healer, and when Riley confirmed her interest, Stranahan offered her the spirits' encouragement for her efforts. Greg was told about a big change coming in his life that could lead to the unfoldment of his own mediumship. The woman who had traveled from Philadelphia received a message about her son, who would be meeting a woman soon—specifically at a party in New Jersey where he would be set up by a

friend or relative. Cary's message was either from a person named Johnson or a person named John who wanted to emphasize his relationship as somebody's son. The spirit encouraged her to proceed with a vacation she had been planning (séance, 26 March 2011, CSE).

Amazing Tourists and Entertaining with Spirits

Participants in the Victorian séance—many of whom are first-time visitors or have only recently developed an interest in Spiritualism—are akin to tourists experiencing a foreign practice for the first time. Anthropologists of tourism Edward M. Bruner and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argue that “tourism is a safe place for practices that are contested in other spheres, for in tourism they function in a privileged representational economy” (2005: 48). By representing Spiritualism as a Victorian practice, Spiritualists self-consciously refer to the movement's hey-day before accusations of fraudulence dwindled the American and European public's popular interest in spirit communication. This endows their practice with the assumed authority of historical significance and pedigree which alleviates participants' inclination toward skepticism from the outset. Participants are engaging with and learning about a historical practice that was once widely practiced and valued, not judging the efficacy of a contemporary alternative religion. Interestingly, the mediumship practiced at the Victorian séance is not Victorian. In the nineteenth century, mediums communicated messages through trance or physical phenomena, i.e. taps on or around the séance table. At the CSE's Victorian séance, mediums

practice the same style of mental mediumship performed at Sunday services. In this way, the CSE's Victorian séance utilizes a historical frame in order to legitimize a contemporary practice.

Events like the Victorian séance highlight spirit communication's capacity to function as an entertainment. The costumes, decorations, music, and refreshments are all distinctly theatrical touches that key the audience into the fact that the event is meant to entertain (Bauman 1977). The fact that participants pay admission further emphasizes the point. Richard Schechner defines an entertainment-driven audience as, “a collection of people who attend because the show is advertised, who pay admission, [and] who evaluate what they are going to see before, during, and after seeing it” (ibid.: 157). The mediums are the main attraction, and the evening's featured performance is the messages given around the séance table. The messages are what participants pay for, and, despite the embellishments at an event like the Victorian séance, the messages are the source of the event's entertainment value. At a gallery reading hosted on a Friday evening two months after the séance, a crowd of around twenty gathered to see touring medium Sarah Lerner. Ordinarily the crowd would have been larger, but the event's coordinator had accidentally advertised the admission fee as \$65 rather than the actual \$25. Participants are willing to pay \$65 for the séance because there are only seven or eight sitters per medium and they are guaranteed to receive a longer message. By contrast, at a reading there are usually between twenty and fifty sitters per medium and the individual messages are much shorter. Longer messages call for a higher price.

What makes messages entertaining? An advertisement for Lerner's gallery reading promised that participants would "be amazed" by her messages. Each of Stranahan's messages to the people at our table were an attempt to tell us something that she could not have known through natural means: personal information about deceased relatives, predictions for the future, and perceptions about our spirituality. All of this information was something that we as sitters could judge and either confirm or deny. In this way, the messages resemble a game or sporting event, as described by Alice Rayner: "[t]he fun comes from the unknown outcome that requires you be going along with the event, in the sensory play of its signifiers, before it is signified and encorpsed, before the final judgment has been made" (1994: 29). Although the audience may hope for persuasive proof, there is always the possibility that the messages may not meet their expectations, and therein lies the entertainment. Just as the winner of a sporting event remains uncertain throughout the game, the truth of a message remains uncertain until the medium has completed the message and moved on to the next sitter. This is what attracts participants and holds their interest. The reason non-Spiritualists attend a message ritual is that they hold open the possibility that the message may or may not prove itself valid. And this indeterminacy is what makes the event fun and appealing. According to Richard Schechner's analysis of theatre and ritual, the fact that séances and readings identify as entertainment raises the audience's propensity to evaluate the medium's performance. And the chance to evaluate the messages is a significant part of what makes them entertaining. At a séance or gallery reading, non-Spiritualists will often test mediums.

For example, Stranahan asked Cary during the Victorian séance if she had decided where to go on vacation that summer, and Cary told Stranahan that she had no plans. After pausing to reflect, Stranahan told Cary that she was seeing a beach. Talking with Cary after the messages had ended and Stranahan had left the table, Cary told me that she was planning a trip to Costa Rica in May. Cary's choice to withhold this information was a test to see how accurate and detailed Stranahan's messages could be.

The concept of “amazing” audiences would seem to place mediums in the same camp with magicians. Messages are not like magic tricks, although a genre of magicians called “mentalists” perform similar feats, often billed as “mind reading.” Through slight-of-hand, subterfuge, and cleverly-designed guessing games, mentalists give audiences the impression that they are able to read their thoughts. But mentalists and mediums operate within different performance frames. Both amaze, but a magician's performance is premised on the concept that what is being shown is an illusion. The question participants ask is often along the lines of “how did he/she do that?” A medium's performance, by contrast, is premised on the concept that what is being shown is the product of genuine supernatural ability, and so the question participants bring to the performance is often along the lines of “is it real?”¹ And so, mediums are expected to persuade participants of the legitimacy of their performance,

¹ In *Fooling Houdini*, Alex Stone observes that audience members will often approach a mentalist after a performance and express their conviction that the mentalist has supernatural powers. This suggests that the ability to discern information about another person is inherently linked, in the minds of some individuals, to the supernatural. The source of this link is beyond the scope of my investigation, but it informs the background for some participants' capacity to be persuaded by a spirit message (2012: 207-230). In any case, mediums work to provide messages that cannot be explained by means of a mentalist's tricks.

amazing but also persuading participants that the messages are not the product of some trick.

Anticipating Spirits: Establishing Expectations for a Spirit Message

What sort of horizon of expectations does the promise to “amaze” establish among audience members (Bennett 1997)? Audiences expect that the medium will achieve something out of the ordinary, i.e. a message with a level of detail and veracity that could not be achieved through mere guessing. However, this hope does not preclude the possibility that the messages could fail. If there is no opportunity of failure, the pleasure and meaning goes out of the performance. Similarly, if there is no danger of a trapeze artist falling, the performance is no longer an extraordinary display and consequently loses its thrill. An entertainment-driven audience operating from a critical perspective demands a display of skill. But what makes for a persuasive message? Attendees at a Spiritualist message service, séance, or reading hold an underlying predisposition or intentionality in common that helps to determine what it means for a medium to amaze and persuade. I often sat at the back of the congregation with the new attendees and asked about their motivation for attending, and I inquired with many long-term members about what brought them to the CSE in the first place. The popular misconception of what drives people to seek out mediums is that they are motivated by grief, specifically the passing of a loved one. Historically, the death of a loved one often inspired Spiritualist conversions. For example, John Edmonds, a judge with the Supreme Court of New York who was

well-known as an early investigator of Spiritualist phenomena, developed an interest following the death of his wife (Moore 1977: 20). The following century, Harry Houdini—who ultimately concluded that Spiritualist phenomena were fraudulent—began his investigation into mediumship in the hope of reaching his deceased mother (Houdini 1924). However, the death of a loved one only surfaced three times in my exchanges with CSE participants about their choice to attend or join the Center (pers. comm., Simon, 9 December 2011, McNickle, 16 April 2011, and Riley). Some were brought or recommended by a family member or close friend: girlfriends, friends, mothers, fathers, and siblings. Several others I spoke to were encouraged by their own supernatural encounters. Holly—a member in her late fifties—reported dreams that led her first to Washington, DC and eventually to the CSE (the Center's podium and hearth appeared to her in detail in her sleep); Melody—a woman in her early thirties who began attending CSE services around the same time that I did—was encouraged by her own mediumistic experiences to begin attending; and Greg witnessed the spectral image of a nineteenth-century soldier on horseback ride through a crowd in the middle of the street which led him down a path that ultimately brought him to the CSE (service, 13 March 2011; service, 20 March 2011, séance, 26 March 2011, service, 27 November 2011, CSE).² Rita O'Conner was fairly typical in that she brought these motivating forces together in her conversion narrative: “I had moved into this house that was just full of spirits. They were moving things all over the place... So I was supposed to go with a friend to a medium but the friend couldn't go

² Thomas Kingsley Brown observed that, in roughly half the conversions he studied at Spiritualist churches in San Diego, California, “an anomalous experience,” generally of the paranormal sort, played a key role in inspiring a first-time visit to a Spiritualist church (2003: 138).

and told me to go ahead alone. The messages I had impressed me so much that I ended up becoming a Spiritualist” (service, 27 November 2011, CSE).

O' Conner was one of several to describe her introduction to the CSE as a kind of happy accident. Cynthia—a retired education researcher in her fifties—told a story of meeting Gehman for the first time at a CVS. Cynthia was shopping for something that the pharmacy did not have in stock. Gehman just so happened to have a spare at her house and gave Cynthia her card. Gehman's card, which listed her occupation as “medium” piqued Cynthia's interest and led to her first trip to the CSE (service, 30 April 2011, CSE). Riley drove past the CSE for years and, during a trip to Lily Dale, happened to learn that it was a Spiritualist Center. These seeming accidents were also preceded by events that predisposed participants to an interest in Spiritualism. Riley was one of several Spiritualist converts to mention a family history that included psychics in her parents' or grandparents' generation. And several months after Cynthia shared her story about meeting Gehman at the CVS, she told me that she had experienced several intuitive psychic experiences and mediumistic dreams in her adult life. These constituted an underlying interest that her chance encounter with Gehman sparked into a Spiritualist conversion. Joanna Simon characterized the predisposition that typifies many contemporary Spiritualists' attitudes: “I have always been interested in and fascinated with the spirit world and psychic phenomenon” (pers. comm., 9 December 2011). Simon—a lawyer in her mid fifties—was another of my key informants. A friend of Gehman's daughter, she had been attending the CSE for over a decade but only decided to convert to Spiritualism at the end of my

first year of research. She told me that her new commitment to Spiritualist practice was, in part, because she now had the time, energy, and initiative to devote herself to her spirituality.

While it may be a commonplace to state that one factor all Spiritualists share at the CSE service is their nascent interest in Spiritualism, this factor is essential to understanding how the messages prove the continuity of life to their sitters. Indeed, a predisposition toward psychic and spiritual phenomena forms the basis for a uniquely Spiritualist intentionality. By proposing that new attendees possess a Spiritualist intentionality, I do not mean to suggest that they are all necessarily convinced of the validity of spirit communication before they attend. Spiritualists may have an open intention or desire to experience spirit messages as proof for the validity of spirit communication, but that intention is conditional. As John R. Searle argues, “there is no way the agent can have a belief or desire without it having its conditions of satisfaction.” (1983: 22). A willingness or even a desire to believe in spirit communication requires, as its condition of satisfaction, that a spirit message demonstrate its validity, and is accompanied by an inherent understanding of what it would mean for a message to fail. Roger Jenkins—a medium with a longstanding practice who is the pastor of his own Spiritualist church in Melbourne, Florida—told the CSE's congregation during a Sunday lecture that he came to Spiritualism as a skeptic: “I went into Spiritualism to disprove it and haven't managed to do it in thirty years” (service, 4 December 2011, CSE). Despite his skepticism, Jenkins possessed a

willingness to discover that the messages were valid, albeit balanced by an openness to the possibility that the messages were false.

The intentionality of a nascent Spiritualist consists of the ability conceive of spirits and spirit communication as possible. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, “at the moment I think, I think something... any other truth, in the name of which I might wish to discount this one, must, if it is to be called a truth for me, square with the 'true' thought of which I have experience” (1962: 463). No matter how uncannily accurate the message may be, it can only be validated if the sitter's concept of reality allows for the existence of spirits and mediums. I cannot intend to have a valid spirit message if I am utterly convinced that there is no such thing as a spirit. Rita O'Conner addressed this in a lecture she gave at a Sunday service when she said,

Regardless of the content of a message, there are skeptics who will never believe anything they are told by a medium. The information may be completely accurate; it may be of such an confidential nature that the medium could not possibly have known about it through natural means. Yet these folks will cite every possible reason, from a lucky guess to outright fraud and everything in between to deny the reality that we live on after we die. A skeptic is only happy with hard evidence and sometimes not even with that. Something concrete and measurable. Something repeatable, more akin to laboratory experiments than to social sciences experiments (service, 27 November 2011, CSE).

For O'Conner, skeptics are not those who doubt the validity of spirit communication but rather those who are unwilling to accept any proof that might suggest their validity. A sitter must be open to the possibility of spirits or there is no hope of the message ever taking on a spiritual significance.

This is not to deny the subtle social pressure exerted by the group of converts that tends to surround a new attendee at a Sunday message service. The fact that forty

people have evaluated a practice and confirmed its validity lends the messages a certain credence from the outset. But lending credence is not the same as demanding assent. New attendees are still free to dismiss the entire congregation as mistaken, and the fact that many new attendees never return enforces that fact. Spiritualists also go out of their way to avoid proselytizing. As O'Conner argued in her Sunday lecture, "I don't feel the need to prove the continuity of life to others because this proof is deeply personal and one must arrive at it on one's own.... Others haven't seen things from the perspective of my unique experiences."³ The act of amazing is not something that is done to the sitter but rather something that the sitter actively and electively participates in. In order for the message to serve as proof, the sitter must choose to accept the message as proof based on her or his own private negotiation with the message conveyed.

How Mediums Amaze in order to Persuade

At Sunday services and gallery readings, the medium assumes a "platform" by standing in front of a group, usually at a podium, and selects members of the audience or congregation to receive messages. The term "platform" does not refer to a physical stage but rather the state of performing messages. When mediums "give messages from the platform" they are performing mediumship in a public setting to a group that

³ In his research on Charismatic Protestant conversion, Simon Coleman argues that conversion need not be an explicit effort to encourage non-members to join a religious organization. Conversion "cannot be isolated as an autonomous mode of action but condenses meanings that are evident in myriad ways of reaching beyond the individual or collective self" (2003: 22). Viewed in this way, any act that professes a Spiritualist identity to a non-Spiritualist can be understood as an act of conversion even though neither the Spiritualist nor the non-Spiritualist necessarily understand their exchange in these terms.

has gathered for the purpose of hearing and receiving messages. If the medium knows the message's sitter she will call out to that person by name. If not, the medium will generally identify the individual by her position in the room (i.e., "back row on the far right") and clothing (i.e., "wearing the green shirt.") Usually, the medium will request permission to give the message by asking some variation on the question "May I come to you?" (i.e., with a message). Mediums tend to ask that their interlocutors speak aloud in order to facilitate the message. Spiritualists contend that the vibration of the sitter's voice allows the medium better access to the spirit who is attempting to communicate with the sitter. And so, most sitters will reply when the medium identifies them for a message by saying "hello," "good morning," or "thank you." After this first contact, the sitter is generally quiet for the duration of the message. The occasional sitter will confirm the medium's message aloud, ask for clarification, or deny what the medium is saying, but this is rare. As a rule, once the medium begins giving the message the sitter silently listens until the message is over and then politely voices her or his gratitude for the message.

Mediums persuade by anticipating sitters' doubts.⁴ They assume that they are performing for an open-minded skeptic when they formulate the messages that they convey regarding their spirit impressions. In speaking to a developing medium, Gehman said, "I want to see you trained in a way that a scientist could be moved by

⁴ Doubt as a natural pre-condition for engagement with the paranormal is a well-documented psychological phenomenon. Linda Degh argues that "belief is fluctuating, hesitant and selective, not consistent or absolute" (1996: 39). Colin Davis imagines the internal monologue of a paranormal believer and disbeliever respectively in *Haunted Subjects*: "I know ghosts don't exist, but I still believe in them; or, alternatively, I don't believe in ghosts, but I don't entirely believe my lack of belief" (2007: 8). Finally, in *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, Jean-Claude Schmitt defines belief as "a never-completed activity, one that is precarious, always questioned, and inseparable from the recurrences of doubt" (1998: 7).

you and not be skeptical.” Natural or “scientific” doubts are based on the prospect that mediums are conducting a cold reading—a guessing technique in which supposed mediums deduce information about a sitter based on their appearance, behavior, and the answers to certain cleverly constructed questions. Whether or not sitters are familiar with the concept of the cold reading, the notion that the medium is playing a guessing game is difficult to dismiss. James Randi—a stage magician who followed in Houdini's footsteps by exposing fraudulent paranormal claims in the latter half of the twentieth century—has debunked the work of several prominent psychics by demonstrating that they require input from the sitter in order to give accurate readings, and that these psychics often provide vague or misleading information that the credulous interpret as legitimate proof (1982: 252-325).⁵ Mediums attempt to overcome the specter of the cold reading, in part, by soliciting minimal information from the sitter. According to Marilyn Awtry, “the medium does not ask questions of the sitter (except, you [the medium] may desire a yes or no so you know they understand the message) if they do not [understand], you give it and you also try to connect with the spirit for something else they would understand” (pers. comm., 15 August 2011). While a new medium may be inclined to receive confirmation for her or his messages by asking questions, such inquiries are discouraged because they expose the sitter to the possibility that the medium is merely guessing and thereby

⁵ Randi's claims about the way in which contemporary psychic mediums achieve their communications have been taken up and propagated by popular figures on the science side of the science vs. religion debate. Richard Dawkins, for example, concludes that the correct information provided by psychics and mediums is best explained as a coincidence, which is not itself evidence for the supernatural because the explanation that a random coincidence has occurred is more probable than that a person possesses supernatural power: “what we need is less gasping and more thinking... to take the sting out of coincidence by quietly sitting down and calculating the likelihood that [something] would have happened anyway” (1998: 147).

diminish the message's ability to prove. For the most part, the mediums I observed at the CSE and at Lily Dale honored this prohibition. Most mediums at the CSE did not even seek confirmation. They simply gave the message and moved on to the next sitter.

By soliciting minimal information, mediums cultivate a confident and authoritative demeanor that figures centrally into the way the messages are performed. Confidence is essential to the performance insofar as it conveys the medium's performative competence to the audience (Bauman 1977: 30-31). Mediums are not necessarily self-confident, but they must have an authoritative confidence in the accuracy of their messages or the message's capacity to amaze will be diminished. Sandra McFadden, a visiting medium from Scotland, saw a gentleman in the spirit world with a lump in his breast at one of the CSE's Sunday message services. Unaware that men could suffer from breast cancer, McFadden was perplexed by her own impression, but she told the congregation that she shared it because “obviously [the] spirit wouldn't get it wrong.” McFadden frequently asked her sitters to confirm her messages, but when they could not or when they denied any of the information she brought to them, she would say “I'm just the messenger. I'm just passing on the message... I'll leave you to sort it out” (service, 10 June 2012, CSE). This approach shifts the burden of a message's accuracy from the medium to the sitter. Since the message is derived from a transcendent source that is never wrong, it is up to the sitter to discover the message's accuracy.

But, removing questions and performing confidently are not enough to satisfy all potential doubts about the prospect of a cold reading. In *A Magician Among the Spirits*, Harry Houdini accused mediums of arriving at information through newspapers, surreptitious accomplices, court records, telephone wire taps, and stolen mail (1924: 217-219). While this kind of conspiracy would be difficult to perpetrate on a random new attendee at a contemporary Spiritualist service, mediums could gather information about individuals who attend over a period of time. This is part of the reason why new attendees tend to receive at least half of the messages given at any service. The more information the medium knows about an individual, the more difficult it is to provide them with information that could not have been attained through a personal interaction. And so, mediums must prove the validity of their messages before they know too much about their sitters. This factor also comes into play in the Center's predilection toward bringing mediums in from out of town. Mediums have difficulty establishing the validity of their messages for themselves when communicating with sitters whom they know personally. Patricia Stranahan gave a message to a friend who had come with her to the service one Sunday and articulated a problem I've heard on multiple occasions from several mediums: "it's difficult to give messages to people you know" (service, 25 March 2012, CSE). This is, in no small part, because the medium—depending on her or his level of ability—may be unable to discern the difference between information learned through the relationship and information learned from the spirits.

Doubts may also spring from the possibility that the medium could read or gather information about the sitter during the brief interaction beginning when the new attendee enters the CSE or even at the start of the message itself. Age, race, clothing, body posture, mannerisms, or a greeting during fellowship could provide the medium with information—that the medium may or not be consciously aware of—that then forms the bulk of what the medium reveals back to the sitter about her or himself. Sitters will also dismiss messages as possible or probable guesses because they could be true for almost anyone. My partner Katie—who served as a regular co-participant in the services and events that I attended and accommodating volunteer when I wanted to test the skills I acquired at Spiritualist workshops— had a difficult time trusting a message she received at a gallery reading that began by asking if she knew anyone in fashion. Her grandmother had worked at a department store, but if that qualified as “working in fashion,” then the question was too broad to have any significance for her as proof. CSE member Scott McNickle put it this way:

Deep down you want to be hit over the head with a profound truth, but the majority of the time it's something along the lines of 'So and So wants to say hello and send their love.' I'm not trying to be dismissive; it's simply a matter of the format. Once in [a] while someone will receive a real heavy hitter and I've been on the receiving end of that blow and it's truly an eye-opener: surreal, comforting, reassuring (pers. comm., 16 April 2011).

McNickle—a graduate student in his mid twenties—is one of the younger members of the congregation and often attends with his father. In addition to the desire to be amazed, sitters bring with them a horizon of expectations for the quality and quantity of details that they require in order to validate a message or be amazed. As Kathy

Riley told me, “I do expect strong and detailed evidence, and I am grateful when it is given” (pers. comm., 22 October 2011).

Mediums attempt to overcome these issues by offering as much specific information as they are able to in the course of a message such that, if the information is accurate, the sitter could not possibly ascribe them to a lucky guess or quick reading of the sitter's appearance and demeanor. Awtry discussed this effort in terms of identifying a particular spirit to a sitter: “The medium should also give identification of the spirit by description of their appearance, by name, by special marking on the body (perhaps a scar or a birthmark)...something so the sitter can *know* beyond a shadow of a doubt it is their relative” (pers. comm., 15 August 2011). This is, in large part, an effort to decrease the probability that the message could be accurate for anyone (or anyone under thirty who dresses casually and carries a notebook, etc.). The more information the medium provides, the more likely the message could only fit with the one specific individual receiving the message, the more persuasive the proof.

Rather than specifically selecting a sitter for a particular spirit message, some mediums allow the sitter to come to the message. These mediums will offer a name or a series of characteristics for the audience's consideration, and if someone can identify the name or characteristics with an individual they know (usually in the spirit world) then they raise their hand and the medium proceeds with the message. Sarah Lerner performs this way. At the gallery reading, she emerged from the back of the room and took her place in front of the audience. She began by explaining, “I am in

the habit of connecting to [a] spirit first and letting the spirit connect to that person in the crowd” that the message is intended for. She asked that we raise our hands when we recognized something she was saying as relevant to us or to someone we knew who had passed on. Lerner encouraged us to ask our spirit loved ones to jump on her “like a monkey on a banana” because our request would help the spirit to come through to her. According to Lerner, spirits jockey for position and do not like to stay in line. Throughout the night, she was frequently interrupted by one spirit in the midst of receiving a message from another. She would be giving a message to one sitter when something would surface in the message that the person could not identify. In the midst of a message from a person who died of a stroke, for example, she suddenly asked if the sitter knew someone who smoked cherry tobacco. When the sitter could not place the cherry tobacco, she pressed the person to try to make some connection with the information, then declared “I must be popping off of you.” Turning to the crowd, she asked if anyone could identify someone in the spirit world who had smoked cherry tobacco. Often, she would return to the same sitter over and over again. This style of delivery kept everyone engaged and in a constant state of anticipation since any of us could receive a message at any moment. It also reduced the possibility for failure since an inaccurate message could always be placed elsewhere in the crowd. This technique, derisively called “fishing” by its detractors, raises the probability that a message will be validated by making it available to as many sitters as possible for confirmation. The trade-off is that the message becomes less persuasive. In order for a message to succeed, it must be accurate. But it must

also demonstrate an ability to receive information that could not have been gathered through natural means. The further out on a proverbial limb a medium is willing to go in performing messages, the more persuasive and the more amazing the performance.

Gehman mockingly demonstrated this technique for a workshop class when she asked, “Does anyone here know a John?”—the implication being that almost everyone in any given audience will know someone named John (class, November 2011, CSE). For Awtry, “fishing without a license” is the foremost negative trend in contemporary mediumship and demonstrates a lack of mastery on the part of the medium (pers. comm., 15 August 2011). A properly trained and sufficiently skillful medium should never ask questions of the message's sitter beyond the straightforward “do you understand?”. According to Gehman, the spirit will tell the medium who she or he wants to speak with. In *Lily Dale*, I observed that only student mediums would practice fishing while certified mediums almost always selected the sitter before giving the message. Although instructors like Awtry and Gehman strongly discourage the practice among their own students, there is no uniform policy enforced across the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC).

But, the unofficial prohibition against fishing provides the foundation for the level of specificity mediums strive to achieve with their messages. By and large, specificity is a product of the volume of information a medium is able to convey from the spirit world. Gehman will often bring the names of not one but three, four, or five spirits to a sitter. It may be that most people know someone named John, but it is much less likely that most people know a Megan, John, and Lillian together. And it

may be that most people know someone who has passed from a chest condition, particularly since this could indicate any number of ailments. But it is much less likely that most people know someone who passed suddenly from that condition and “wasn't ready to go.” When both messages are combined for a single sitter, as they were when Gehman gave this message at a Sunday service, the probability that the message could resonate for anyone other than its specific sitter is diminished considerably (service, 16 January 2012, CSE).

Who Are the Spirits?

The spirits are always individuals who once lived but are now dead. They are the sole inhabitants of the “spirit world,” a place where the souls of the living go after they die. In *Becoming a Spiritualist*—a book of Spiritualist theology distributed to all new members of the CSE—H. Gordon Burroughs contends that

through the faculty of mediumship we are told that as places, there is neither a heaven nor a hell set apart; heaven and hell are states of consciousness into which the individual enters according to his own desires, hopes, aspirations, and ideals. We are told further that we are by means of death going into eternity; that we have always been associated with God in some form. (1962: 65-76)

To be a spirit in the spirit world is not to be separated from this world. Rather, it is to exist without the limitations of the world of the living which also encompass that world. Spirits are beyond the confines of time and space, limited only by their own consciousness. The specific geography of the spirit world is then unique to each spirit, determined by the spirit's “desires, hopes, aspirations, and ideals.”

Communicating spirits are consistently good or evolved enough to exert a positive

influence on the person with whom they are communicating. Spirits who made poor choices in life and exist in the less evolved segments of the spirit world never communicated through a medium at any service I attended. Mediums reach out for the “highest and the best” of the spirit world and this orientation precludes receiving messages from “lower” spirits.

The spirits who communicate through mediums with sitters at Spiritualist performances are either deceased relatives, friends, or acquaintances of the sitter or “guides.” Spirits need not have had an extensive relationship with sitters in order to convey a message. Some are relatives who died soon before or soon after the sitter was born; others are friends the sitter had minimal contact with in life. Guides are elevated spirits who have elected to serve the living by offering guidance not only through messages but also through the living person's intuition. Usually, guides are not related to the living people they work with. Guides do not always identify themselves—sometimes appearing in the form of a column of light or rainbow. When they do identify themselves, they tend to be white Westerners or American Indians—an interesting identity issue that I analyze below. Guides lived in an earlier time period—ranging from a several decades to several centuries before the living person was born. Guides are frequently with the living people whom they have committed to serve, whether the living individuals are aware of it or not. More spiritually attuned individuals can feel or otherwise sense the influence of their guides and direct their actions accordingly. Guides can also serve as “doctors” in spirit healing by channeling energy into sitters that brings about physical, mental, and spiritual healing.

Text and Tactics: How Mediums Persuade

Although there is wide variety in messages' content, most messages follow a loose structure and visit similar themes. Working from detailed notes taken at message services over the course of my research, I compiled statistics on the content delivered in forty-nine spirit messages (of the more than 200 messages I witnessed) given during ten services (of the over 40 I attended). The services at which I chose to record detailed notes on the messages were randomly selected and span the first full year of my research, and so they are fairly representative. Almost all of the messages focused on satisfying two goals: to identify the communicating spirit to the message's sitter and to pass some information either about the spirit's feelings or about the sitter's life to the sitter. The following message delivered by Gehman at a Sunday service demonstrates how these goals are addressed in the message:

As I feel the touch of spirit I feel drawn to you. I see a woman. There's a beautiful spiritual aura around her. She lost a lot of weight. She used to be very heavy, but lost a lot of weight near the end of her life, and she walked with a limp at the end of her life. She's very pleased with what you're doing right now. I see writing and pulling books together. There's a project starting next month. Do you understand? There's also a Margaret or a Margaritte with her. I'm also hearing people speaking in another language. There are a lot of spirits around you... A man comes through who has difficulty breathing because of fluid in his lungs. He had an ailment at the end of his life so that he was unable to answer while dying. But he's able to speak now. He's so happy to connect with you and sends so much love into your vibration (service, 10 April 2011, CSE).

Mediums generally begin by identifying the spirit. No single tactic for identifying a spirit was used more than 50% of the time, which speaks to the variety within the messages themselves. Tactics were also often combined to make the

requisite connection. In Gehman's message, she combined a physical description with the description of an ailment to identify the first spirit, and brought in naming and aural cues for the second. The most used tactics were naming the spirit (42%) and identifying how the spirit knew or was related to the sitter in life (42%). Mediums also identified spirits by giving an account of the ailment or ailments that caused the the spirit's physical death as with the first and third spirits described above (28%), a visual description of the spirit in life (34%), or details of the spirit's personality in life (18%). Mediums might also describe images or objects brought by the spirit that help to identify the spirit to the message's sitter (28%). For example, a medium might describe a scene in which the spirit had interacted with the sitter in life or an object that has been passed down from the spirit to the sitter.

Interestingly, the most used tactics are also the most falsifiable. If a medium tells me that I have a grandmother in the spirit world named Gertrude, I know instantly that this is not true. Mediums also go to great lengths to get the names of the spirits attempting to communicate with a sitter, often visibly struggling to get the first letter of a spirit's name or a word or phrase that the name sounds like if the name itself does not come through. By contrast, the less utilized tactics are also the most vague. A tall man who died of a respiratory ailment could be any number of people whereas a grandmother named Gertrude could only be one individual that either existed or did not exist. This suggests that mediums tend to favor risk-taking so as to assure more impressive and persuasive messages. Mediums would rather get a message completely wrong than provide a vague and unconvincing message. It also

suggests the level of confidence mediums have in their messages. Mediums have faith in the accuracy of their own messages, or else they would not be as likely to give falsifiable information from the platform. A trapeze artist would not attempt a daring feat on the high wire without a net if the artist was not reasonably confident that she would not fall and snap her neck.

In most cases when the spirit could be identified, the relationship was familial. Communicating spirits tended to stretch back no further than two generations from the sitter, but this is not to suggest that the spirit necessarily needed to have known the sitter in life. Grandparents and great grandparents have communicated with sitters born after the spirit's death. Generally, communicating spirits came from the immediate family or immediate extended family (aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins). For some sitters, particular spirit relatives communicated with them regularly at services and readings. This tended to be the case when the loved one had a close or especially contentious relationship with the sitter—a spouse or sibling—and passed before reaching old age. Two CSE members had joined the congregation shortly after losing their wives, and nearly every time either one received a message it would include something from their deceased spouse. Another member had apparently had a very difficult relationship with her sister just before she died, and her sister would often come through to her at services and other CSE events. But not all communicating spirits were blood relatives. Friends, neighbors, co-workers, and acquaintances would also come through with messages. For example, one congregant received a message from a waitress who had worked at a salad bar she frequented and

wanted to thank her for how kind she had been as a customer (service, 8 May 2012, CSE).

Once the medium has made an effort to identify the spirit to the sitter, the medium turns to what the spirit wants to convey. Most often this is a broad message of love, support, and pride, as is given by the last spirit in Gehman's message (40%). Some spirits talk about future events including birthdays, travel, and life changes (28%) as in this message delivered by CSE medium Gloria Saide: “[t]here's a grandmother with you who loved you dearly.... She's bringing you a white gift box. Only you are meant to know what it is. There's a birthday or some kind of celebration coming up” (service, 9 October 2011, CSE). Some mention the sitter's personal development in family, career, or spirituality (20%) as in the message delivered by Patricia Stranahan: “There's a woman with you who looks a lot like you. She's very proud of you for [recently] winning [an] award” (service, 16 October 2011, CSE). In a few cases spirits give advice, but this is relatively rare (10%). This message, given by touring medium Patricia Bell from the sitter's grandmother, is typical of spirit advice: “Get your hands in the dirt. Who was it that worked with the dirt?... You need to get grounded” (service, 15 May 2011, CSE). When a message comes from a family member or individual that the sitter can recognize, this second portion of the message is less important than when a message comes from someone who did not know the sitter in life.

If the medium is able to provide remarkably specific information that the sitter can confirm without soliciting information from the sitter then the medium has more

or less adequately established that the message could not have been arrived at through natural means. However, alternative paranormal explanations persist. Given humanity's relatively limited experience with the supernatural, there are doubtless innumerable possibilities that might account for the phenomena of mediumship that have yet to be discovered, but there is only one that Spiritualists have raised: psychism (book club, 2 December 2011, CSE). According to Gehman, all mediums are also psychics, and some messages are psychic rather than mediumistic in origin. If the message derives from the medium's interaction with the living sitter to whom the message is directed then the message is psychic. A technique called psychometry is frequently used by mediums to derive psychic messages. Psychometry is based on the principle that objects carry an "auric emanation:" a non-physical energy that adheres to the object, including all of its owner's traces and memories. The non-physical element of the object connects with the non-physical element of the object's owner and gives the medium impressions about the owner when the medium makes physical contact with the object (class, 1 November 2011, CSE). For example, I received a message from CSE medium James Hobson in which he saw me standing along a railroad track watching the bright light around the people inside a train passing by. Hobson interpreted this quasi-metaphorical scenario as a sign that I was on the correct spiritual path and would soon be able to see individuals' auras. Since the message made no reference to spirits and seemed to come directly from Hobson's non-physical perception of me, it was a psychic communication (service, 9 October 2011, CSE). It is a distinct possibility that, rather than communicating with spirits, the mediums are

actually discerning information about the sitter's deceased loved ones from the sitters themselves.

In performance, the possibility of a psychic reading never becomes problematic. Although a spirit message is preferable, there are no explicit taboos or stigmas about giving a psychic message from the platform. And messages are never categorized as they are given. The premise of any Spiritualist message ritual is that the messages are coming from the spirit world. As a consequence, Spiritualists tacitly allow psychic messages to be mistaken for spirit messages. This is not necessarily a case of purposefully misleading the audience. Often, mediums have a difficult time differentiating for themselves the source of their messages, especially less experienced mediums. And most sitters, particularly new attendees, never think to reflect on the difference. A medium need not reference any specific spirit in order to amaze or impress a sitter. If the medium is able to discern any detailed or specific information about the sitter that cannot be attributed to any natural source, this demonstrates that the medium is accessing a non-material or supernatural source. This in turn supports Spiritualism's premise that there is a non-material or spiritual dimension to each living person. In a workshop lecture, Gehman defined Spiritualism as “the opposite of materialism” (class, 25 October 2011) Although psychic messages do not prove the existence of a spirit world, they demonstrate that there is a non-physical dimension to existence.

The only way to truly differentiate between a psychic and spirit message is to turn the basic premise of the messages' persuasiveness on its head. In order for a

medium to demonstrate that she or he has not discerned information about a sitter psychically, the medium must tell the sitter information that she or he does not already know and cannot validate in the moment that the message is conveyed. Holly, who had been attending Sunday services regularly suddenly stopped attending for a full month. When she finally came back I asked why she had not been at the last month's services, and she said, "I had a message from Anne about a month ago that I was going to have respiratory trouble" (service, 3 April 2011, CSE). Although Holly was not aware of any medical condition, Gehman's message proved accurate and that was why Holly ended up missing the services. Messages that disprove psychism in favor of mediumship need not always be predictions, although they often are. The medium may provide information that the sitter does not know offhand but can confirm later. Patricia Stranahan's message to the woman at the Victorian séance whose son was about to meet his future wife at a party serves as a useful example of this kind of prediction.

When Messages Fail

The effort to prove by overcoming both supernatural and natural doubts is a terrific feat, and when mediums successfully execute it, the result can be remarkably convincing and even moving for sitters. But mediumship is a challenging practice and mediums are not always successful. While the attempt to provide specific and detailed information to sitters is perhaps what makes messages most persuasive, it also sets mediums up for spectacular public failures. James Hobson gave this

message at a Sunday service to a “young woman” who was attending for the first or second time: “I'm seeing you with an ancient scroll. It deals with knowledge. You won't stop learning. You're going to continue learning. You will graduate. You'll do very well. I also see you married and I see one child. You'll have one child. You might have more but I'm seeing one.” Although reluctant to interrupt, the woman felt the need to intervene, informing Hobson that she was already married with five children. “Whoa!,” said Hobson, “I was way off.” He then proceeded to attempt to provide an alternate justification for the message: “[m]aybe the reason I'm seeing one child is that you're having trouble with one child. As for the marriage I'm seeing... No. Not getting anything. Yes. Yes I am. The marriage is going to become a marriage. You're going to get closer. A renewal of your vows. Success is over your head” (service, 2 October 2011, CSE) I noted the following week, and for months afterward, this woman returned and even brought people with her—a child at one service, friends at another, and, much later, a romantic partner. This example, an admitted failure on the medium's part, reveals a great deal about what it means for a message to fail and the effect failure has on a spirit message's overall ability to prove.

Why didn't this message's blatant inaccuracy lead its sitter to reject spirit communication or Spiritualism outright? What brought this woman back to the CSE despite the medium's failure? There are two possible explanations for the woman's response: the Spiritualist and the social scientific. The Spiritualist explanation is that she accepted the Spiritualist interpretation of Hobson's failure: the message was wrong because Hobson interpreted his spirit impressions incorrectly, not because the

impressions themselves were inaccurate. The act of conveying the impressions that come from one or several spirits to a sitter is largely one of translation. As Anthony Steinbock argues: “there is an *irreducibility* of the experiences to language [for] mystics, even though these experiences are evoked for us only through their creative descriptions” (2007: 36). Similarly, the impressions that mediums receive do not necessarily translate easily into messages for sitters. Mediums do not simply listen to a spirit voice and repeat verbatim what the spirit says. They are responsible for taking the various sense impressions they receive from spirits and transforming them into verbal messages for sitters so that the sitter will understand what the spirit is attempting to share. The variegated nature of impressions can mean that they are often vague, incomplete, or difficult to decipher. At a demonstration in Lily Dale, medium Richard Schoeller explained that mediums often receive physical or emotional feelings from spirits attempting to give a message. For example, a spirit who was wider than Schoeller might cause him to feel a pulling outward or a shorter spirit might cause him to feel a compressing downward (workshop, 2 August 2011, Lily Dale). The indeterminate nature of these impressions can lead to inaccuracies if the medium is not cautious. A feeling of anxiety may mean that the spirit is anxious or it may mean that the spirit is referencing anxiety in the sitter's life. A pulling outward could mean that the spirit was always wider or it could mean that the spirit gained weight.

Mediums must develop strategies to overcome the indefinite nature of their impressions in order to give messages that adequately amaze. When mediums feel an

impression is too indeterminate to communicate they may give as much information as they can be certain of and leave the rest unfinished as in this message given by Patricia Stranahan: “I see a grandmother who stands tall and strong.... She had a wonderful sense of humor. She is calling you her little something. I can't quite make it out, but it's a name she had for you” (service, 11 September 2011, CSE). Or mediums may attempt to enlist the sitter's help as in this message given by visiting medium Benjamin George: “There's also a man in spirit. In the navy. Has your father passed on?” The sitter nodded affirmatively. “I have a person who starts projects but doesn't finish them. Does that describe your father?” The sitter responded, “No, but that describes me” (service, 6 October 2011, CSE). While consulting the sitter can help to make sense of a message—especially given the fact that most spirits shared a relationship with their sitters—consulting the sitter in this way tends to diminish the message's potential as proof.

Mediums avoid interpretation as much as they are able to by simply reporting their impressions as they receive them. Interpretation can be dangerous because, given the often indeterminate nature of the impressions received, the interpretation can be wrong and inadvertently render the message inaccurate. Ideally, the sitter will understand a message even if the medium does not. Medium Gloria Saide advises that mediums should “just report, don't interpret.” Saide—a health care provider in her early fifties—was another of my key informants. Having had a variety of supernatural experiences throughout her life, Saide picked up an introductory book on spirit communication that ultimately led her to the CSE and to mediumship. In her practice,

Saide tries to stick with describing the feelings, images, and impressions she experiences without making any effort to understand or explicate them for the sitter. Rather, she leaves it to the sitter to make sense of the impressions she conveys.

But many messages call out for interpretation. For example, a spirit may perform a gesture, the intention of which is not easily conveyed through the medium's verbal description of the act, as in this message given by Gehman: “[y]ou have lots of [spirit] guides with you... One is touching your feet. To bring healing. There has been something disturbing and the foundation is pulling back together” (service, 5 November 2011, CSE). If Gehman had simply described her visual impression of the guide touching the sitter's feet, the sitter may have attributed any number of meanings to the gesture. Since Gehman is able to see the gesture, she can extrapolate information from the spirit's action about the spirit's intention. But Gehman is not necessarily taking the whole interpretation from her visual impression. Spirits also convey impressions about their intentions that do not derive from any direct sensory impression. James Hobson often provides metaphorical messages that incorporate his own intuitive understanding of the meaning behind the metaphor: “There's a bridge and the bridge has collapsed. A stone structure. Several people are around in spirit. Not getting any names. Someone named Mary or it sounds like Mary. What this bridge represents is you can't cross a bridge in your life, but you're working on it, building it. You feel you're at a stand still but you're not” (service, 2 October 2011, CSE). Hobson understands the message not because he is specially skilled in symbol interpretation but because the spirits who conveyed the message also provided him

with an interpretation. To that end, some mediums develop codes that they share with the spirit world in order to limit the need for interpretation. Awtry developed a system such that if a spirit appeared on the right shoulder of a sitter it meant that the spirit was a member of the sitter's family, and the left shoulder indicated someone outside of the sitter's family. This code was unique to her, but, with the spirit's cooperation, it helped her to avoid misinterpreting the spirit's relationship to the sitter (pers. comm., 15 August 2011).

In light of this explanation, the fundamental principle of mediumship remains intact despite the message's failure: spirits can communicate with living mediums even if mediums do not always understand the impressions that spirits provide. Hobson's assertion that the woman would have a child had not come directly from the spirits, but was, rather, his interpretation of a visual impression he received of a single child. When the message proved inaccurate, he returned to that image to search for an alternative interpretation. The image of the child provided by the spirits (and the image of the marriage as well) was correct even if his personal understanding of the image proved fallacious.

The social scientific explanation for the sitter's response is that the first part of the message—when Hobson saw her continuing her education and graduating—impressed her enough that the medium's failure in the latter part did not make a difference to her overall adjudication of spirit communication in general. Joe—an infrequent attendee originally from the Philippines—received a message in which Gehman described a great uncle who was with him and went on to talk about a

significant change that was taking place in his life. When I asked if he found the message accurate, Joe told me that he could not place the great uncle, but nevertheless, he was pleased with the message because the second part about a change in his life rang true (service, 20 March 2011, CSE). In other words, if one part of a message serves as persuasive proof for a sitter, it does not matter whether any other segment of the message is inaccurate. According to sociologist Erik Goode, "If even a single instance of any one of these [paranormal] phenomena exists or works, the paranormal principle is valid" (2000: 58-59). If an archer shoots an arrow into the bull's eye of a target, the archer has proven that it is possible to hit the bull's eye with an arrow and that she is capable of doing it. Even if she misses a hundred times before or a hundred times afterward, the proof stands. From the perspective of an individual sitter, if a medium can prove, even once, that she or he has received a message from the spirit world then the principle of spirit communication has been established no matter the medium's previous or subsequent failures. The same holds true for the wider congregation. None of the thirty-seven other congregants in attendance suddenly got up and left the Center in disgust or refused to return after Hobson's failure, and Hobson himself was not impugned. In his next message, he amazed the sitter when he told her that a spirit named Barbara was standing behind her, telling her not to worry. Tearfully, the woman told Hobson that her sister, Barbara, had passed on recently, and that she was grateful to have a message from her.

How often do messages succeed at persuading and how often do they fail?

From the perspective of an observer, this is a very difficult question to answer. Sitters'

public responses do not necessarily match their private opinions of the medium's accuracy. At the Victorian séance, Greg nodded along with medium politely as she gave him his message, seeming to confirm the information she was conveying. After the séance, I had the opportunity to ask Greg privately what he thought of his message, and he told me that he was not impressed. The medium had mentioned a veteran in Greg's family, but Greg could not identify a corresponding individual among his relatives. By contrast, Riley sat at the same table with us, received messages from the same medium, and responded publicly much like Greg—politely nodding along with the message. When I asked her later if she thought her message was accurate, she told me that much of what the medium had said rang true for her, particularly as it related to her spiritual path. Even though the medium did not know Riley personally, she correctly recognized that Riley was training to become a spiritual healer. Often, sitters respond just as Riley and Greg did: nodding politely and encouraging the medium to continue with the message. Insofar as this response masks the sitter's actual experience with the message, it belies any attempt to determine if the sitter deems the medium accurate. A subtle social pressure tends to discourage individuals from confronting mediums publicly if a message does not resonate for them. And, since mediums encourage sitters who cannot identify a spirit to go home and research their family, talk to relatives, and consult friends about the spirit's identity, sitters could withhold judgment about a message until days, weeks, or even months after they receive it.

Out of a hundred messages I observed during Sunday services at the CSE, I recorded five verbal denials, fifteen verbal confirmations, and five emotional responses (which are tantamount to a confirmation). This suggests that about 25% of the messages given elicited an explicit verbal or emotional response and 75% of those responses were affirmative. (The proportion of positive verbal responses should come as no surprise insofar as it is much easier to express confirmation in a social setting that privileges affirmation.) But, since the reception of most messages falls into an indecipherable gray territory, I cannot quantify the overall frequency with which messages are deemed accurate or inaccurate. Indeed, even my own experience receiving and evaluating messages was indeterminate. In one of the first messages I received, I parsed the message's relative success and failure to myself in the car on the way home. The medium communicated a message from my grandfather. Since my grandfather was the only close relative in my family that had passed on I could have been amazed by the medium's accuracy, or I could have dismissed it as a lucky guess based on the medium's conscious or unconscious deduction that, given my age, the likeliest possibility for a deceased family member would be a grandparent. Ultimately, while I didn't deem the message necessarily invalid, I also did not find it convincing enough to prove the validity of spirit communication to me. This experience touches on a fundamental tenet of the message experience. The question of failure or success is not always black and white. Even though a message does not succeed, that does not necessarily mean that it fails. Messages may succeed partway and lead participants to seek out another, potentially more persuasive experience.

Being or becoming persuaded may not be something that happens in a single message but over the course of several messages over time. This poses a challenge to the notion of what it means to persuade. Does a message succeed if it amazes its sitter but the sitter never returns to a Spiritualist service or event again? Does it fail if it does not amaze, but the sitter returns to experience another message and another and then eventually converts? What role do messages play in attracting converts to the Spiritualist church?

The Ease of Messages, the Challenge of Mediumship

When messages are understood solely as a Spiritualist science—that is to say as a tool for amazement and persuasion—they offer no meaningful opportunity to would-be initiates for religious experience or expression. This prevents spirit communications from precipitating participants' interest in Spiritualism as a philosophy and religion. In *The Churching of America*, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke contend that in order to successfully win converts, religions must place demands on their members. Noting that while not all people seek religion, among those who do, “the demand is highest for religions that offer close relations with the supernatural and distinctive demands for membership without isolating individuals from the culture around them” (2005: 275). While messages certainly offer a quick if indirect connection with the supernatural, they fall short on defining boundaries and making demands on their sitters. The fact that messages appeal to a popular audience and trade on that appeal at séances and readings blurs the boundaries that delineate a

uniquely Spiritualist community. More importantly, messages create a relationship between the medium and the sitter in which almost all of the ritual's demands are shouldered by the medium. Sitters need not make any personal commitment or sacrifice in order to receive a message. In the case of a reading or séance they pay for the message just as they would any other service.

Messages are meant to demonstrate Spiritualism's validity, which requires a display of skill on the part of the medium. The medium is expected to do the work of amazing while the sitter sits back and evaluates the performance. In the NSAC brochure, "Hints for a Good Reading," message sitters are advised that "Spirit provides evidence of identity in many different ways... Be willing to verify such evidential information so the medium can proceed to any message that is to be given." Participants must only be "willing to verify" which leaves the burden almost entirely on the medium to provide something that participants can affirm. According to the brochure, participants should "[l]et the medium know when they are correct. Don't attempt to confuse them. Be fair." Sitters are further warned that "[a]rguing or wanting things done your way makes it difficult for the medium to function effectively and may lead to failure." Far from asking that participants do anything like trust the medium or open themselves to belief, the brochure requests little more from participants than that they refrain from being openly hostile. The NSAC's "hints" make no allowance for the medium's failure. If the medium is unable to offer anything convincing, participants are free to reject the medium and possibly the entire practice. Mediums are almost entirely responsible for proving the validity of

Spiritualism to newcomers. And so, they must be well-trained and sufficiently skilled if they are to serve these would-be initiates.

Mediums who perform under the auspices of the NSAC are required to complete an online course with the Morris Pratt Institute, to attend advanced classes with a registered medium, and to apprentice before they are officially recognized as qualified to practice spirit communication publicly. The process usually takes several years to complete. The duration and rigor of the training required to be a medium suggest the difficulty and seriousness of the undertaking. Officially, Spiritualists believe that anyone can be a medium. As Sarah Lerner said at the start of her gallery reading, “We’re all intuitive. Everybody can talk to Spirit because everybody is [a] spirit.” All people have an innate ability to make contact with spirits. This ideology surfaces in classes and workshops, during church lectures, and during the message service. When pressed, however, Gehman admitted that she believed mediumship was a calling (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). Gehman herself was called by a spirit during her near-death experience when she was fourteen old, as was CSE medium John Otey, who survived a plane crash and made contact with the divine through his experience. Other mediums describe fantastic and sudden encounters with the supernatural. Gloria Saide experienced supernatural visual experiences throughout her life, including a transparent vision of a deceased uncle just before she began to pursue mediumship (interview, 2 April 2012). Richard Schoeller had no sense of

mediumship until he came home one night to discover a room full of spirit relatives waiting for him (workshop, 2 August 2012).⁶

Although all people have an innate ability, only some are drawn or even capable of developing it to the degree that sanctioned mediums have. In her class on “Applied Mediumship Energetics” in Lily Dale, Marilyn Awtry compared mediumship to musicianship. Ability can only be brought out to the level that it exists within. As Awtry argued, anyone can play the piano, but not everyone can be a concert pianist (workshop, 4 August 2011, CSE). Awtry stressed the intense time commitment required for mediumship: “the student should understand instant mediumship does not exist. You cannot unfold in three day seminars; you cannot unfold in three month classes” (pers. comm. 15 August 2011). Mediumship is an innate talent that individuals have to varying degrees, but talent is not sufficient to sustain a successful practice. Both Gehman and Awtry stressed the need for practice in their own craft as mediums and for the development of their students. When her students are unable to receive messages from the spirits in class, Awtry will ask them if they have been practicing meditation and will inevitably discover that they have not. A great pianist must not only have innate talent but must practice vigorously to maintain and further develop proficiency.

Awtry's analogy also suggests an implied but very rarely articulated understanding among Spiritualist mediums and their sitters that some mediums are

⁶ Tom Driver argues that the shaman's “call comes after an illness, which is accompanied or else followed by a period of severe emotional distress” (1991: 72). While the backgrounds of these mediums do not suggest physical illness, they do indicate that mediums experience a period of emotional distress, usually caused by a traumatic near-death experience, which carries on the tradition established by tribal shamans.

better than others. During the course of my research I very rarely heard anyone criticize a specific medium's ability. That having been said, I discovered at the Victorian séance that many of the church's members and supporters had made their own private determinations about who the best and least skilled mediums were. Seven mediums served at the séance in 2011, and we were given a number that indicated the table where we should sit. The mediums were assigned numbers randomly after all of the attendees were seated and found the table they were to serve accordingly. Volunteers at the event told me that this system had been devised because when they used to allow attendees to select their own tables there would be some argument over who was able to sit with which medium. Attendees had determined that certain mediums were more skilled and would give better messages at the séance (séance, 26 March 2011, CSE).

What makes for a better or worse medium? According to Spiritualist standards it depends on the level of ability and methodology demonstrated in performing messages for a congregation or audience. Certification as a registered medium is not simply a matter of completing a series of requirements. Mediums must also demonstrate a degree of accuracy in their messages. The weekly bulletin distributed at Sunday services includes the following statement: "If the message ministers are students, they are working toward their certification in mediumship. If the message given to you is accurate, providing you with proof of the continuity of life, please request and complete an affidavit form for the student."⁷ If students cannot

⁷ I have only seen student mediums perform in Lily Dale, and they are always introduced as students in order to alleviate the higher standard applied to certified mediums. Students are only supposed to practice publicly while under the supervision of a certified medium.

sufficiently prove the accuracy of their communications to their sitters, they cannot achieve certification.

Mediumistic ability is also tiered. While all mediums are psychics, not all psychics are mediums. Psychic impressions are easier to receive than mediumistic impressions. And so, less skilled practitioners may be able to convey information about a sitter's life but not necessarily from the sitter's loved ones in the spirit world or spirit guides (class, 1 November 2011, CSE). Accessing one's perception of spirits and the spirit world requires a higher degree of ability and, in many cases, training. More skilled mediums also tend to have a more complete sensory experience of the spirit world. The popular conception of a sixth sense is somewhat reductive when applied to mediumistic practice. In fact, mediums have non-physical senses that complement each of the physical senses. Clairvoyance (the ability to see spirits), clairaudience (the ability to hear spirits), and clairsentience (the ability to feel spirit impressions) are the most common. Clairsentience is generally the first sense to develop, and, as mediums advance they begin to receive sights and sounds from the spirit world. The more skilled the medium, the more senses a medium can bring to bear, and the more detailed and persuasive a message will be. For example, John Otey delivered a message from a sitter's grandmother in which he could *see* her the way she looked later in life, drawn and thin, but he could *feel* the energy and vitality she possessed when she was younger (service, 10 April 2011, CSE).

There is one notable exception to the rule that mediums shoulder the burden for the success of spirit communication. In order to facilitate the medium's ability to

give messages, the audience is expected to sing. Music, particularly as the product of one or several human voices, “raises the vibration.” That is to say, music both creates a conducive environment in which mediums can receive spirit messages and helps to project the medium into the state of mind required for spirit communication. For a Sunday message service, this music comes in the form of a hymn. While several hymns are sung throughout the course of the service, the hymn that directly precedes the message service is essential to the medium's process. Gehman demonstrated this one Sunday when the congregation struggled with the hymn “Draw Thou Near” just before she gave her messages (service, 30 October 2011, CSE). The congregation was not familiar with this hymn and many dropped out of the singing or lost the rhythm partway through. Although it was not on the day's program, Gehman asked that we sing another hymn before she began: “Peace Like a River”—a song that the congregation sings often. Although Gehman prefers that a song have spiritual significance in order to facilitate messages, the songs used to raise the vibration need not always be religious hymns. At a workshop demonstration in Lily Dale we raised the medium's vibration with “Michael Row Your Boat Ashore,” the Carpenters' “Sing,” and the oddly appropriate “I Have a Dream” by the Swedish pop group ABBA (workshop, 2 August 2011, Lily Dale).⁸ Generally, the songs or hymns tend to be upbeat with a positive (if not directly spiritual) message. The medium often participates in the singing at first, but then, at some point during the song or series of

⁸ The lyrics to the ABBA tune sung in this context seem to reference the medium's entry into a nonstandard form of consciousness: “I have a dream, a fantasy / To help me through reality / And my destination makes it worth the while / Pushing through the darkness still another mile.... I believe in angels / When I know the time is right for me. / I'll cross the stream—I have a dream” (workshop, 2 August 2011, Lily Dale).

songs, stops singing and stands silently as the song continues. Gehman will usually sing the first verse or two (depending on the total number of verses in the song) and then stop, and, at the demonstration in Lily Dale, the medium sang the first verses of the first song then only picked up a few words at the end of a verse or two before stopping entirely.

According to Gehman, the quality of the singing is not the issue. The fullness and enthusiasm of the group's participation in the singing is what makes the song functional for the medium's purposes. When Gehman requested "Peace Like a River," she playfully warned that if we did not sing we would not get a message. The song suggests the message service's underlying qualification for its audience. In order to receive a message, an individual must participate by actively intending—choosing to stand and sing—to receive a message. The willingness to participate and "verify" suggests that participants must bring an openness to accepting the validity of spirit communication. Spiritualists' proof can only succeed if it opens onto a receptive sitter who is willing to accept and believe in spirit communication.

The problem with the message service is that it only offers two roles to potential initiates: medium or sitter. The sitter is a passive role whose job it is to be persuaded and amused. Consequently, the demand is too low to inspire any sort of religious commitment. By contrast, to be a medium requires an intense, long-term commitment. For newcomers, the prospect of pursuing mediumship can be daunting and impractical. Inherent within the feeling of being amazed is a sense that the person who has amazed me has achieved something that I cannot fathom doing myself.

Mediums like Sarah Lerner may profess to her audiences that mediumship is a natural and inherent faculty that anyone can develop, but her audience understands that Lerner's ability is far beyond what any of them can easily attain. While a church must make demands on its participants if it is going to be successful, there are limits. Stark and Finke caution that “religious organizations can make too many demands, just as they can make too few” (2005: 251). If—as the message ritual seems to suggest—the only alternative to the role of sitter is to become a medium, the extensive training, daily meditation, and testing process place that role at too great a remove to inspire devotees to pursue it. And so, messages in and of themselves fall short at encouraging conversions. Of the seven sitters who sat with me at the Victorian séance, Kathy Riley was the only person besides myself to join the Center. That having been said, Spiritualists do win converts. Roughly twenty people joined the CSE during the course of my research. And nearly all of these individuals' first experience with Spiritualism was sitting for a message. This suggests that messages have the capacity to move individuals toward conversion, but how? In order for messages to inspire a religious commitment, they must make greater demands on their sitters than the promise to amaze and persuade affords. I argue that mediums are able to make these demands by side-stepping the quest for proof in order to offer messages that touch closer to the meaning and philosophy of spirit communication.

Beyond Persuasion: Messages that Begin with Belief

The discussion at a Friday night book club meeting on *The Priest and the Medium*—a biographical account of Gehman's relationship with Wayne Knoll—had grown particularly intense (see Figure 5). We were talking about the ways in which Spiritualism tends to be misunderstood by non-Spiritualists. Some members complained about friends and family who dismiss their religion or are hostile toward their beliefs. Kelly—a CSE member in her forties who administrates all of the CSE's workshops and spends a great deal of time at the Center—mentioned her husband, an Orthodox Romanian, who does not share her commitment to Spiritualism. With a sense of optimism, she said, “He will eventually make it to this church.” Larry—Scott McNickle's father, a member in his fifties who comes from a family of Protestants who do not approve of his religion—said, “It's not us, the Spiritualists, looking out. It's the other religions looking toward us because they don't understand. There is a lot of misperceptions I find myself defending.” Gehman replied, “[t]his is an opportunity to teach.” Knoll chimed in, “There is nothing that Anne practices or does that is against my religion.... I see myself as both a practicing Catholic and a practicing Spiritualist. Why should I give up anything that brings me closer to God?” Gehman said, “[m]any priests and ministers send people to me for grief counseling.” I asked whether popular culture helped or hurt outsiders' impression of Spiritualism. Gehman replied, “popular culture gives the false impression that it's all about the phenomena and not the philosophy... It's up to us to help convey the right impression about what Spiritualism is about.” In other words, the act of proving the validity of spirit communication (“the phenomena”) can tend to overshadow the greater meaning of

that proof (“the philosophy”) thereby undermining any effort to encourage individuals to adopt the system of belief that Spiritualists have developed around spirit communication.



Figure 5: Kathy Riley and Wayne Knoll at a book club meeting at the CSE. Photograph by the author.

Knoll concluded that an important part of the disconnect with non-Spiritualists is that they do not understand that Spiritualism is a religion like any other. Many think of spirit communication as either fraudulent or an “occult” activity that makes no reference to any divine or higher power. In one of the most directed criticisms of mediumship, the adult cartoon *South Park* devoted an episode to condemning television medium John Edward as “the biggest douche in the universe” for giving what the cartoon characterized as false hope to the bereaved. Religious authorities often denounce Spiritualism under the wider umbrella of the occult. According to the Old Testament, “A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads”

(Leviticus 20: 27). An issue of the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Awake!* Magazine featured an article that attacked mediumship as inherently evil. While the images suggested that the magazine was particularly interested in addressing a recent media craze for vampires and werewolves, the article included spirit communication among the sins it was criticizing⁹. Similarly, many Catholic clergy, maintaining the long-held dogmatic position that the dead will not return to earth until the second coming of Christ, list séances and Ouija boards along with “crystals, reiki, witchcraft, black magic, [and] tarot cards” as evidence of a burgeoning paganism which must be stopped.¹⁰

As the Catholic authorities' list of condemned practices suggests, Wiccans, followers of syncretic religions like Vodou and Santeria, and New Age practitioners are often attacked by the same critics. Each of these faiths profess to achieve a temporal result for their adherents through “magical” activity; that is to say, they invoke supernatural forces to improve their earthly conditions. Similarly, Spiritualists invoke the spirits to amaze and persuade newcomers of the validity of spirit communication. This gives the mistaken impression that there is no greater meaning to their rituals. As one congregant complained, “The [Judeo-Christian] religions treat each other on an even level, but most say Anne is a kook.” Knoll admitted that he often experienced an involuntary revulsion at seeing others practicing an unfamiliar religion: “[w]e tend to stay in our comfort zone” To counter this, Knoll “pictured these people in the church, hearts and minds open to God, and that was all it took to overcome the feeling” (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE). From Knoll's

⁹ *Awake!*, February 2011.

¹⁰ *Times* (New York), 25 February 2012.

perspective, the key to gaining acceptance and opening up the possibility for conversion is to get others to understand that Spiritualism is about more than just spirit communication. Non-Spiritualists should be helped to realize that, at its root, spirit communication is about connecting with a higher power, a concept that resonates across most religions. I asked Gehman what gave the CSE its longevity over the past three decades. She said,

I think it's the philosophy and the education and that we do not focus exclusively on the phenomena....I remember I was talking with a Spiritualist minister in New England and she said they were losing their church. They couldn't pay the mortgage and they so they were having more and more [séance] circles. But that's not where it is. That's not what brings people in. But that's what a lot of Spiritualist churches do. They have message circles and that's what they do. They don't go beyond that. And I've never wanted to focus just on the phenomena. And you'll see that we have very few circles. Because I know that's of value but it's not *the* value. The value is to learn to live joyfully, abundantly, peacefully, and progressively with spirit and in the spirit of love and light. Every once in a while someone from another church will say why don't you have more circles the public love that. And sure they love it, but is that what they need? (interview, 22 January 2013).

Although Spiritualists only ever profess that messages are about proving life's continuity, the act of proving is meant to precipitate a very specific result in the message's receiver. Ideally, a medium's message should lead to the exploration and acceptance of Spiritualist philosophy and, ultimately, to membership in a Spiritualist congregation. One way that Spiritualists work to achieve this result is by incorporating rituals and lectures into their events that reveal a dimension of meaning to the messages beyond their power to amaze and persuade. At the gallery reading with Sarah Lerner, she paused from giving messages twice. The first time, roughly halfway through the event, she gave a short lecture on pursuing dreams and the value

of meditation: “Meditation is one of the biggest things. Meditation is key to experiencing the spirit within us. If we don't take time for ourselves, our evolving, we're telling the universe I'm not worth the time or the effort” (service, 15 April 2011, CSE). And just before the conclusion of the messages we paused again for a visualization meditation in which we were meant to picture departed loved ones and attempt to picture spirit guides in order to receive advise on how best to pursue our dreams. In both of these short breaks there was no discernible effort to prove to or otherwise impress the audience. Rather, the medium was speaking and guiding us toward an understanding of the import of the messages beyond the act of proving, i.e., to utilize communion with spirits in order to pursue our own spiritual evolution. Similarly, the Victorian séance pointed toward the sacredness of the messages by marking the event as a commemoration of the birth of spirit communication. Before the messages began, mediums Marilyn Awtry and Jeannie Kerr-Lerch gave a historical lecture on the Fox Sisters. This rooted the messages in a long-standing tradition that had been developing a system of belief for over a century-and-a-half.

Even with these philosophical interludes, a séance or reading, which are most effective at drawing newcomers, give considerably less focus to Spiritualism's philosophy than weekly church services. On Sundays, the role the messages play is reduced. They come at the end of the service, and on average only fifteen percent of the congregation receive them. Consequently, Sunday services tend to be less popular with newcomers, although one or two generally surface each weekend. At a Sunday service, messages are only one third of the day's events. The rest of the service is

devoted to Spiritualist philosophy—meditation, recitation, and a lecture—and building the sense of community among congregants by singing hymns together and greeting one another in fellowship. This shift in emphasis is made all the more apparent by the fact that the messages are the last event of the day. On Sundays, the philosophy is literally placed before the phenomena. The challenge becomes that, while Spiritualist philosophy is given a prominent place on Sundays, it often remains disconnected from the messages themselves. The meditation is geared toward healing and the recitations and hymns make reference to spirit communication, but only to assert that messages are a sacred and religious act that Spiritualists affirm as valid without any further explication of their meaning. Lectures occasionally address the philosophy of spirit communication, but not often. January's lectures are devoted to world religions and speakers come in from other faiths to discuss what they believe and how they practice. In February, African American speakers are invited to speak on topics related to black history. And various non-Spiritualist guests visit to lecture throughout the year. Even regular Spiritualist lecturers like Wayne Knoll and John Otey tend to focus on issues that relate indirectly to the philosophy of Spiritualist ritual in their lectures on mythology, religious tolerance, overcoming life challenges, and compassion. I estimate that only about twenty percent of Sunday lectures ever specifically address spirit communication, and I have only heard one lecture explore the topic in depth. While the lectures contribute to the general sense that there is an underlying purpose and philosophy to Spiritualism, they make no concerted effort to deepen congregants' perspective toward the messages.

On Sundays, the messages are also bracketed by metacommunications that point toward the significance of spirit communication beyond its ability to prove and persuade.¹¹ The messages are introduced with a direct address from the day's chairperson about their meaning and purpose. The chairperson is a rotating role filled by various members who moderate the service. The chairperson's address immediately before the message service explicitly labels the messages as a sacred act. Carol Caesar—a member in her early forties who has been a Spiritualist for most of her life—gave this address one Sunday: “messages are a sacred part of the Spiritualist service... They sometimes come from departed loved ones and sometimes from guardian angels. The principle reasons for the message service are to prove the continuity of life, to ease the grieving process, and to make our lives more important. Life becomes more important to us when we understand its significance through its continuity” (service, 10 April 2011, CSE). While this introduction primes the congregation to search for deeper meaning within the messages, it does not provide the meaning itself. Messages may reorient our understanding of the importance of life, but it is up to the messages themselves to achieve that effect. And, if their only concern is proving, persuading, and amazing then they will inevitably fall short.

Spirit Guides

Not all messages are performed to amaze. Some messages focus directly on the significance of the sitter's existence and perform what I call a religious function.

¹¹ Metacommunications, “communication about communication,” are part of how a verbal performance is “keyed” or framed, according to Bauman (1977: 15).

6% of the messages I surveyed came from spirits who had no blood relation to the sitter and had never known the sitter in life. These were the “guardian angels” that Caesar referred to in her introduction, although they are more often called “spirit guides.” For the most part, these are spirits who lived and died several generations before the sitter was born. Guides are higher spirits (i.e., they possess an especially well-developed spiritual evolution)¹² and give direction to the living through their intuition.¹³ Each living person has one or several spirit guides that assist them in various ways to work toward their own personal and spiritual evolution (class, 22 November 2011, CSE). For example, I received a message from a guide that the medium, Gehman, identified as a man of science and philosophy from the early part of the nineteenth century who, according to the message, assists me with my work by inspiring my ideas. Gehman noted that the guide was very similar to me intellectually and spiritually, and that he wanted to assure me that my plans would go forward as I hoped. The first part of Gehman's message offered little in the way of persuasive proof. Since I never knew my guide as a living person, I could neither confirm nor deny that such a man existed. Confirmation comes from either a connection I perceive between myself and the guide as he is described or the recognition of the guide's influence in my life. For example, I could choose to find confirmation in the fact that I am a researcher and so it stands to reason that a man with scientific and

¹² See Chapter 5: Unfoldment.

¹³ Guiding spirits are also significant to shamanic practice. All shamans are attended and assisted by spirit guides, but some shamanic practices hold with Spiritualism that everyone has their own guides. According to Michael Harner, “[t]o perform his work, the shaman depends on special, personal power, which is usually supplied by his guardian and helping spirits. Each shaman generally has at least one guardian spirit in his service, whether or not he also possesses helping spirits” (1980: 42).

philosophical interests would work with me. Or, I could retroactively recognize the guide's influence on my work as a writer.

While spirit guides almost never explicitly identify themselves with a full name, sitters have a natural tendency to try to place them among the famous historical figures they know. Carol Caesar cautioned me against this after I received my message, informing me that it is always more likely that it is a regular person rather than a famous person serving as an individual's guide (service, 20 March 2011, CSE). According to Gehman, the more evolved a spirit guide is, the less likely the guide is to give a name. A preoccupation with fame, even in the spirit world, indicates an unhealthy devotion to individual ego (class, 22 November 2011, CSE). Many guides tend to be Native American, often working in groups of more than one with a single sitter. Gehman explains to congregants, “so often our Native friends assist us particularly in the beginning of our [spiritual] unfoldment” (see Figure 6). Native Americans have been associated with Spiritualism since its founding. Cora Richmond channeled the spirit of an American Indian girl in her trance lectures (Barrett 1895), the Eddy brothers manifested several different Native Americans at their séances, and Lily Dale had a resident Native spiritual teacher and healer in Mohawk Chief Os-Ke-Non-Ton through the 1930s and 40s.¹⁴ In her article on the intersection between Shakerism, Spiritualism, and art and theatre in the nineteenth century, Bridget Bennett contends that “Indian spirits indicated access to a world of spirituality and truth—even authenticity” (2005: 130). Werner Sollors argues in *American Quarterly* that Spiritualism was an attempt to sacralize an increasingly mechanistic, technology-

¹⁴ *Saturday Evening Post*, 4 February 1860; “Chief Os-Ke-Non-Ton,” Lily Dale Historical Society.

obsessed America, and that Native Americans were primarily put to this use: “the strongest support for the practical progress of America coming from the spirit realm was extended by the ethereal shapes of the American Indians, who were—almost by definition—the nonmodern, the traditional ones” (1983: 479). In other words, American Indian spirits possessed an inherent authenticity that allowed them to serve as more persuasive proof. From a Spiritualist perspective, these qualities, rather than serving a purely rhetorical function, are what make Native spirits particularly strong guides. They are more spiritual and so have a stronger ability to guide the living along their spiritual path.



Figure 6: A photograph displayed at the Lily Dale Library of "medium John Slater and his close friend Chief Shongo" circa 1900. Photograph by Katie Lesser.

Guides run counter to the medium's inclination to provide falsifiable information to their sitters. Since sitters know nothing about their guides until the medium tells them, the existence or identity of a guide cannot be disproven. As such,

guides should not be able to impress or amaze a sitter. And yet, they are a persistent if infrequent visitor at Spiritualist message services and readings. Guide messages perform a religious rather than a evidential function in that they purport to reflect the sitter's spirituality and to locate the sitter within a community of divine beings oriented toward the sitter's personal spiritual evolution. For example, Gehman brought through a Native American guide for a toddler. The guide appeared with a bright star and the message that the girl would achieve great things in this dimension (service, 11 September 2011, CSE). Barbara Sanson made note of a spirit with one member of the congregation that she would only identify as a "master teacher." The spirit noted that the sitter had gone through a spiritual change and a "change of consciousness" and thanked the man for being at the service (service, 1 May 2011, CSE). Guides need not always manifest as individuals. Sometimes they are referenced as an impersonal divine light. For example, Gehman observed a bright light around one sitter and the light allowed Gehman to know that the woman had been very prayerful in regard to healing. The light prompted Gehman to ask the woman why she doubted her intuition. At another service a column of light appeared around a woman with the reminder that she had not been and would not be abandoned (service, 30 January 2011, CSE). Identifying a guide resolves the conflict inherent within the proof-driven message by neither demanding too much nor too little from the sitter. Rather than amazing a passive sitter or overwhelming the sitter with the prospect of mediumship, the guide message conveys that the sitter is evolving spiritually, and that the sitter should endeavor to continue this process. The evolution

need not end in mediumship or any position of religious authority, but it also should not be neglected.

Although only 6% of messages come directly from guides, most messages are hybrids, blending amazement and religion in a variety of different ways. Sometimes guides come in along with family members. Other times, messages from family members or friends can move in and out of providing what would otherwise be a guide's message. For example, at one service Gehman began as she often does by observing “a beautiful aura of light” around a sitter. She continued, “There's been a recent effort on your part to reach out to God. You are trying to re-connect. Loved ones in the spirit world want you to know they are with you in this process. I'm hearing Martha. Also Betty: a woman who lost her hair through cancer. She manifests with you and touches her hair as if to say she's whole again. She's pleased with the recent change in you. I hope you feel that presence and know they are with you” (service, 30 October 2011, CSE). Before offering proof in the form of names and ailments, the spirits Martha and Betty acted as guides acknowledging the sitter's commitment to her spirituality and encouraging her to continue to pursue mediumship. Just as the ultimate truth or falsity of a message can often fall into a gray area for sitters, so too can a message's function blend philosophy and persuasion.

The nature of the message a medium relays to a sitter is, according to Saide, dependent upon several factors: “the message depends a lot on your own surrounding energy and the energy of the space and the person you're working with” (interview, 2 April 2012). Guide messages are more frequent at Sunday services when the general

attitude is more philosophical than at séances or readings when the audience is more entertainment driven. And, as the guide messages themselves suggest, the individual spirit communication is only partially responsible for the effect it is able to achieve in its sitter. Guide messages encourage sitters to trust themselves, to aspire to greatness, to help others, to connect with their spirituality, to feel the presence of divine forces in their lives, and to invest time and energy into their own spiritual growth. They imply without ever explicitly suggesting that sitters should make Spiritualism a more integral part of their lives. Sitters, having been brought to this conscious realization must then make the choice to act on it. The act of receiving a guide message is not in itself sufficient to precipitate a conversion. Finally, messages can only ever be a call to action.

This gets to the heart of what the religious function of spirit communication actually is. The purpose of a spirit message is to advance sitters' consciousness toward a deeper connection to their own spirituality so that the individual will take action to become a more spiritual person. All spirit messages work toward this end, but their results depend on the starting place of each individual sitter. A message can precipitate a commitment and conversion to Spiritualism, but only if the sitter's conscious understanding has evolved to the point that a conversion is possible at the moment that the message is received. If a sitter has not evolved spiritually to the point that a message can advance her or him into a religious conversion, then the medium must be content to amaze and persuade. This ideology enhances the appeal of membership within a Spiritualist church. The relatively small coterie of Spiritualists

are a spiritual elite who were sufficiently enlightened to realize the significance of spirit communication and allow it to blossom into a deep personal commitment.

The Role of Belief in Spirit Communication

How does the performance of spirit messages solicit and define a congregation that is distinctly Spiritualist? Through their effort to persuade, the messages demonstrate that belief in the spirits is not on the same order as belief in Jesus Christ or Jehovah. The evidence for the existence of spirits is not, first and foremost, an abstract argument or a subjective experience of religious feeling or faith. It is a demonstration of supernatural power. Spiritualist belief hinges on intersubjectivity: the ability to independently confirm the existence of some entity in the world. The medium perceives a spirit in such a way that the sitter can confirm, through her or his own subjective judgment, that the medium is in fact perceiving the spirit. This intersubjectivity lends the spirits a stronger claim to existence in the phenomenal world, and for Spiritualists, this validates their system of belief. Many mainstream religions and their less mainstream sects, by contrast, do not base belief in intersubjective verification. Faith may lead to phenomena (or “miracles”) that can be intersubjectively confirmed, but these experiences are a product of belief, not its starting place. Catholic transubstantiation, for example, only takes place for the true believer. Pentecostal snake handlers prove the value of their faith to protect them against the serpent's bite, but the efficacy of the ritual is contingent on participants' belief. If someone is bitten, this may be a sign that he or she did not believe enough,

or a believer who is bitten may explain the bite as a test, pointing to an eventual recovery as the true demonstration of her or his faith. In either case, belief precedes the miracle. (Maguire 1981). In the message service, nascent or would-be Spiritualists bring a propensity to believe that can only become actual belief if the newcomer finds confirmation in the messages themselves. If a message fails, they may continue to attend hoping to receive a persuasive message or abandon Spiritualism entirely. Intersubjective confirmation is essential to developing belief and moving down the path toward conversion.

But the promise of a demonstration of spiritual power invites participants who are not necessarily interested in developing a system of belief. Although Spiritualist belief is distinct in the way it foregrounds intersubjective evidence, it also endeavors to be a religion like any other in that it strives to offer a comprehensive system of belief and a community of believers for participants to commit themselves to. A Spiritualist is not only one who seeks intersubjective evidence but one for whom that evidence is the basis for forming a religious or spiritual commitment to a broader life philosophy. Spiritualists require intersubjective confirmation in order to inspire belief, but they also intend for spirit communication to have broader implications for their lives. From society at large, the message service draws out those people with an interest in intersubjective paranormal or supernatural experience. Through guide messages, the performance then culls a smaller group from this audience in order to form a congregation of Spiritualist believers.

Spiritualists acquire belief over time through their participation in rituals that provide them with validation for those beliefs. This differentiates them from faith-based traditions. David J. Hufford contends that belief is not necessarily irrational but may be the product of “events accurately observed and reasoning properly carried out” (1982: xiii). Colin Turnbull defines belief as a “rational form of religious experience” and faith, in opposition, as non-rational (1990:70). Spiritualist belief is more rational than non-rational, but it relies on experiences that cannot necessarily be articulated through logical argumentation. Although Spiritualists reason through the meaning of mediumship, they base their practice on an experiential understanding that transcends any second-order rationalizations. As Gehman teaches, “through psychic and mediumistic experiences our philosophy must expand. The purpose becomes to bring guidance, healing, upliftment, and awareness of the spiritual realm. Through that, the philosophy begins to unfold” (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). Philosophy, in this context, is a kind of experiential understanding that cannot be grasped or understood except through the process of spiritual unfoldment. Spiritualists base their beliefs on increasingly direct encounters with the spirit world. This accumulation of experiences forms a spiritual understanding that encourages deeper commitment to Spiritualism. The more experiences I gather, the more complete my understanding of the spirit world and spirit communication, the deeper my belief. In *Varieties of Religious Experience* William James argued that many religious devotees “possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-

sensible realities directly apprehended” (1902: 59). For Spiritualists, movement between intellectual confirmation and direct sensory and/or emotional experience is central to the practice.

For Spiritualists, an exercise of belief always opens onto an experience of proof just as an experience of proof always opens onto an exercise of belief. No matter how persuasive the proof that comes through the message service, the messages cannot prove their validity to anyone who is unwilling to believe in spirit communication. Similarly, no matter how fervently I believe that I am receiving a spirit communication, I cannot know for certain unless I am able to receive confirmation from outside of myself that my message is legitimate. Spiritualist belief can be defined as an intention that leads to a commitment. As a newcomer, I must first intend to engage with Spiritualist ritual and be willing to affirm its validity. As a convert, I must commit myself to my own spiritual unfoldment if I am to achieve personal contact with the spirit world. Spiritualists follow the path of conversion by discovering that the reward for intention is a deeper experiential understanding. That understanding then inspires a deeper intentional commitment to achieving spirit contact and the cycle continues. Newcomers suffer from what Alva Noe calls experiential blindness. Noe contends that “[t]o perceive is not merely to have sensory stimulation. It is to have sensory stimulation one understands.” (2004: 181) We cannot perceive that which we have no conceptual understanding for. One cannot perceive a spirit, for example, if one has no concept of what it is like to see, hear, or feel a spirit's presence. Messages provide a vicarious experience of spirit contact that

expands participants' understanding of what spirit contact is like. Healing forms the bridge from vicarious to direct experience by facilitating a mediated but direct engagement with the spirit world. These experiences then build a conceptual foundation from which Spiritualists can attempt to make their own direct contact with the spirit world, pursued through the rituals of unfoldment.

Messages for Converts and Performative Transformation

For converted Spiritualists—who attend the message service on a regular basis—spirit messages take on a function that exceeds amazing or persuading and is, in fact, more akin to spiritual transformation. According to Ronald Grimes, “[t]he more deeply an enactment is received, the more an audience becomes a congregation and the more a performance becomes ritualized” (1982: 69). Whereas new attendees experience messages for the first or second time as a sincere attempt to prove, the CSE's members experience messages for the hundredth or thousandth time as a ritualized act. Messages have nothing to prove to members because they have already accepted the continuity of life. Although new attendees, who receive roughly half of the messages, sit in the back and often do not vocalize any confirmation or denial of their messages, members almost never turn to see a sitter's reaction. They keep their attention focused on the medium on the platform. They are already confident that the message possesses validity. According to CSE member Scott McNickle:

Since my time attending the CSE, I no longer have the same eagerness to receive a message. Not because I don't cherish them and take immense solace in their comfort. To the contrary, I've received enough that I see that it's truly not necessary. They're nice and warming, but after a certain point of

exploration and evaluation, you begin to privately rest assured that things are perfect the way they are and that death is just a part of the process (pers. comm. 16 April 2011).

Even though the messages no longer have anything to prove, McNickle suggests that they still have a value that exceeds their evidential function. For some, this value can be very pragmatic. Joanna Simon said, “often I am told something I already know, but view it as [an] important validation of circumstances and then I tend to get some guidance about it. So I think that I learn and gain insight” (pers. comm., 9 December 2011). But often, the value is more amorphous, as in the emotional response McNickle identifies. A given message's value also takes on a spiritual or metaphysical dimension that is not easily characterized on an emotional spectrum. Kathy Riley characterized her engagement with messages as “a beautiful experience that I welcome because it helps me become a better person and connect with my higher self.” For Riley, who attends CSE services nearly every Sunday, participation “awakens my spirit” (pers. comm., 22 October 2011).

Gehman often speaks directly to the significance of the messages for those who no longer require proof in her concluding comments after she has finished the service: “As we work with spirit it is my prayer that you can feel that loving touch of spirit” and “[u]sually when a medium is working you can touch in with that love and light [as well] and feel that touch of spirit;”(services, 22 January 2011 and 30 October 2011). Gehman addresses the entire congregation with these comments, not just the particular individuals who receive messages. She intends for the messages to create a situation in which everyone—not just those to whom the messages are specifically

directed—will “feel that loving touch of spirit.” In this way, the Spiritualist performance functions in a similar way to what Bert States says of the art object: “what is before us, the painting itself, offers a different kind of *here* than we 'usually tend to be' in. The painting is a place of disclosure, not a place of reference” (1985: 4) The same could be said of the religious experience of congregants at the message or healing service. Just as the painting opens up a dimension of being to the viewer that removes her or him from a conventional “here,” the medium opens up a world of spirits to the congregation. And the medium's messages or physical contact are not intended to make reference to this world of spirits as someplace else or as a metaphor but rather to disclose them as actually present in the space with the congregation.

From a cognitive perspective, the Spiritualist service fills a similar function to that of many other weekly religious services. As they go about their daily tasks throughout the week, Spiritualists naturally forget that spiritual inspiration is always available, the spirits are ever-present, and they are always connected to the spirit world. The message service raises their awareness of this connection, just as it raises a Christian's awareness of Christ's ever-present love. But it is significant that Gehman expresses a hope that her congregation “feels” rather than “understands” or “rediscovers” their connection with the spirits. Mediums, by virtue of their developed connection to the spirit world, tend to draw spirits into their presence. The community of like-minded individuals open to spirit communication that forms at the CSE every Sunday tends to facilitate contact with the spirit world. And so, spirits are actually more present at a Spiritualist service than they are at any other moment in a

participant's week. These conditions make it more likely that non-mediums can have their own firsthand sensations of the spirit world. From this perspective, McNickle's emotional engagement and Riley's connection with her higher self can be interpreted as palpable encounters with the spirit world.

For Spiritualist converts, messages take on a kind of performative function (Austin 1962). That is to say, they do not describe but rather achieve something through their utterance. While the specific content of the message tends to be a non-performative description of what the medium sees, hears, or feels of the non-physical realm, the act of describing becomes performative insofar as it actually makes spirits present in the room with the congregation and establishes a connection between the congregation and the spirits. By uttering a message, the medium opens a pathway between the living and the dead that allows for a freer communion with the spirits. In other words, the act of communicating messages brings spirits into both the medium's and the sitter's "vibration"—the non-physical space that overlaps individuals' physical location in the world.

In this way, the messages could be said to take on an embodied and cognitive performativity as defined by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter*, "[p]erformativity is... not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals and dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (1993: 12). The repetition of the messages Sunday after Sunday creates a transformation in regular participants by establishing—through the iteration and reiteration of the mediums' communications—the norm that

spirits are present around them and that they are connected to them. By raising the congregation's awareness of the presence of the spirits, converts become more spiritually attuned which, in turn, makes them better able to achieve their own direct contact with the spirit world. As Butler suggests, repetition achieves this in a way that is often concealed from the participant. By repeatedly experiencing the message service, participants become increasingly open to the influence of the spirit world. The messages open a gateway between participants and the spirit world that stretches wider with each communication they experience, whether the message is for them or simply performed in their presence.¹⁵

According to Catherine Bell, ritual functions to “bring the social body, the community and the largest image of reality into some reassuring configuration of coherent unity” such that “the coherence is rendered and experienced as redemptive for those empowered by the schemes of the ritual” (1992: 115). At a Sunday service, Spiritualists create a space in which they can hope for a stronger and deeper connection with the spirit world—a hope that does not obtain in their daily lives. In the presence of a network of support formed by their fellow congregants, the mediums, and the spirit messages, unfolding Spiritualists can hope to feel the touch of spirit that is usually beyond their reach, and mediums can hope for a better

¹⁵ In his ethnographic study of contemporary Christian Spiritualism in San Diego, California, Thomas Kingsley Brown argues that “most Spiritualists are uncertain about Spiritualist beliefs and... seek proof that will spark their shift from merely 'believing' in the spirit world to 'knowing' for certain that it exists” (2003: 137). For Brown, Spiritualists' belief fluctuates as they seek to have increasingly definitive proof brought to them by mediums and healers. Spiritualists at the CSE do not tend to differentiate between believing and knowing, in large part because they do not understand their belief as something that fluctuates but rather unfolds. Messages spark an initial belief, and this is the first step on a long journey to increasingly powerful belief, often achieved through direct, personal contact with the spirit world. As a Spiritualist moves forward along her or his spiritual journey, the spirits become increasingly present and available for immediate, firsthand perception.

connection with the spirits than they are able to achieve independently.¹⁶ Spiritualists imagine a more perfect world in which there is wider acceptance of spirit communication and a more perfect self that maintains a deeper connection to the spirits. Insofar as the message service can actually achieve wider acceptance through the proof offered in messages, the act of imagining succeeds in pushing the world as well as the service's participants toward that state of being.

Summary and Further Questions

When performed as an entertainment, messages have the capacity to attract larger crowds than Spiritualists can generally draw to their more ritualistic services. And so, they utilize this inherent draw by creating entertainment-driven events that bring people into the church and allow them to get a small sampling of what it means to be a part of a Spiritualist community of believers. By contrast, a Sunday service emphasizes the messages' capacity to function as a religious religion and downplays their role as an entertainment but never-the-less incorporates acts of amazement and persuasion into the service. Although one generally predominates depending on the context, religious ritual and evidential entertainment always coexist in the performance of spirit messages. By contrast, spirit healing is only ever performed in the context of a religious ritual—at every Sunday service and at services at the Lily

¹⁶ Bell argues that, “[e]ssential to ritualization is the circular production of a ritualized body which in turn produces ritualized practices” (1992: 93). While the messages propel members along a spiritual trajectory, these members simultaneously generate the conditions that allow the messages to function in this way. This places an interesting spin on Stark's theory that interpersonal relationships are the most effective means of conversion (2005). In this instance, the formation of a community achieves deepening levels of religious conviction not through any overt social pressure but rather through the supernatural power that participants believe inheres within such a gathering.

Dale Healing Temple. Consequently, it encourages participants to engage with the performance as a religious ritual. But this is not to suggest that spirit healing is completely divorced from Spiritualist science or entertainment. Healing endeavors to provide verifiable results in its sitters and is performed as a kind of religious spectacle at the front of the church facing the congregation. In the next chapter, I explore why healing functions more overtly as a religious ritual directed at initiates and converts but nevertheless maintains its connection to evidential demonstration.

Chapter 4: Healing:Joining the Performance to Feel the Touch of Spirit

The Healing Temple

The Healing Temple in Lily Dale is a small, white building facing one of the town's two main roads, nestled among the trees beside the outdoor Forest Temple. When I visited with Katie one warm morning in early August, the two trees along the short walkway up to temple's doors were decorated with bright colored ribbons (see Figure 7). We passed between the simple white columns on either side of the door and walked inside. The temple was wood paneled. Stained glass windows admitted streams of bright colored light into the room. A woman dressed in a plain white button-down shirt and dark pants greeted us at the door with a black-and-white brochure. The brochure welcomed us to “experience the renewal of Spiritual Healing” and offered “guidelines for healing.” We were directed to take a seat at the back of the congregation. The room was full. Nearly a hundred people were waiting, seated in rows in two sections with an aisle down the middle of the congregation. They ranged in age from twenty to ninety, with the majority falling in the middle of the two extremes. Most were white, and all appeared to be middle class. Some were silently meditating, others sat watching the healing taking place at the front of the room. At the front of the congregation, five healers stood over five sitters, seated on stools. The healers—all women between forty and sixty—were dressed in white just like the woman who had greeted us. One of the healers had her hands cupped side-by-side and palms down, inches above the sitters' head. Another's hands hovered over a

sitter's chest and back, facing inward. Another stood behind a sitter, grasping his hands in hers. And another was standing with her hands on the sitter's shoulders. Two healers were on a raised stage, and four were on the floor. The temple's pastor, Barbara Sanson, was slightly separated from the others, giving healing in front of a big stained glass window. Between the two healers on the stage, Lucinda Wilson—a Center for Spiritual Enlightenment (CSE) member and pianist who spends a significant part of her summer in Lily Dale—was playing an electric piano. The music was slow, soft, and calming (service, 1 August 2011, Lily Dale).



Figure 7: The Lily Dale Healing Temple. Photograph by Katie Lesser.

Although we were waiting to become participants in the ritual taking place at the front of the room, Katie and I were also able to engage with the performance as spectators. And we, like all of the others in the room with us, held an expectation—albeit an amorphous one—that the healing would achieve some discernible result. In this chapter, I argue that spirit healing—as compared to spirit messages—identifies more closely with a religious ritual. I consider how the performance addresses itself

to believers and excludes non-believers and the role that spiritual commitment plays in the ritual's efficacy. Spirit healing reveals how active participation in a performance can serve as an opportunity to practice and develop belief. But, regardless of this connection to ritual, I contend that healing does not break entirely with Spiritualist science or entertainment. The performance both functions as a spectacle to be observed by a non-participating audience and endeavors to prove something to its participants. In this way, spirit healing reveals how belief does not necessarily preclude criticism in the act of engaging with a performance, although the role and nature of the critical perspective takes on different dimensions in a more ritualistic performance.

At the Healing Temple, as one sitter finished, another was called up, moving row by row according to the direction of yet another woman dressed in white. Each healing session lasted roughly three or four minutes. After the healing, the sitter stood and smiled or bowed to the healer. Then the sitter walked down the center aisle and out of the temple. The healers bowed and turned to wash their hands in one of several basins of water positioned around the stage. Drying their hands, the healer returned to the chair as the next sitter took the stool. At my turn, I was sent onto the stage and the healer smiled at me as I sat. In a thick Eastern European accent she asked if I had any specific requests. Since I had no particular ailment in need of healing, I told her no. She said, "Put your feet flat on the floor, close your eyes, and imagine the healing light of God entering your body." Then she asked if it would be alright to touch me. I gave her permission and closed my eyes. I felt her hands at my head first, hovering

inches above my skin. Then I felt them move one at a time slowly down my back, then at my hips, knees, elbows, and on the inside of my arms and elbows, always hovering an inch or so above the surface of my body. She placed her hands on my shoulders for a long moment and then she took my hands. She stood for a while without moving, and then she leaned in and whispered, “Let us thank God for the healing light today.” She said, “Amen” and I replied in kind. I stood up and walked to the back of the church to wait for Katie to finish her own session.

Standing alone at the back of the temple, I reflected on my healing. I had experienced several different sensations in the chair including a feeling of warmth, a tingling, and what can only be described as an inchoate feeling of positivity. But had these sensations come from the healer or from my own imagination? Had the healer's hands channeled a divine force or energy into my body that had manifested a physical and psychological response? Perhaps the religious spectacle of the temple, the healers, the music, and the waiting throngs of devotees had put me in the mindset to fabricate a sense of being healed or to re-contextualize my perfectly natural sensations and impressions as somehow supernatural in origin. Katie joined me and we made our way outside, down the path, and out into the street. After we had walked a block or so in silence, I turned to her and asked, “Did you feel anything?” There was a long pause as she thought the question over. “I'm not sure,” she said at last. We had been healed, but what did that mean?

The Paradox of Healing

At a workshop on spirit healing, one of the students asked Gehman if skeptics can receive healing. “Certainly,” she replied, but then she qualified her assertion, telling the class that when we sit for healing we should “be receptive and open” and “feel your connection with Spirit” (class, 15 November 2011). Spirit healing is akin to spirit communication in that it requires an openness from its sitters in order to succeed. Skeptics cannot be healed just as closed-minded skeptics cannot be persuaded of a message's validity. However, spirit healing takes this requirement a step further. In order for healing to succeed, a sitter must not only be open to the possibility of its success but must also trust and believe in the power of spirit healing to make a discernible change in her or his body. The pamphlet that had been handed to Katie and me at the Lily Dale Healing Temple instructs its readers that, in order to achieve the best possible results from the healing, they should “relax and open to receive,” “ask in the silence of your heart for the healing to occur,” and “[t]rust in the love and power of the Spirit that touches you... Expect good and respect the process.” Compare this with the National Spiritualist Association of Churches (NSAC) brochure offering tips for a successful reading which asks that sitters refrain from arguing with or intentionally confusing their medium. For spirit communication, mediums ask that sitters be open to their messages' succeeding, even if they hold out the possibility that the message could fail. Healers ask that their sitters trust that the healing will succeed and surrender judgment or risk undermining the ritual's efficacy.

Gehman's claim that skeptics can receive spirit healing is a reference to the fact that, like messages, healing attempts to provide an empirically verifiable result in

its sitters, i.e. a physical, psychological, and spiritual improvement in the sitter's condition. But the proof offered through healing is less persuasive than spirit communication's evidence. Whereas the test for a message lies in the sitter's conscious deduction, the test for healing lies in the sitter's subjective experience. I can know for a fact whether or not I have a grandmother named Gertrude. But whether or not my existential condition improves and whether or not this improvement is a result of spirit healing is much more open to interpretation. In a message, the evidence is clear and I can choose to accept, reject, or reserve judgment on it. In healing, the evidence itself is amorphous. Messages can work to pare down a sitter's doubts with increasingly specific information, but there is an irreducibility to the doubts that can be applied to spirit healing. At a certain point the truth or falsity of a healing session is lost in the indeterminacy of the sitter's own physical and psychological experience.

Compared to spirit messages, healing has a diminished capacity to amaze. There are no special Friday night healing events to draw in newcomers, nor do Spiritualist healers have a presence in popular culture the way that Spiritualist mediums do. The performance identifies more closely with a religious ritual than a form of entertainment. Unlike the dramatic and entertaining faith healing practiced by televangelists who cast the devil out with a palm to the forehead, Spiritualist healing is sedate and calm. The performance relies on its own ability to access and activate participants' beliefs rather than persuade them in order to bring about healing. The ability to benefit from spirit healing becomes the province of an elect group of Spiritualist believers. In this way, the healing ritual encourages participants to explore

and discover a deeper dimension of Spiritualist belief. How does the ritual prepare its participants to take this leap of faith, and how do Spiritualist adherents experience spirit healing in a way that precipitates an existential improvement that they can verify?

Spiritualist Healing in Context

The act of healing through the power of the spirits involves using one's physical body as a channel through which the spirits work in order to cause a physical, psychological, and spiritual improvement in oneself or another person. There are two ritual actions through which healing is achieved: meditation and laying-on-of-hands. At a Sunday service, congregants use meditation to channel healing energy into themselves. Laying-on-of-hands is an effort to achieve healing within the body of another who is physically present through corporeal contact, specifically the placing of the healer's hands on or in close proximity to various parts of the sitter's body. Laying-on-of-hands healing is not unique to Spiritualism. It is also practiced by other religions including Catholic Charismatics and Pentecostals as well as in a secular context in the form of Therapeutic Touch (see Csordas 1994, Campbell 2010, and Wuthnow, 1997). These traditions share some basic principles with spirit healing, but they also differ in significant ways.

Catholic Charismatics ascribe some physical and psychological ailments to the influence of a Satanic supernatural evil. The act of healing through the laying-on-of-hands is then a channeling of the power of Christ in order to expel these evil

influences. If the patient's disease was in fact caused by Satan, the act of healing will result in a cure (Csordas 1994). Spiritualists, by contrast, do not ascribe illness to a supernatural force per se. However, Spiritualists believe along with Charismatics that illness is existential. That is to say, physical maladies also have a psychological and spiritual dimension. For Spiritualists, all aspects of the physical world also have a non-physical or spiritual dimension. According to Gehman, “Spiritualism opposes materialism. The physical material world is a vehicle for the expression of Spirit. A materialist [by contrast] believes that this world is all there is” (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). This ideology bears more than a passing resemblance to Christian Science. Mary Baker Eddy—the religion's founder—experimented with Spiritualist healing during the period that she was first developing Christian Science in the nineteenth century (Schoepflin 2003). But the ideology that Eddy ended up forming broke from Spiritualist understanding in an important way. Christian Scientists believe that the physical world is illusory and that all physical things are reflections of God. The act of healing is then an intellectual effort to bring patients to the realization that their supposed illness or injury is an illusion, and this awareness effects the cure. Spiritualists, by contrast, believe that there is both a physical and a non-physical world, and that the non-physical can be used to make perceptible changes in the physical.¹ Thus, physical difficulties can be alleviated through spiritual therapy. Gehman defines healing as, “To be made whole or holy. Balanced of mind, body, and spirit.” Patricia Fosarelli identifies this existential approach to the individual as a

¹ Mary Baker Eddy argued that “what a human believes constructs reality.” A Christian Science healer touches the place of injury or the site of illness on the patient's body, but only as a means to bring the patient to an awareness that the malady is an illusion (Schoepflin 2003: 25).

general characteristic of all varieties of faith healing: “Healing sees illness as a fragmentation, a denial of the interdependence of body, mind, and spirit. Therefore, the intervention [of the healer] permits re-integration” (2002: 218). Spiritualists believe in the unity of the individual and that if the body, mind, or spirit is ailing that there are causes and consequences within all three.

Therapeutic touch, first developed by nursing professor Dolores Krieger in the 1960s, ascribes to the notion that there are energy fields emanating from the human body that can be manipulated when a trained practitioner puts her or his hands in close proximity to a patient's body (Wuthnow 1997). Similarly, Spiritualists believe that there is a natural magnetic force within the body, and that this force can be positively influenced when a healer's hands are placed near but not on the body. According to Gehman, magnetic healing works through a “super abundance of magnetic energy or magnetism that flows through the body. Magnetic healing has an immediate [but] impermanent effect on the body” (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). This ideology stretches back to Spiritualism's earliest days when mesmerism—a technique said to work through the natural magnetic energy of the body—was used to put mediums into trance. Spiritualists believe that a healer's magnetic power, while helpful in the short term, cannot effect substantial or lasting change in an ailing sitter. In order to provide the best quality of healing, a spirit healer must not only channel magnetic energy but also spiritual energy. Christian faith healers derive their spiritual healing power from Christ's love. Gehman teaches that Spiritualist healers “extend their awareness to the spirit and attract unto themselves guides, healers, and doctors

from the other world to help them” (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). This creates a stronger and more lasting healing effect. According to Carol Caesar—who has been training for several years to be a certified healer—healing spirits and spirit doctors are akin to the guides who communicate through messages except that they have a special propensity for healing. Caesar told me that during healing her “spirit doctors” often combine and consult with the spirit doctors of the sitter, and in this way she becomes a conduit through which the spirits can heal (service, 20 March 2011, CSE). Some Spiritualists, like Caesar, believe that all people have their own team of spirit doctors, just as each person has his or her own spirit guides.

But, as Gehman indicates, spirit doctors are only part of the force that brings healing in a Spiritualist laying-on-of-hands. Although magnetic forces are less potent, they are often incorporated, and other classes of spirits (“guides” and “healers”) are also involved. My healer in Lily Dale referenced an ultimate over-spirit when she asked that I imagine the “healing light of God.” And Barbara Sanson contends that our understanding of the source of healing need not be complicated because, “healing is just love,” specifically the healer's own love (workshop, 30 April 2011, CSE). In a Sunday lecture at the CSE, Sanson told the congregation that when healers want to work at the Lily Dale Healing Temple, she is less concerned with their certifications or coursework and more concerned with the healer's capacity to love. In her first meeting with an aspiring healer, she wants to hear them talk about love (service, 1 May 2011, CSE).

The Inchoate Source of Spirit Healing

Do spirits or the healer's love make up the source of healing's power? Must the energy be either magnetic or spiritual or can it be both? In fact, the source of healing is a blend of all of these things. It is a channeling of an inchoate force in order to create an inchoate experience of existential improvement. James Fernandez defines the inchoate as “the dark at the bottom of the stairs, and after its being that, whatever that is, it is all the other images and contexts that are swung into association with that central and organizing image to cast light upon it” (1986: 215). These associative images and contexts describe without ever definitively identifying what the inchoate is. Catholic Charismatics have an elaborate typology of the kinds of demons that can be expelled through healing. Spiritualists, by contrast, do not diagnose their sitters. Unlike my healer in Lily Dale, many do not even ask their sitters about their specific ailments. They simply begin the ritual, channeling a healing energy into the sitter's body with the understanding that the energy will make whatever improvements are required. What these improvements are, exactly, is encompassing and non-specific: “Physical, psychological, and spiritual” was the closest Gehman would come to describing the effects of healing. And, whereas Therapeutic Touch and Catholic Charismatic practitioners have a very specific concept of the forces at work in a laying-on-of-hands healing, in a Spiritualist healing the nature of the energy itself is a slippery concept to pin down. For Sanson, it is love. For Caesar, it is spirit doctors. And Gehman—despite her relatively academic definition at her workshop class—tends to speak of it in other contexts as a non-specific divine force akin to God. None

of them would disagree with each other, although each of them describes the source of healing differently. The healing power that is channeled through the Spiritualist healer's hands is all of these things. They are images or concepts brought in to describe a force that is, finally, beyond description. This identifies the experience of healing as one that exists outside of language. Unlike spirit messages which must be intellectually evaluated, the act of healing and being healed is an existential immersion that must be felt in a way that defies critical analysis.

The inchoate nature of the source and effect of spirit healing shrouds the healing experience in mystery, opening a certain distance between the congregant and the spirits who heal. This distance endows the healing spirits with an “aura,” which Walter Benjamin defines as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (1968: 222). According to Benjamin, this aura can be characterized as a “cult value,” which is directly connected to the fact that the cult object remains hidden: “[c]ertain statues of gods are accessible only to the priest in the cella; certain Madonnas remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are invisible to the spectator on ground level” (ibid.: 225). Both the communicating spirits in the message service and the healing spirits are literally hidden from view, but it is the way in which they are hidden that determines if and to what degree they possess an aura. Communicating spirits can only be hidden if they exist, and they only exist insofar as they can be made comprehensible for newcomers. Unlike the Madonna statue, their cult value is suspect, and so they are unable to open a distance between themselves and their sitters. Healing spirits, by contrast, are

incomprehensible. They must be believed in order to be experienced, and they must be experienced in order to be judged, placing them at a distance from the sitter. Communicating spirits want to be understood while healing spirits hold themselves aloof.

From Benjamin's perspective, distance elevates the cult object onto a pedestal, demanding an attitude of worshipful awe from its audiences, and this, in turn, endows the cult object with the authority and power to control or otherwise manipulate believers. According to Benjamin, “[t]he magician [or shaman] maintains the natural distance between the patient and himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority” (ibid.: 233). Similarly, the inchoate mystery surrounding the healing spirits inspires awe in newcomers and leads to a kind of obeisance that convinces the newcomers of their power. But Spiritualists' inability to clearly describe the source or effects of spirit healing should not be read as an intentional effort to create this distance. The mysterious aura around the healing spirits is, perhaps, best understood as an unintended side effect of the fact that they cannot be easily categorized. The healing service works diligently to close the gap between congregants and the healing spirits by calling on congregants to participate in the ritual of spirit healing, to feel the spirits' power, and to judge the efficacy of the healing for themselves. To be sure, the healer's aura of authority is a definite factor in the experience of sitting for healing. But, this aura is challenged by the fact that Spiritualist practice is both an exercise of religious belief and of empirical and evidential criticism. Through participation, the

sitter places her or himself in a position to evaluate and judge. Unlike the shaman's patient, Spiritualist sitters engage with the spirits' mysterious aura in order to question it. The distance helps aid participants' capacity to believe in the healing spirits, but, finally, the goal is to close that distance through critical reflection.

The Significance of Asking for Healing

Karen Clark-Stone—a professional nurse and spirit healer—was the chairperson for the service one Sunday morning. Twenty people were sitting in the congregation as she took the lectern and began to give the conventional introduction to the healing service: “For those of you who are new to the healing service...” She paused and smiled and looked at the group in front of her. “I don't see any new faces. Is there anyone here who is new?” (service, 18 March 2012, CSE). Laughing, she dispensed with the introduction and moved on to the day's first hymn. Clark-Stone was not disappointed or resentful that all of the faces in the congregation were familiar to her. Rather, she was pleased to acknowledge that the people who had gathered for healing that morning already knew and accepted the terms of the ritual. The fact that only twenty participants were present was not a sign that the service would be poorly attended that day. Indeed, the number of individuals in the congregation doubled by the end of that service just as it had at nearly every service before. Lower attendance was expected at the healing service—the first part of every Sunday ritual—and, as Clark-Stone recognized, most of the participants who choose to come for healing are CSE members or regular visitors.

Why isn't the healing service as well attended as the devotional and message service? First of all, the CSE allows for it. On the Center's website "Healing and Meditation" are listed as beginning at 10am, but the "Service and Messages" are a separate event beginning at 10:30am. In this way, the CSE implies that the healing and meditation are not a part of the Sunday service but rather a separate event that precedes it. Why wouldn't the CSE want to include the healing and meditation in the service and simply list them as one complete event? The ritual itself suggests the answer. The healing ritual begins with a hymn and then the congregation recites the Healing Prayer. The Healing Prayer posits a community of believers that excludes newcomers from the ritual. Through the prayer, participants express their belief in a subjunctive, ritualized way so that they can activate their actual belief in the ritual's efficacy. The prayer, read from the back cover of the Spiritualist hymnal, is repeated aloud and in unison by all members of the congregation:

I ask the great unseen healing force
To remove all obstructions
From my mind and body
And to restore me to perfect health
I ask this in all sincerity and honesty
And I will do my part.

I ask this great unseen healing force
To help both present and absent ones
Who are in need of help
And to restore them to perfect health.
I put my trust in the love and power of God.

Most of the prayer takes the form of what J. L. Austin calls an "explicit performative" (1962). Through speaking the prayer, I invoke the cooperation of divine forces in the

act of healing. The words “I ask” might have been inferred and the prayer addressed more directly to the spirits, i.e.: “Great unseen healing force, remove all obstructions from my mind and body.” Their inclusion suggests an attempt to overcome ambiguity (ibid.: 69). The prayer makes clear that it is not only an attempt to invoke a higher power but also an effort to summon the speaker's own intention to seek a higher power. This is clearest at the end of the first stanza when the prayer employs another performative: the promise. The phrase “and I will do my part” marks the prayer as not only a request and an endowment of trust but a beginning point for a nondescript action that is to come.

In this way, the prayer helps to identify the kind of believer that the healing service is designed for, and, implicitly, to exclude non-believers from the ritual. As a weekly recitation, the reading of the healing prayer is a subjunctive act that “marks [participants'] acceptance of [a] convention” (Seligman, et. al. 2008: 24). In other words, the prayer need not be a sincere expression because it identifies an attitude and belief that have been internalized as a quality of the speaker's existential being. In this way, it clearly denotes who the healing ritual is for: those who have already accepted the continuity of life and the power of spirit intervention and are willing to invest that belief in order to encourage healing to take place. In reading the prayer I either identify with the belief and intention that it articulates or discover that the ritual does not include me.

While the healing prayer is only open to those who are able to trust in the healing power of the spirits, this group includes a wide range of believers possessing

varying degrees of belief. As a new initiate with an incomplete system belief, the prayer demands that I choose to commit myself to believing as much as I am able to in order to proceed with the ritual. The prayer also has an idealizing function that guides participants to believe to the best of their ability. The authors of *Ritual and its Consequences* contend that “[p]articipants practicing ritual act as if the world produced in ritual were a real one. And they do so fully conscious that such a subjunctive world exists in endless tension with an alternate world of daily experience” (ibid.: 26). Participants may doubt the fullness of their belief or struggle to be able to “do their part” in order to allow healing occur. And so, the prayer functions to reassure novice believers that, while they may have doubts in their daily lives, in the context of the healing service they possess enough belief to commit to the ritual and contribute to the act of healing.

Spectating Healing

The meditation that follows suggests another reason for listing the healing service as a separate event: it is not especially entertaining. Every week congregants follow the same guided meditation, and after the guided meditation there is fifteen to twenty minutes of silent meditation during which sitters receive laying-on-of-hands healing at the front of the room. The laying-on-of-hands ritual can be a fascinating event to witness, particularly for first or second-time participants. But, unlike the messages which are performed in patterned but infinitely variable iterations

depending on the medium and the sitter, healing happens more or less the same way with every healer every week.

Gehman demonstrated the healer's basic movement pattern during her healing workshop. She asked for a volunteer from the class to serve as her sitter during the demonstration. The volunteer sat on a bench and Gehman stood behind her with her hands on the woman's shoulders. "I like to begin by standing with my hands on the shoulders," Gehman said, "You should breathe with the person [sitter] and get in the rhythm of their breath. As you go along their breath will correspond to yours and you'll do some deep breathing. As you breathe out you're directing energy through your hands." Gehman asked her volunteer if she could feel the energy and the volunteer acknowledged that she could. We all practiced breathing and channeling energy through our hands for a moment. "Touch the head," she said, continuing the demonstration, "But don't touch the top of the head. When your hands begin to feel very full, it will feel warm and electrical and your hands will begin to pulse. Turn to the side. One hand over the forehead. One just over the neck. Hands facing parallel. When you feel the hands connect with energy, I like to touch the forehead. Next go to the throat, again making sure hands are parallel or together under the neck. Then place one hand on the back and feel for the limit of the aura with the other hand [in front of the chest]. Keep your hands parallel with the body." Gehman paused to ask her volunteer to tell the class what she was feeling. "A tingling in my hands," the woman replied, "I feel relaxed, and there's a spinning in my head." Gehman continued, "Next, put your hands side by side on the back. Maybe an inch or so apart.

Wow.” She paused again. “What are you feeling?” The volunteer responded, “I feel it all through my back not [just] where your hands are.” Gehman continued again, “Take their hands at the end.... Say something prayerful, but never give any advice” (class, 15 November 2011, CSE).

The dramatic moments in this exchange—when Gehman and her volunteer experienced potentially supernatural sensations from the act of healing—are theoretically unavailable to the audience at a typical Sunday healing service. Generally, both healer and sitter have their eyes closed and remain largely expressionless as the healer moves through the same familiar pattern: shoulders, head, neck, back and chest, hands; concluding with the prayer whispered so that only the sitter can hear it. As in the message service, the greatest thrill comes from direct participation. However, unlike the message service, there is no possibility for spontaneous inclusion, an important part of what makes the messages so engaging. At the CSE, the people who sit for healing are self-selected. They choose to take a bench and be included in the laying-on-of-hands ritual. If I do not choose to sit for healing, there is no chance that I will suddenly find myself in the midst of a spirit healing in the way that I might suddenly find myself the target of a message.

If spirit healing does not function well as an entertainment, why do Spiritualists put the ritual on display by showing it “on-stage” for the congregation to watch? Ritual demands participation; however, the laying-on-of-hands ritual is optional. For its participants, the healing is a ritual, but for those who choose to watch it becomes something more like a show or a spectacle. For Gehman, displaying the

laying-on-of-hands healing is not primarily an act of showing but rather an opportunity to bear witness. During her workshop, Gehman was lecturing on the legalities of the healing ritual: healers should never touch the sitter's body except the head, shoulders, and hands; healers should never diagnose or prescribe; and healers should not guarantee a cure. Any of these actions could lead to a lawsuit. Then, she reminded us that the healing service is always held at the front of the congregation in front of a chairperson. I asked if this arrangement was for legal reasons. "No," Gehman replied, "I think a lot of people like to watch the healing... I like to watch healers evolve from magnetic to spirit healing.... I can see the energy from the healers' hands. It's often a gold or blue color" (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). Spectators may reduce the possibility for legal action for inappropriate contact, but their primary purpose is to witness the beauty and efficacy of the ritual.

The CSE's choice to display the healing ritual assumes an audience comprised mostly of Spiritualist converts. Differentiating between spectacle and the more ritualistic festival performance genre, John J. MacAloon says, "[i]n festival, the roles of actors and spectators are less distinguishable than in spectacle, where the increased emphasis on sight, often at the expense of other modes of participation, seems to increase the threat of oversight" (1984: 246). Making a spectacle of the healing ritual exposes it to doubt by limiting participants' ability to adequately evaluate the proceedings. An overemphasis on seeing coupled with the awe or wonder inspired by the spectacle render the act suspect. But, for Gehman, this awe or wonder is contingent on the audience's ability to see the beauty of the ritual. Gehman assumes a

knowledgeable “in crowd” audience when she speaks of the kinds of people who “like to watch the healing.” Tacitly identifying herself with these spectators, Gehman projects her own ability to actually see the supernatural forces at work in the laying-on-of-hands healing onto the ritual's audience. While Gehman is certainly unique in her extrasensory visual capacity, those who are inclined to watch might still discover or seek to discover the kinds of sights she witnesses through their own observation. This automatically excludes those who will not see by virtue of their skepticism from the ritual's presumed audience. The ritual can be made into a spectacle because its audience is disinclined to be suspicious of its legitimacy.

Interestingly, the terms of the ritual at the Lily Dale Healing Temple differ in small but significant ways from those at the CSE. Lily Dale is a tourism destination, attracting people who want to experience Spiritualism for the first time or are looking for an interesting place to stop on the way to Niagara Falls. Of the hundred people that gathered at the Healing Temple for the morning service, I would estimate that roughly twenty were converted Spiritualists.² At the CSE, those twenty Spiritualists would be the entire congregation for the healing and meditation. At Lily Dale, there are an additional eighty tourists in the room who have not committed to the system of belief on which spirit healing is based or affirmed the legitimacy of the ritual for themselves. And so, whereas the CSE allows its congregants to take on the role of spectator, everyone who enters the Lily Dale Healing Temple must participate in the

² Lily Dale does not keep statistics on the number of tourists vs. converted Spiritualists who visit each year, nor do any of its temples or workshops. My estimation is based on a basic observation that only converted Spiritualists tend to participate in Lily Dale's workshops. Most workshops have around twenty participants, whereas public services like the twice daily message service and healing service attract around one hundred participants.

ritual by sitting for healing. The option to spectate, which can raise doubts in non-believers, is only intended for Spiritualists who have the ability or the inclination to appreciate the ritual through the prism of their beliefs.

Making Demands on Sitters

Displaying the ritual has consequences for the spectator, but what about the sitter? Central to the ritual is the sitter's commitment. The sitter's sense of personal responsibility is amplified by the fact that sitting for healing is a distinctly public act. Sitting in front of the congregation for healing is a way of affirming one's belief to the community. Sitters are aware of themselves as being in some sense on display. Kathy Riley said the sense that the congregation is facing her is always with her while she is receiving healing (circle, 20 March 2012, Simon house). Joanna Simon said that healing often causes her to tear up and she becomes self conscious about having that response in front of others (circle, 20 March 2012, Simon house). Both acknowledged that their sensitivity was perhaps unfounded since most of the congregation is meditating with their eyes closed during the laying-on-of-hands. But, regardless of whether the feeling was rational or not, they could not overcome their awareness of being on stage. This differentiates healing from the message service. While the messages call attention to particular members of the congregation, they do not physically draw the participant into the performance space. The message sitter remains part of the audience, watching and critiquing the medium's performance. To receive healing, the sitter must abandon her or his position in the audience and get on

stage. This identifies the sitter more closely with the performer, separating the sitter from the audience's judgmental stance and incorporating the sitter into the performer's project to create an effective performance.

The fact that congregants must elect to join the performance by choosing to sit for healing suggests that healing can only serve those who are willing to be healed. The act of walking to the healer instantiates the attitude that sitters must take toward the ritual in order for it to succeed. If I am to be healed, I must participate by placing myself in a situation that will open me to healing. Standing and walking forward is an extension of the intentional act begun in the prayer, actively and literally projecting the participant into an experience of healing. This illuminates the role and meaning of the guided meditation and the silent meditation that precede and overlap the laying-on-of-hands ritual. Since the sitter is partially responsible for the healing's success, the ritual must make an effort to prepare the sitter for the ritual.

The guided meditation begins immediately after the healing prayer. I identify four phases that the meditation directs participants through every week: (1) releasing tension, concerns, and negative feelings that the participant brought with them into the Center that morning; (2) allowing the love and light of the spirits into the participant's body in order to bring about the participant's own personal healing; (3) picturing the healing light of the spirits within the participant's body, filling and expanding beyond the boundaries of the body into the sanctuary and then through the walls of the sanctuary into the world, ultimately filling the world; (4) choosing and naming (silently or in a low whisper) the names of loved ones who are in need of

healing, and sending healing light into the world and to the people on the CSE's healing list. The meditation concludes with the phrase, “know by your intention that it is done.”

The first moment of the guided meditation is always oriented toward preparing the body to experience healing. Spiritualists believe that one's position can facilitate or hinder the flow of magnetic and spiritual energies through the body. As Wayne Knoll explains, “[e]nergy comes from the earth and from the heavens and our spirit guides while healing ” (service, 16 October 2011, CSE). The feet are flat on the ground and uncrossed in order to allow magnetic energy, which flows up from the earth, to enter the body. Gehman discourages rubber-soled shoes because they tend to block the flow of energy up from the earth (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). Spiritual energy flows down from above, channeling through the participant's head, which makes the seated position optimal. The hands should never be crossed because this also blocks the flow of energy, but they could either be placed palm up or palm down depending on the participant's intention. Gehman teaches that if the participant intends to heal others, the best position is to have the palms up. But, if the participant intends to heal her or himself, the palms should be down (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). Since the guided meditation endeavors to heal both ways, the position of the hands is usually left undefined as simply “resting comfortably on your lap.”

Assuming the appropriate posture for healing creates an embodied expectation that healing will occur. The meditation pose “primes” the body to experience and perceive sensations of healing (Ratcliffe 2008: 98). According to Shaun Gallagher,

“[t]he conditions placed on perception by the body, and various postures that it takes, help us to organize the perceptual world in a meaningful way.” (2005: 141). The fact that the sitter sits still with eyes closed organizes the sitter's perceptual experience by concentrating the sitter's senses on a potential tactile engagement with the spirit world and raises the sitter's sensitivity to any sensations that might occur. Furthermore, assuming this position contextualizes the sitter's subsequent sensations as possible feelings of healing and opens the sitter to perceive sensations that she or he might otherwise fail to recognize. Spiritualists believe that the spirits often influence peoples' lives in ways that they fail to recognize, generally in the form of intuitions and experiences we overlook or ignore. In a lecture, medium Roger Jenkins contended that “these little insights we have inside ourselves [are] really spirit” (service, 4 December 2011, CSE). By physically sitting for healing, participants orient themselves to acknowledge the spirits' influence as it arises.

Music is also significant to the the act of priming. The guided and silent meditations are always accompanied by music, which is consistently soft but otherwise non-specific. When the music is recorded and played through the stereo system it tends to be a genre designed for meditation or relaxation: a soft melody played on wind pipes accompanied by gentle chimes. When the music is performed live on the Center's keyboard or piano, however, it often includes a variety of classical pieces including works from Beethoven and Debussy. Since learning how to practice laying-on-of-hands healing in Gehman's class, I have practiced many times with Katie when she has suffered from a head ache or stomach ache. Initially, I

attempted the healing in complete silence, but I found it took much longer to focus on the act than when I decided to incorporate choral music into my practice. I found myself mentally riding the waves of the music into deeper focus and connection with the act of healing. In this way, I discovered that music plays a functional role in facilitating the focus of its participants. The specific kind of music is not important as long as the music fits with the general meditative mood of the exercise. Thus, while music is a convention of the ritual, it has a direct bearing on participants' capacity to achieve a sincere result.³

The remainder of the meditation is focused on preparing the mind to experience healing. This is significant to developing the open and receptive state necessary for healing. In Lily Dale, the healer who worked with me attempted a truncated version of the guided meditation when she instructed me to “imagine the healing light of God entering your body.” The act of picturing or imagining that the body is being influenced by a healing force or light opens the individual to the possibility of an actual experience of healing. Visualization meditations are a key component to Neo-Pagan religion as well. Neo-Pagans engage in often elaborate narratives in their guided meditations, drawing on themes and stories from myths, folk tales, legends, and ballads. These meditations are designed to allow participants to realize an experience of enchantment that provides healing for themselves and the world (Magliocco 2004: 143-144). For both Neo-Pagans and Spiritualists,

³ Each February medium Carl Davis visits the CSE and pushes the efficacy of music to a new dimension. Davis is a medium who, working with the spirit of a Buddhist monk, developed what he describes as the heretofore lost art of playing gongs in order to generate healing sound patterns. According to Davis, these sound patterns actually cause healing to occur in listeners who are open to their efficacy.

visualization is a tool to overcome an existential blindness. By visualizing divine forces, the individual is intended to realize and recognize that these forces have been present all along. The act of recognition then allows for the divine force to exert a positive influence on the ritual's participant.

The difference between Neo-Pagan and Spiritualist visualization is that for Neo-Pagans the guided meditation is an end unto itself. For Spiritualists, it is a preparatory exercise for another, more efficacious ritual. This difference can be attributed to the fact that Neo-Pagans focus almost exclusively on transforming consciousness whereas Spiritualists believe in creating an existential change, effecting both mind and body. As Gehman contends, “there's always a relationship between physical and mental health” (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). In a discussion about the healing service, Kathy Riley complained to me that the guided meditation frustrated her because it limited her ability to “really” enter into the meditation (circle, 14 February 2011). And in her class, Gehman informed us of the inadequacy of guided meditation when she told us that visualization could not be used to achieve any sort of direct contact with the spirit world (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). Spirit healing cannot be realized at a purely conscious level. Spiritualists' mind-body approach to healing resonates with Merleau-Ponty's discussion of psychosomatic disease. According to Merleau-Ponty, “[n]either symptom nor cure is worked out at the level of positing consciousness, but below that level” (1962: 189). Comparing the cure to sleep, he argues,

As the faithful, in the Dionysian mysteries, invoke the god by miming scenes from his life, I call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and

posture of the sleeper. The god is actually there when the faithful can no longer distinguish themselves from the part they are playing, when their body and their consciousness cease to bring in, as an obstacle, their particular opacity, and when they are totally fused in the myth (ibid.).

In order to effect a transformation that registers on a bodily level, the healing ritual must reach beyond or below consciousness. The conscious decision to participate in healing must open onto a subconscious or non-analytic experience of healing. Finally, the guided meditation is not sufficient to realize spirit healing as a fully existential experience because the individual's consciousness registers too prominently in the exercise, precluding the participant from fully immersing in the experience of healing.

The opportunity for this full existential immersion comes immediately after the guided meditation in the form of the laying-on-of-hands ritual and the silent meditation. At the conclusion of the visualization, participants are given the option to either come to the front of the congregation to receive healing or to sit and silently meditate. Some participants choose to silently meditate while waiting to receive healing or to meditate after they have been healed. Participants are given minimal instruction for the silent meditation. Sometimes the chairperson calls the day's healers forward, invites the congregation to sit for healing, and says nothing more. Other times, the chairperson encourages participants to continue meditating on healing. For example, at one service Carol Caesar said, "we invite you to send healing to yourself and others" (service, 1 April 2012). Releasing the specific directions of the guided meditation, participants are free to determine how they will send healing on their own. In a book Gehman recommends to congregants, *How to Meditate*, Lawrence

LeShan differentiates between structured meditations like the Spiritualists' guided visualization and unstructured meditations like the open-ended silence that follows: “The structured meditations primarily train the intellect and will release the emotional life more slowly. In the unstructured meditations this is reversed” (1974: 63). The goal of the silent meditation is to allow participants to enter a space beyond or below the intellect and immerse themselves in a more existentially full experience of healing that engages those aspects of the self that remain untouched by the visualization.

Silent meditation is most often identified with Eastern religions, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. The practice was popularized in the United States in the 1960s by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi who founded Transcendental Meditation (TM) also known as the Science of Creative Intelligence. Derived from Hindu practice, TM practices a form of meditation that involves concentration on a *mantra* or single thought. Mantras are given to initiates during their first meditation session and change as the initiate's practice advances. TM claims to have myriad mental and physical health benefits beginning with the reduction of stress and including the ability to cure diabetes, high cholesterol, immune deficiencies, infertility, depression, and insomnia. More advanced practitioners claim to develop supernatural powers including knowledge of former lives, a form of astral projection, and prophecy (Cowan and Bromley 2008: 54-60).

Spiritualism's approach to silent meditation is similar in that practitioners are asked to meditate on a single thought, in this case healing, but the thought is not as specific as a TM mantra and there is no chain of progression. All congregants are

directed to meditate on some aspect of healing during the silent meditation. The content or direction of their meditation may evolve as they continue to practice, but this evolution is driven by the practitioner, not directed by the church. In short, Spiritualists are more comfortable allowing the meditating sitter to dwell in the realm of the inchoate. The Spiritualist ritual also differs in that, unlike TM practitioners, Spiritualists are meant to achieve direct contact with divine beings through their meditation. In TM, the positive effects of the practice are attributed to the act of meditating. In Spiritualism, the effects are attributed to meditation's ability to grant access to a divine force which is then responsible for any healing that might occur. Although most forms of Buddhist meditation tend to resemble the Hindu-inspired TM, Tantric Buddhism holds a much more similar mirror to the supernatural dimensions of Spiritualism. Tantric practitioners meditate in order to make contact with a *yi-dam* or holy being who then acts as a teacher, guiding the practitioners toward higher states of enlightenment (Harvey 1990: 260-263). Similarly, through practice, the Spiritualist is able to develop a strengthening ability to connect with the spirits, channel healing, and achieve evolving states of mental, physical, and spiritual health.⁴

⁴ Another point of intersection between TM and Spiritualist meditation is the purported impact practitioners believe that they will have on those around them. Both Spiritualists and TM practitioners understand their meditation as a way of taking responsibility for improving civilization and the world. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi teaches that “a society is characterized by the quality of its *collective consciousness*, which arises from the consciousness of all its members taken together, and reciprocally influences individual behavior” (Hagelin, et. al., 1999: 158). In 1993, TM practitioners staged a month-long group meditation in Washington, DC in order to curtail homicides which correlated with a drop in violent crime, most dramatically 15% during the last week of the project. As the guided meditation suggests, Spiritualists endeavor to both receive healing and to project it outward onto others through their meditation. An underlying premise of the laying-on-of-hands ritual is that healing is more effective when it comes from another person. Gehman, who is acknowledged within the Center as a gifted healer, sometimes sits for healing herself because the healing she receives from another is more effective than the healing she can

Sharing Responsibility between Performer and Participant

This program of weekly meditation gets to the heart of the demanding nature of the Spiritualist healing service, relative to the message service. LeShan suggests ten to fifteen minutes of silent meditation or twenty minutes of guided meditation for first-time practitioners. By contrast, the Spiritualists' healing meditation is comprised of roughly ten minutes of guided meditation and fifteen to twenty minutes of silent meditation. LeShan warns that new practitioners should not expect to be especially successful when they first begin to meditate: “[o]nly after a long period of practice can you expect to be really just doing a meditation and not anything else” (1974: 75). Silent meditation, unlike the prayer and guided meditation, does not guarantee its own success. It is a skill that takes practice to develop. By calling on participants to attempt silent meditation and—for those who attend regularly—to develop the skill, the ritual indicates that participants must play a role in the ritual's overall success. Participants must be willing to contribute to the act of healing and to enhance their ability to contribute by becoming increasingly well-practiced Spiritualists, thereby bringing participant's own responsibility for healing to the foreground.

give herself. During the meditation, I am often aware of the concept (if not the spiritual energy) that others are healing me even though I am focused on expanding my own energy into the space. In this way, participants take on a double consciousness: aware of themselves as both healing and being healed. This healing influence can be projected across great distances, as at the conclusion of the guided meditation when healing is sent to distant loved ones and then to the world. According to E. W. Sprague, a Spiritualist minister and healer from early part of the twentieth century, “[t]hough the patient be a great distance away, it matters little with some healers, for distance is nothing to the spirit” (1930: 108). Spiritualists believe that healing does not require co-presence because the spirits are not constrained by the physical limits of geography and can travel great distances instantaneously. In the context of Spiritualist meditation, participants are endowed with both the ability and the responsibility to heal remotely and to give healing to the world. This contributes to the demands that the ritual makes for inclusion.

How does healing place demands on its sitters without overwhelming them? After all, demanding too much commitment may undermine the ritual's ability to inspire any commitment at all. Healing is more demanding than the message service but less demanding than the path to mediumship. The ritual appeals to a smaller group, but still draws fifty percent of an average congregation every Sunday. Although the threshold of commitment required to engage in spirit healing is higher than that of the more open and appealing spirit messages, the ritual remains open and accessible within the Spiritualist community. About twenty people gather for the healing service, and of those twenty between eight and twelve sit for healing each Sunday (twenty to twenty-five percent of an average Sunday congregation). Most converts sit for healing on a semi-regular basis, and not all who sit for healing are converted members of the church. Many are regular visitors who have not yet converted but have discovered an interest and belief in Spiritualist practice. Healing rests in this religious middle ground—requiring commitment and effort without demanding significant time or effort—by sharing the responsibility for a successful healing between the sitter and the healer.

The ability to give healing requires deeper belief and commitment than the ability to receive it. Just like mediums, healers must practice and develop their capacity to achieve the ritual's function. Healers are all volunteers who have either been certified or are working toward their certification. Certification requires that a healer complete an educational program—generally based online with supplemental in-person instruction from an accomplished healer at the church. Additionally, healers

must demonstrate proof of their ability to heal by acquiring affidavits from individuals who affirm that they have been healed through the healer's efforts. To be an effective healer is also to commit oneself to a specific program of physical and psychological temperance. According to Gehman, healers should practice moderation in alcohol consumption, refrain from smoking, and, ideally, not take any prescription medications regularly (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). Gehman advises healers to pursue an advanced state of personal wellness including a monthly fast and the regular consumption of wheat grass. As Barbara Sanson teaches in her workshop, "everything we do or do not do is affecting our vitality" (workshop, 30 April 2011, CSE). Gehman cautions that, when a healer gives healing to a sitter, she or he should not be "sick, toxic, smoking, drinking, or using drugs." In her lecture on healing, she told a story of feeling sick for a month after receiving healing from a smoker. Similarly, a healer should pursue a program of psychological wellness. This includes limiting exposure to the negative fear-inducing influence of contemporary culture. Sanson argues that popular media is full of violence and destruction and this is a shadow on modern life: "the fear mode is so heavy that it's demonstrated out on the street." It also means cultivating an attitude of emotional openness and generosity (service, 1 May 2011, CSE).

Although healers are generally more spiritually committed than their sitters, the role of healer is closer to that of sitter than the role of medium. Healers provide a supporting role, facilitating the sitter's quest to be healed through the power of the spirits. According to Sanson, the healer's role is to empower the sitter so that the sitter

can serve an active role in the healing process: “always give the power to the person that you're working with. Never take it away from them.” (workshop, 30 April 2011, CSE) The relationship between sitter and healer differs from the relationship between mediums and their sitters because individuals who sit for healing take on partial responsibility for the ritual's success through their commitment and belief. As a consequence, the role of healer is more accessible than that of medium. Whereas the Center has only five practicing mediums on the ministerial council, I have witnessed fifteen different healers serve who were directly associated with the Center. Of the healers that serve regularly, six are men and nine women, and fourteen are white. All of the healers are over thirty, and more than half are over sixty. All of the Center's mediums are also healers, but most of the healers are not also mediums. The specific group of healers varies from week to week, but is drawn almost entirely from the Center's membership. This is perhaps the key difference between the healers and the message ministers. Whereas the Center only has six mediums who regularly give messages and brings in guest message mediums for roughly a third of the services, the Center's healers are drawn from a much larger pool and are almost always regular members of the congregation.

The healers honor the responsibility taken up by participants by allowing everyone who wants to receive healing the opportunity to sit. At a Sunday service, messages are limited and given to only a few participants. Healing, by contrast, is open to all. The amount of time spent with each sitter tends to vary between five and seven minutes. Sometimes, a healer who had not planned on serving that day will join

the day's healers in order to answer an unexpectedly high demand. One morning, a father who arrived toward the end of the healing service brought his child up to sit for healing. The little girl sat in the father's lap and the healer put a hand on her back as well as the father's. Karen Clark-Stone eventually joined them, standing facing them with her back to the congregation. Her hands were out, not touching, and she was a few feet away. I asked Clark-Stone about this after the service and she told me that she stood in front in order to create a space to contribute to both the father and child's healing (service, 9 October 2011, CSE). Clark-Stone stipulated that this was not an effort to supplement what might otherwise be an insufficient healing. Rather, since she was free to participate, she wanted to maximize the father and child's healing experience to the best of her ability. In other words, the effort was a positive contribution to a ritual that by its very nature would give exactly what the participants required. Healing is always sufficient, but that is not to suggest that it cannot be maximized. As Clark-Stone explained,

Since the time remaining for father and child to receive hands on healing was limited, I thought a second healer (since I was available) would maximize the healing in this shorter time.... What we are taught is that we receive exactly what we need as we sit to receive; so, using that reasoning, the amount of time shouldn't really make all that much difference. I'd never want to say that one healer needs the help of another per se. (pers. comm., 5 December 2012).

The nature of the commitment that healers share with sitters is perhaps best demonstrated by Spiritualists' ideology concerning the healer's closing prayer. At the conclusion of each healing, the healer leans forward and whispers a prayer to the sitter. There is considerable variation as far as the actual wording of this prayer, but it is almost always a generalized expression of the underlying principles of the act.

Prayers center around phrases like “know that you never walk alone,” “you are always loved,” and “God is always with you.” These prayers refer to the spiritual communion achieved through the ritual, but they are almost never personalized, no matter the healer's experience with the sitter. The prayer disconnects the healer from her or his sincere communion with the sitter. Through the prayer, the healer “gives the intention” to end the session. In Lily Dale, the act of ending the session is accentuated by the healer rinsing her or his hands in a basin of water after the healing has ended (according to Gehman, this gesture is best understood as a symbolic act because healing is a non-physical act whereas washing one's hands is a physical act). Giving the intention to end healing is important because it prevents the healer from remaining connected to the sitter, which could risk the healer taking on the sitter's physical symptoms or existential malaise (class, 15 November 2011, CSE). Once the healing is through, the healer must consciously sever the relationship created through the ritual for the healer's own well-being.

The healer's closing prayer is an interesting kind of performative gesture. By speaking the words, the healer creates a metaphysical break with the sitter, but the words themselves do not say what they do. To say “I sever this bond” or “I end this session and am no longer communing with you” would unsettle the mood and intent of the ritual. And so, healers shift the relationship from one of the healer's own temporary personal mediation between a divine power and the sitter to an on-going relationship between the sitter and the divine power itself: “know that you never walk alone.” In the closing prayer, the healer both marks an end to the healer's personal

responsibility and points toward the sitter's own power and concomitant responsibility to continue to receive healing. Although the healer, through her or his advanced spiritual ability, was able to aid the sitter during the laying-on-of-hands, the sitter resumes the responsibility for creating and maintaining a connection to a divine healing power after the healing has ended. Just as the sitter exerts an intentional responsibility to prepare to receive healing before the ritual, the healer encourages the sitter to resume that responsibility after the healing has ended.

Healing as an Opportunity for Practicing Belief

The first time I attempted to give healing was at an all-day Saturday workshop at the CSE on “Color Radiance for Spiritual Healing and Vitality” given by Barbara Sanson, who was serving as the CSE's visiting lecturer and medium for the week. At the conclusion of a day of instruction on the role of color in mental and physical health, Sanson asked us to partner with each other in order to practice using our new color knowledge in the process of giving and receiving healing. I partnered with Paul—a CSE member in his early fifties who also serves on the Center's board of directors. Paul had only recently converted to Spiritualism and this was also his first time attempting to give healing. We decided that I would serve as the healer first. Paul sat on a bench in front of me, and I put my hands on his shoulders. We joked that even though neither of us had given healing before we had both seen it done enough times to have a sense of the basic routine. Sanson led us in opening ourselves to the spirits, adding that we should ask the spirits for any colors that would help our

sitter. She reassured us that love is the only thing needed for effective spiritual healing: “there are no techniques or protocols, only loving laying-on-of-hands which could be done any way. The church has prescribed ways of doing things for good reason, but they are not essential.”

While healing Paul, I focused on an abstract conception of love and then channeling the love of the spirits to Paul. I sought colors and saw shades of purples. I wondered if I was seeing purple because, in a demonstration Sanson had given earlier, I had seen that Paul was most conducive to receiving healing from the color purple. I chastised myself for being analytical and opened myself again. Whenever I felt myself drifting into a self analysis or getting impatient with the process I reminded myself that my sincere and open engagement with this activity was for Paul's benefit and that Paul deserved a co-participant who was willing to open themselves as any devoted believer would. I pictured a white column of light channeling down through me to Paul, as Anne had suggested at another workshop. I tried to see a rainbow channeling to Paul. Ultimately, I began to see darker shades of purple and green. Afterward, at Barbara's suggestion to the group, I took Paul's hands and parroted what Barbara had suggested we say, thanking God for his healing and offering Paul a blessing. When Paul told me about his experience receiving healing from me, he said that he saw shades of indigo, blue, and green. He told me that he has been having difficulty with a disc and that he felt a warmth on the disc as I was healing him that had made it feel more comfortable and less painful (workshop, 30 April 2011, CSE).

Significant to my process giving healing to Paul was the effort to stop judging myself and allow myself to simply experience the ritual. As medium and healer Suzanne Giesemann explained, “I am only the instrument. I ask for healing energy to be channeled into me and through my hands to go where the person needs it to restore balance and harmony” (pers. comm., 26 January 2011). Giesemann does not need to know or discover anything about how or where the energy is going. She simply makes the request and trusts that the spirits will do the rest. Unlike a medium, a healer does not endeavor to learn anything specific through the ritual. Mediums must constantly toggle between achieving direct spirit contact in a non-conscious state and conveying information from that contact in a conscious state. Healers, however, can maintain a single-minded focus on remaining open. Caesar told me that she often receives messages while healing, but chooses not to convey them because healing is the wrong context for giving messages (service, 20 March 2011, CSE). Even specific information about the sitter's ailments is unnecessary for the healer to discern in any conscious way. Gehman does not believe that the healer should ask the sitter if they have any specific physical problems that they want addressed. If the healer is drawn to a particular area, this happens intuitively and won't necessarily register in the healer's consciousness. Thus, the healer works to attend to the entire person and does not concern her or himself with any specific complaint.

The healer's greatest challenge in maintaining this state of passive focus concerns the healer's ability to move between body positions while carrying out the ritual. The act of relinquishing control remains strictly bounded by the bodily patterns

of the ritual. As Caesar's spirit doctors take over, there is no danger that she will make any noise that will interrupt the calm of the service or abandon the proscribed ritual act of hovering her hands over various places on the sitter's body. Indeed, mindful of the threat of a lawsuit, she will refrain from direct contact with her sitter, even though she has passed control of her mind and body to a spiritual force. The structure of the ritual has become embedded within Caesar's body, thereby allowing her to free her mind to have a non-conscious, uncontrolled, sincere experience. Alva Noe argues that “gesture knowledge is body knowledge; it belongs to our pre-intellectual habits, skills, anticipations, [and] forms of readiness” (2004: 120). Once the physical actions utilized to give healing are learned, they become internalized to the degree that they can be forgotten even while they are in use. This forgetfulness becomes more pronounced with practice over time such that a healer is able to abandon her or his conscious engagement more and more with experience.⁵ This gesture knowledge does not demand a strict pattern of movement but rather an underlying style. Caesar can move intuitively according to the influence of her spirit doctors, but the movement will always be controlled by the conventionalized style of movement that she has adopted for the ritual. If Caesar was not able to trust that she had internalized the subjunctive actions that go to make up the laying-on-of-hands healing, she could not fully commit to entering a passive, uncontrolled state of being.

The ability to enter and maintain this trance-like existential concentration is something that must be learned over time. In my first several attempts to bring

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu calls this phenomenon “genesis amnesia” through which action becomes second nature and enters into the actor's *habitus*, in this case through training and practice (1977: 79).

healing to Katie through the laying-on-of-hands ritual, I had to spend considerably more time between movements in order to reach the kind of focus and connection I wanted to achieve. Each time I would move to a new position, my conscious mind would return to the fore of my thought process and remove me from this meditative state. And so I would have to work at returning to my meditative state again. After practicing for six months, I found that I would still leave my meditative state when switching positions, but I was able to enter the meditative state again more and more quickly. The conscious effort needed to switch positions became less pronounced. I was no longer working as hard to decide what the next position should be, and so I was less removed from the act.

As I discovered in my first attempt at healing, quieting one's consciousness in order to focus exclusively on the act of healing is also an act of quieting one's doubts. To heal requires an existential step that enters the healer into a trance-like state rooted in a mind-body experience that exists below the level of intellectual analysis. This existential step is similar in kind to the step required of those who choose to sit for healing but of a more intense degree. The challenges I faced in attempting to heal Paul—abandoning my analytical consciousness in order to focus on the act of healing—were almost identical the challenges I faced receiving healing from Paul. At first I tried to focus on remaining open. Paul began with his hands on my shoulders. At the end of the first minute or so he pressed hard and then shifted his hands to my head. I reflected on how this was innovative and wondered, since he had never healed before, whether some intuitive force was compelling him or if he was simply mirroring what

he had seen done in church. He moved to my chest, back to my head, and back to my shoulders before ultimately taking my hands. I scolded myself for wondering what was motivating Paul's movements and tried to remain focused on staying open. I searched for colors. I began seeing shades of blue and indigo with some touches of green. By the end I was seeing a bright white with some tinges of pink. Pink kept recurring to me and I could not say why. It did not feel like this was something I was forcing on myself but rather was coming to me intuitively. I told Paul afterward that I became aware of my own physical and psychological tension when he laid his hands on me and that as the ritual proceeded I felt a release of tension. I wondered if I had come up with this simply as something to say or if it was genuine. I honestly could not say one way or the other. That having been said, there were palpable physical sensations during my healing. The experience in the chair was different than it would have been just sitting. I felt a tingling and the pulsing of some sort of energy moving from just below my solar plexus. The second time he moved his hands to my head I saw a white light and felt my eyes relax and release tension (workshop, 30 April 2011, CSE).

To heal and to be healed, I had to make an existential movement of faith. Rather than question the images, impressions, and sensations I was receiving, I simply had to let them flow; to be present with my experience and not judge. To do otherwise would be to disallow the healing to occur. Healers and their sitters must face their doubts, recognize their legitimacy, and choose to look past them anyway. It is reasonable to wonder whether my impression of the color purple is a supernatural

effect of the act of healing or if I have imagined it. But to stop and wonder is to interrupt my concentration and undermine the ritual's efficacy. According to Soren Kierkegaard, “[t]his is quite clear to the knight of faith so the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith. So he recognizes the impossibility, and that very instant he believes the absurd” (1843: 40). Although the ritual legitimizes my faith, it can only do so if I abandon my capacity to evaluate the ritual by investing myself fully in its efficacy. Richard Schechner makes a similar point about shamanism when he contends that, “even those skeptics who want to expose shamanism as a hoax find themselves ineluctably drawn into the system. This is because the system allows no objective reference point against which the shaman's effectiveness can be measured” (1973: 183). I can achieve physical, psychological, and spiritual health through healing, but only if I am able to abandon my propensity to doubt that this healing is possible. My investment in the ritual then rewards me with experiences that legitimize my choice to believe, as when Paul felt the warming sensation on his painful disc. While healing can effect measurable or discernible changes in its participants, it is not an outlet for proving so much as for expressing and experiencing belief. Finally, what differentiates healers from the rest of the congregation is their practice, commitment, and enhanced propensity to enter the existential state required in order to give and experience healing. Healers like Caesar, Geiseman, Sanson, and Gehman have or have developed a particular propensity to make Kierkegaard's movement of faith that has taken on an existential quality and now informs their entire bodily orientation toward the experience of healing.

The Intersection of Proof and Experience

Although healing is only verified within the prism of belief, does it happen that some converts and initiates have experiences with healing that they do not deem efficacious? While Joanna Simon has been successfully healed on multiple occasions, she said, “[s]ometimes I feel nothing much, so maybe there is just no connection there [with the healer] then” (pers. comm., 9 December 2011). The lack of connection may be attributable to Simon's own lack of concentration or engagement during the ritual or the fact that the healer was not sufficiently skilled. In either case, Simon is able to maintain her belief in the concept of spirit healing while still evaluating and finding fault with individual instances of healing. As Schechner says, “[a]t most, individual shamans can be found ineffective; this in no way disturbs belief that extends throughout the society” (1973: 183). In other words, sitters bring a capacity and willingness to believe in the legitimacy of spirit healing in principle, but, as with messages, they also bring a set of conditions of satisfaction that each individual experience must meet.

Spiritualism establishes itself with newcomers as a religious practice that can establish its validity empirically or “scientifically.” Healing demonstrates that, once science—understood in Spiritualist terms as the intersubjective validation of empirical evidence—is introduced as a central component of faith, it becomes an inextricable aspect of the how a system of practice and belief functions no matter the degree of participants' capacity and propensity to believe. Even though healing is a

separate practice, its participants expect that it will be able to achieve the same quasi-scientific legitimacy as spirit messages. Healing requires an existential movement of faith, but that faith is temporal. As Kierkegaard says of his knight, “[h]e did not believe that some day he would be blessed in the beyond, but that he would be happy here in the world” (1843: 30). Sitters have faith that something empirically perceptible or verifiable will occur in this life. Thus, the possibility remains that this expectation will not be met. What does it mean for spirit healing to succeed? What sort of experience meets the expectation established by sitters' belief in the power of the laying-on-of-hands ritual?

The NSAC has established the institutional terms by which a spirit healing can be deemed a success or a failure. At the conclusion of the healing service every Sunday, the chairperson repeats a request listed in the day's program: “[m]any of our healers are students working toward their certification. If you experience a change in your condition that you attribute to their healing, please request an affidavit form.” In order to be certified, six sitters must complete affidavits affirming the healer's ability. The affidavit asks that the sitter describe “the physical condition which brought you to seek Spiritual Healing” and “how the physical condition was cured or relieved.” The affidavit notes that the sitter's healing “may reference a single visit to the healing chair or to a condition needing several visits.” It limits the possibility of a fraudulent report by requiring that two officials at the church (minister, medium, or board member) witness the healing in question. The sitter must actually experience a change in her or his physical condition. Caesar told me that these qualifications can make it

difficult to collect affidavits because many who sit for healing do not suffer from any particular physical ailment. Rather, they sit in order to “feel that touch of spirit” (service, 20 March 2011, CSE). But, even if a healer can collect these affidavits, the prospect that the healing may be the result of a perfectly natural force unrelated to any spiritual intervention is difficult to overcome. Spirit healers suggest that anyone who suffers from a serious medical problem should seek other forms of treatment to supplement the spirit healing. Spirit healing is never intended to work on its own. Caesar said that while she had collected ten affidavits from people that she has healed, she was not comfortable submitting them to the NSAC because she did not feel that some were “strong” enough evidence of her ability (ibid.). The affidavits are submitted as part of an application process and having the requisite number does not necessarily guarantee certification. Finally the question of whether or not a healing is effective becomes a matter for subjective deliberation. A healing—and the account provided by its sitter—must be sufficiently persuasive to warrant certification.

What makes for a persuasive healing? To begin: sensation. Sitters describe sensations that they experience in the moment that let them know that healing is taking place. The most common sensation is a feeling of warmth radiating from the healer's hands. When I asked Katie to reflect on the experience of being healed, the heat coming from my hands was the first thing she mentioned. For some, this is the only sensation they experience. Mary Jane Ruhl said that she often does not feel much when she sits for healing, but she can “feel the heat from the healer's hands” (pers. comm., 21 January 2011). This heat is characterized as something unique or

greater than the warmth that might naturally accompany any non-healing touch. Sometimes, this means that the warmth is co-mingled with other sensations that separate the experience from the ordinary. Kathy Riley, for example, explains that the heat is often accompanied by a “slight tingling” (pers. comm., 22 October 2011). In other cases, the feeling is distinctly pronounced in ways that ordinary touch would not be. Joanna Simon explains that the heat emanating from a healer's hands can intensify as she is being healed, becoming “very warm, even hot” (pers. comm. 9 December 2011). Often, healing is accompanied by visual experiences that occur to the sitter while her or his eyes are closed. These visual experiences tend to be vague and abstract. Sitters will see colors, lights, or shapes, for example, but only rarely do they see anything as detailed as a face or a scene. For example, Kathy Riley often sees “swirling colors” while she is being healed. Sitters can orient themselves to look for these kinds of sensations or to experience healing in a way that will facilitate a visual reaction as at Barbara Sanson's color healing workshop. Rita O' Conner describes her experience being healed as a variegated and multi-faceted encounter that develops out of her own focus and openness:

The experience can vary. I may feel great calm. I may feel intense heat from the hands of the healer. I may feel nothing at all. With healing mediums whom I consider to be very gifted, I may see a burst of the most vivid purple color during the healing. I try not to think of anything when I sit in a healing chair, but just to clear my mind and allow the healing to happen. If I think anything at all, it is to affirm my intention to receive healing and to do my part (pers. comm., 26 November 2012).

The heat and visual sensations sometimes precede a more penetrating sensation that enters into the sitter's body and brings about an instantaneous feeling of

relief. In my most successful attempts with Katie, she has described the dissipation of her headaches or stomach aches, sometimes partially and sometimes completely. But healing is not limited to addressing specific pains. It can cause sensations of relief that are equally or primarily psychological. Kathy Riley told me that she has “experienced great relief” from both “physical pain and stress” when she has been healed at the CSE. The feeling of being healed is, at first, physical or emotional, but, at its most effective, it grows into a profound existential and spiritual experience. According to Joanna Simon, “I can feel the heat on my skin and sense energy coming my way. Typically I feel calm, peaceful. Several times I have been moved to tears” (pers. comm., 9 December 2011). And, for Kathy Riley, “[w]ith some healers I feel a strong connection to the earth through my feet, and with others I feel a strong connection to the heavens through my head. What I especially appreciate are healings that allow me to unite the two and feel a strong connection through my solar plexus to all that is—a balance between the magnetic earth and the ethereal sky—my connection” (pers. comm., 22 October 2011). In these accounts, Simon and Riley describe sensations that are both physical and supernatural. The sense of energy arriving or the body connecting with the earth or the spirits is not, strictly speaking, physical. And yet, both Simon and Riley are able to place the sensation in the physical world. Simon feels it “coming her way” along with a sensation of heat, and Riley is able to locate the sensation in her feet, head, or solar plexus. The healing proves itself by first providing a unique bodily experience that derives from a source outside of the body that can not be located in the natural world but is, never-the-less

palpable enough to create a tactile feeling. It further establishes its legitimacy by blossoming into a more encompassing feeling that incorporates the sitter's mental state. For Simon, this is an intensely moving experience of peace. For Riley, it is a feeling of balance and self-possession.

Often, these experiences are proof enough for participants who are just looking to “feel that touch of spirit,” but they fall short of the standards imposed by the NSAC's healing affidavit. In order for spirit healing to truly prove its legitimacy, it has to be accompanied by an enduring physical change that extends beyond the immediate circumstances of the healing. Jean Brooks—a CSE member in her late forties who is an employee with the federal government—had been suffering from a great deal of tension in her muscles. She described the experience of being healed as primarily mental and emotional, but after she left the healing bench she could feel the emotional healing that had been focused in her head and her brain trickle down into her body. Over the course of many hours and into the following week, Brooks experienced near complete relief from the tension that had been plaguing her (circle, 20 March 2012, Simon house). Kathy Riley had been suffering from chronic pain as a result of a gall stone operation. When she sat for healing, she was aware of what she described as a general feeling of being healed, but she did not feel anything specific in the area by her gall bladder where she often experienced pain. It was only in the several days after the healing that she began to notice that the pain had dissipated considerably and was not returning (circle, 20 March 2012, Simon house).

The enduring change that Brooks and Riley attributed to spirit healing was rooted in an initial sensation that took place on the healing bench during the ritual. The various existential sensations experienced during healing let participants know that something was achieved during the healing process. When those sensations are followed by either a continuing sensation that exceeds the ritual as in Brooks' case or an unexpected change in condition as in Riley's case, they are retroactively proven as a legitimate instance of healing. The sensations experienced during healing become a lens through which any subsequent change in physical condition is interpreted. This lens has an indeterminate expiration that varies from person to person. Brooks experienced her physical change in the hours and days after her healing whereas Riley experienced hers throughout the following week. Thus, healing begins as a subjective sense experience that gains in objective validity over time. As participants extricate themselves from the circumstances that spurred the initial sensation, the fact that an experience of healing continues becomes that much more persuasive. Participants must be content to trust and believe in the moment and then wait for the result. But the result can only be discovered as a product of healing if participants were willing to believe in the first place. Just as participants must be willing to acknowledge when a medium has made a convincing enough case that she or he has connected with the participant's spirit loved one, sitters must be willing to connect a change in their physical condition to the experience they had while sitting for healing.

Healing inverts the logic of the message service in order to serve a more select group of Spiritualist believers. I must believe in order for the spirits to act on me,

whereas the spirits prove their validity to me in the message service in order to inspire my belief. However, healing does not dispense with the intersubjective persuasion that attracts participants to Spiritualism in the first place. As the message service revealed, Spiritualists are drawn to practice Spiritualism because Spiritualism offers a form of belief that can receive affirmation beyond their own subjective experience. In the laying-on-of-hands ritual, this intersubjectivity begins as something that is akin to what Spiritualists experience in the message service. As a sitter, I confirm the healer's supernatural ability through the sensations that I perceive in the healing chair. The fact that my belief precedes these sensations, however, throws these sensations into doubt and requires further confirmation. In other words, because I am required to be caught up in the non-analytic and subjective encounter of my belief, true confirmation rests on an experience that endures beyond my immediate experience. Confirmation must happen after the immediate experience has ended and I have the opportunity to reflect on whether and to what degree healing has made any change to my being.

In the message service, sitters hope to be persuaded and have their beliefs affirmed by the performance. In the healing service, sitters practice, develop, and realize belief as active participants in the performance. This is the fundamental difference between the message service and the healing service, which marks spirit healing as a more advanced Spiritualist practice. The message service brings participants toward an increasingly enlightened conscious Spiritualist understanding. The healing service strives for a deeper, embodied, existential engagement. In order to achieve this result, healing requires deeper commitment and more active

participation from its sitters. To put it another way, healing is more of a ritual and messages are more of an entertainment. In return for sitters' commitment, the healing ritual provides a fully existential reward. Participants are not merely intellectually enlightened through the laying-on-of-hands or the healing meditations. They are transformed and improved in mind, body, and spirit. For select congregants, realizing the benefits of direct contact with the energy of the spirit world (with a healer's assistance) can lead to a desire for a deeper, unmediated experience. These congregants take a step beyond the weekly Sunday service and engage with the still more demanding and spiritually rewarding rituals through which they realize their own personal spiritual unfoldment.

In order to meet the goal of personal contact with the spirit world, participants must develop the fullest possible commitment to their spiritual development to be able to immerse themselves in a state of mental and physical connection with the spirits. But, this commitment must be accompanied by a self-criticism that tests and legitimizes the reality of that connection. For unfoldment, the participant combines religious belief and empirical criticism by turning the critical gaze on her or his own personal ability to connect with the spirits. This is the apotheosis of the Spiritualist's journey from initiate to convert and the gateway into a position of authority with the church as a healer or medium.

Chapter 5: Unfoldment: Achieving Conversion through the Communal Performance of Spirit Communication

My Choice to Unfold

Unfoldment is the final stage in the Spiritualist's journey to become a fully practicing convert. Interestingly, the home circle—the central performance practice for unfolding Spiritualists—instantiates the fullest integration of empirical criticism and religious belief of all of Spiritualism's performances. Spirit messages either serve an evidential or religious function depending on the sitter to whom they are directed. Spirit healing begins by requesting a distinctly religious mindset from the sitter but concludes by soliciting the sitter's critical reflection. I examine how that unfoldment—especially the home circle—demands a form of engagement that is simultaneously religious and evidential. Spiritualists must both activate their belief in order to make their own personal connection with the spirit world and draw on their critical faculties in order to determine whether and to what extent they have achieved that connection. Spirit messages and healing prepare Spiritualists to be able to pursue this integrated consciousness, marking unfoldment as the apotheosis of Spiritualist practice and performance.

In order to study the process of unfoldment, I had to make a shift in my own orientation toward Spiritualist practice. In the last six months of my research, I made the move from newcomer to convert, and this required that I affirm my belief in the Spiritualist principle of “the continuity of life,” especially as demonstrated through the act of spirit communication. It was a Tuesday evening in late October. Gehman

stood at the lectern at the front of the CSE's main room, addressing a group of sixteen people who had gathered for her class: "Unfoldment of Your Higher Spiritual Gifts." Most of the group was middle-aged. I was the only male present and one of only two attendees under thirty-five. Each of us had paid two hundred and twenty dollars for the opportunity to be there. Gehman's self presentation was just as formal if not more so than when she gave messages on Sundays. She wore a gray pant suit and purple blouse with a sparkling gray and black scarf, diamond earrings, and a diamond necklace. Gehman looked out over the group and said, "I assume the fact you're here means you've accepted the proof that life continues after the change called death" (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). She waited for some affirmation from the crowd. I quietly checked in with myself before nodding my assent.

In order to participate honestly in the exercises undertaken during the course—divining psychic impressions from inanimate objects, meditating in order to receive impressions from the spirit world, and healing—I had to let go of my agnostic doubt and fully engage with these rituals from the perspective of an active believer. Had I chosen to remain skeptical, I would have had to compromise my ethical standards and lie to my informants in order to maintain their trust. If I remained skeptical and was truthful, this would have foreclosed on opportunities to experience the private rituals that Spiritualist converts employ for their own development, limiting the scope and depth of my research. The fact that I was willing to engage with Spiritualist belief and practice unburdened my identification as a researcher of the skepticism that many projected onto that role, and earned me an invitation to participate in a home circle.

At the circle, I was again pressed to activate my belief in the spirits in order to attempt to communicate with them. Insofar as all participants in the ritual must report on their experiences during the exercise, this attempt had to be genuine and committed if I was to maintain my membership.

Through these efforts I began to question the boundary between myself and my informants. Having been born and raised in the same country as many of my informants and lived in the same community for four years prior to beginning my research at the CSE, this boundary was easier to eclipse than it can be for ethnographers working in cultures outside of their own. But in my quest for deeper access, did I compromise my ability to distance myself from my informants enough to write critically about their practice? Throughout my research I have attempted to maintain a double identity and double consciousness as a researcher. At the outset, I sought to become a newcomer-researcher, and, over time I adopted the identity of a Spiritualist-researcher. Always, I have endeavored to maintain an awareness of myself as conducting research. In ritual meditations, circles, and healing for which I have had to set aside this distancing self-consciousness, I have consistently reflected back on my experience after the fact, pondering over the details and analyzing my experience as if it were being related to me by an informant. In short, I have watched myself throughout this process such that I have become my own informant.

Interestingly, Spiritualism often encourages this self-critical attitude in its participants. Spiritualists do not believe that all messages are necessarily valid. Mediumship is a fallible practice subject to error. I have heard stories from

newcomers and converts alike about unsuccessful spirit messages and a few stories about false mediums faking their spirit communications. While Spiritualists accept the principle of spirit communication, they remain critical of the individual messages that mediums communicate. Similarly, the process of developing one's own ability to communicate with the spirits requires a significant amount of parsing and self-evaluation. Practitioners must learn to differentiate between impressions that come from the imagination and impressions that come from the spirits. And many are inclined to doubt to their own ability to experience spirit communication at all in their first few attempts. As with messages, Spiritualists affirm the principle of mediumship, but their individual ability (and the ability of those around them) remains open to critical judgment and self-doubt. Thus, many Spiritualists are inclined to discuss their attempts at mediumship or experience with messages after the fact—much like my reflections recorded in my notebooks—in an effort to discern whether or not the encounter possessed any legitimacy. Interestingly, my training as a theatre artist has served me well in this regard. Denis Diderot, a French Enlightenment philosopher, first theorized the actor's double consciousness in *The Paradox of Acting* (1883). Diderot contended that the best actors were able to “feel” their stage experience with the fullness of their “passion” and “genius” but also “with complete self-possession.” The same can be said of the Spiritualism's best mediums. While fully immersed in their communion with the spirits, they are able to maintain a full awareness of themselves and their surroundings.

In many ways, this attitude has set the terms by which I have come to accept Spiritualist belief. Receiving messages, I held open the possibility that the medium could convey something persuasive about my life that the medium could not know through any other means. Meditating, I held open the possibility that I could have a spiritual experience, potentially with actual spirits. In each instance, I did not foreclose the possibility that the ritual could fail. If a ritual succeeded, however, it was incumbent on my open-minded perspective that I acknowledge its success and consider whether the Spiritualist rationale for that success was valid. In my eighteen months of research, I received messages from mediums that were blatantly inaccurate, not persuasive enough to convince me of the medium's ability, and, in two instances, very persuasive. And I witnessed close friends, including my partner Katie receive messages with an uncanny degree of accuracy. In my own practice, I discerned the contents of a sealed envelope with a psychic precision that I did not think myself capable of, experienced intense emotional reactions while meditating, witnessed a table rock and tilt by means of a force I could not identify, and provided healing to friends and family. While these practices have had a positive effect on my psychological well-being, I continue to question and explore my personal ability to make contact with the spirit world and whether spirits are the only possible explanation for the phenomena I have experienced and witnessed. In short, my belief as a Spiritualist-ethnographer affirms Spiritualist practice as a worthwhile outlet for personal growth, existentially and spiritually, that invites and requires further exploration.

Joining a Home Circle

It was a Tuesday evening in late February. Five of us had gathered together in Joanna Simon's living room, as we had been doing all month for a “home circle”—a ritual in which novice and experienced practitioners gather to receive and share impressions from the spirit world. The home circle is an opportunity for Spiritualists to practice and develop their connection with the spirits. For aspiring mediums, it is a requisite part of their training, but some Spiritualists who have no desire to serve as mediums engage in circles to get closer to the spirit world. Simon and I sat on opposite ends of the couch. In a chair next to Simon was Center for Spiritual Enlightenment (CSE) medium Gloria Saide—our unofficial mentor—and beside her was Kathy Riley. Jean Brooks rounded out the circle, sitting opposite me beside Riley. We sat around a low coffee table on which Simon had lit a candle. We had been talking about Lily Dale: who had been there and how many times. It was nearly 7:30, the time at which we had been starting the ritual each week. Simon got up to light a few more candles on the mantel and returned to her seat. With feet flat on the ground and palms open and up in our laps, we all closed our eyes. Jean said a short opening prayer, inviting the spirits of our guides and loved ones to draw close to us, and together we sang “Peace Like a River.” Then, for a long moment, we sat in silence.

Jean was the first to speak. She had a vision of two men: a Native American and an Indian dressed in a turban. Gloria was next, bringing her impression of a man named Marty with red hair to Joanna. Joanna reported experiencing the smell of

incense. Gloria pressed her to “go into” her impression for more information. Joanna said she had the sense that there was a ritual taking place and saw an image of candles. For my part, I had a few distinct physical impressions. The first was an intense warmth on the backs of my hands. This persisted for several minutes and eventually cooled off. I also had a strong sense of a cold pillar with a large circumference coming out of my chest and stretching into the room. My most vivid impression began as a dull ache in my ankle and led to a numbness. I reported to the group that I felt I might be sensing the presence of someone who had an amputation. I had the impression that the spirit was male, but I could not say how. Gloria asked if the spirit was for anyone in particular in the room but I had no impression that directed me toward any of the other sitters. Gloria said, “he is welcome and we thank him for visiting and being with us.”

At our home circle, we sat giving and receiving impressions for an hour. Then, Jean said a closing prayer and we turned on the lights to discuss our experience. Gloria told Jean that she had a healing guide from India and that Jean's image of the man in the turban might have been for her. She pressed Jean to work toward selecting specific members of the circle to receive her messages. Joanna said that when Gloria had pressed her to “go into” her scent impression of the incense, she was not able to discern as much as she had hoped, although she had silently asked her spirit guides for more information. Gloria explained that asking for “the light”—an open channel to the spirit world—was something that should be done during the day in preparation for the circle. Once an impression comes, asking for guidance pushes

the medium into an analytical mindset and out of a place of simply opening and receiving. Without judging or analyzing, the medium should let the message come and report it as it comes.

But, this is precisely the challenge of the home circle. Gehman suggests that for a successful circle, sitters should give their impressions without editing or judging them (class, 29 November 2012, CSE). Much like spirit healing and silent meditation, unfoldment requires that participants enter a state of existential communion with the spirit world—an altered state of consciousness that operates below the intellectual or analytical level. Spiritualists refer to this state as “attunement” or “being in attunement with the infinite.” But unlike healing, which is realized in the sitter's own subjective experience, unfoldment is tested against a community of interlocutors and realized through an intersubjective validation of the sitter's impression. In other words, I must give my impressions to others, and my impressions gain validity when those around me can confirm what they are hearing, just as in the message service. But what is a spirit impression, and how can I judge the difference between a spirit impression and a mundane thought? As Marilyn Awtry cautions, “[a] lot of things we get come from our subconscious mind and not from spirit.” (workshop, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). That evening in February, the cold pillar and dull ache were not the only things that came into my attention. Thoughts about my drive, my day, and my work all moved through my head as I sat there, but to report all of them would have made my contribution an endless monologue, cutting the others off from giving their own impressions and completely disrupting the ritual. I had to choose to report these

impressions to the group and to not report those thoughts or experiences that I deemed non-spiritual.

Few converts are members of regular weekly circles. Participation in a circle is reserved for a still more elite and spiritually committed group within the church's membership. This is due in no small part to the difficulty of the practice. In order to receive an impression, I must refrain from analysis or judgment. But in order to give an impression, I must evaluate my own experience and decide which of my thoughts are spirit impressions and which are just my normal thought pattern. The home circle seeks to combine the deep belief and existential immersion essential to spirit healing with the critical discernment characteristic of the message service. Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff refers to this state as “transcendence, where one is aware simultaneously of being in flow as well as aware of his/her actions” (1990: 247). Spiritualist attunement represents what Robert K. C. Forman calls a dualistic mode of mystical experience in which “[o]ne encounters one's own consciousness, all the time, alongside all of one's actions and thinking. One recognizes, in an entirely new way, the nature of the self, and does not lose contact with that even when one is active” (1999: 164). But, for Forman, this dual consciousness is applied to everyday experience. The mystic, by virtue of a transcendent moment in which her or his consciousness was opened, becomes perpetually aware of her or his experience through a state of mystical detachment. Spiritualists are unique in that they utilize this dualistic consciousness in order to achieve supernatural or non-material sensation.

From a Spiritualist perspective, a purely analytic approach or purely emotional response are inadequate to achieve the fullest possible spiritual self-realization, i.e. direct personal contact with the spirit world. The act of working toward the intersection of analytical consciousness and non-analytical experience demands the fullest possible experience of both. In this way, the messages and healing introduce Spiritualists to concepts and experiences that unfoldment extends to the furthest possible limit. How do Spiritualists manage to combine existential commitment and critical evaluation in order to create a deeper and stronger connection to the spirits and to Spiritualism? And what does the home circle—and the process of unfoldment of which it is a part—reveal to be the ultimate goal of Spiritualist ritual and Spiritualist conversion?

Attunement: Establishing a Connection with the Spirits

In Gehman's six-week class, she taught a mediumship meditation—intended to precipitate attunement—on the first day (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). The exercise resembled the healing meditation in its approach. We began by imagining the energy from the earth entering our bodies through our feet. Then we visualized our “third eye,” located in the center of our foreheads—a non-physical element of the individual's spiritual being that opens on to psychic and mediumistic sensations.¹ Focusing on the third eye, we freed our minds of negative thoughts and turned our attention to thoughts of joy, love, and peace. Then we visualized our own non-

¹ The third eye also surfaces in Hindu practice, Taoism, Theosophy, New Age practices, and forms of Christian and Jewish mysticism.

physical spiritual body within our physical body and pictured that body connecting with the higher plane of the spirits, which we imagined being somewhere above our heads. We pictured a column of light entering our bodies from the spirits above and followed that connection upward, allowing ourselves to enter an “unconscious stream” in order to search for symbols. At the end of the meditation, we followed the same column back down into our bodies. Over the course of several classes, Gehman reduced the amount of time and focus that were given to the guided meditation. She also shifted from directing students to search for symbols to directing students to search for faces or feelings of a spirit's presence. She encouraged students to practice meditating at home and assumed that we would internalize the steps required for attunement.

Gehman warned that the guided meditation was a starting point that we would have to abandon in order to truly unfold. The guided meditation could not bring about a mediumistic consciousness because it appealed too much to a conscious process of visualization. By actively visualizing, participants could not open themselves enough to receive anything substantive from the spirit world. Mediums access psychic and spirit messages through a subconscious process. This is the same state Spiritualists are meant to achieve in a home circle. According to Awtry, the conscious mind must be quieted in order for mediums to receive messages. This is not to suggest that mediums must enter a trance state in order to give messages, although trance is a viable path to spirit communication. Generally, the medium is alert and conscious, but the messages come from a place in the mind that tends to be accessed through

sleep or meditation (workshop, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). Indeed, Gehman suggested that spirits can and do visit both mediums and non-mediums in their dreams. Gehman associates mediumship with a “right brain” process because the brain's right hemisphere is aligned primarily with creativity whereas the left brain tends to be aligned with logic. Mediumistic creativity involves achieving a state of mental detachment in which the individual is not inserting her or his own analysis onto the impressions she or he is receiving. As Gehman teaches, “You don't think. You have to remain detached.” To perform psychometry, Gehman suggests talking as quickly as you can and not allowing yourself to pause, presumably to prevent the practitioner from thinking about the messages she or he is receiving from the object. Gehman occupies the role of an observer, never interfering with the impressions she receives (class, 1 November 2011, CSE).

For Spiritualists, achieving attunement is both a specific act and an evolving personal transformation; an existential expansion of mind, body, and spirit. Forman argues that “[s]ome mystical experiences *are* semipermanent or permanent, being a transformation that, once accomplished, changes the deep epistemological structure of all experience for months, years, or indeed for the rest of one's life” (1999: 133). According to Schechner, one achieves transformation “either by surrender to strong outside forces, as in possession, or by giving in to moods within oneself” (1985: 41). Barbara Myerhoff defines transformation as

a multidimensional alteration of the ordinary state of mind, overcoming barriers between thought, action, knowledge, and emotion. The invisible world referred to in ritual is made manifest and the subject placed within it. But such experiences cannot be compelled, only invited and sought. Hence

transformation is seldom made the explicit goal of a ritual, on whose appearance success is thought to depend (1990: 246).

The intense investment of time, money, and effort required for unfoldment is part of an overall process of attunement that is meant to transform the Spiritualist's overall state of being. With each successful attunement, the practitioner unfolds her or his mediumistic ability, becoming more and more adept at connecting with the spirit world. This transformation both is and is not the explicit goal of an unfoldment ritual. Each meditation, circle, or exercise is contextualized as part of a process. If a sitter does not achieve the desired attunement or transformation in a given ritual that does not mean the attempt was in vain. Rather, the sitter has practiced achieving attunement and developed her or his ability such that in subsequent attempts, a connection with the spirit world will be that much more likely.

Philosophy and Rationalization in the Unfoldment Process

Spiritualists begin the journey toward unfoldment in workshops and classes, the first function of which is to explain the purpose and technique for achieving attunement. This is almost always accomplished through lectures, which fill the first half of a two-hour or full day session. For Marilyn Awtry's all-day seminar on "Applied Mediumship Energetics," twenty students gathered in Lily Dale's Lakeside Assembly Hall. Awtry stood at a lectern at the front of the room. Behind her, three large stained-glass windows colored the morning sunlight as it illuminated the room. On the left a vertical window showed the letter "A" or the greek alpha on a shield against a purple background. On the right was an identical window except that it

showed the greek letter omega. Between them, a horizontal window featured a depiction of a tree with a wide trunk. The words “church of the living spirit” were written across the branches. On the walls around us hung paintings and black-and-white photographs of Lily Dale's most prominent mediums, spanning the course of the town's history. Awtry began by asking the class to reflect on a few questions: why were we taking her seminar, could we distinguish between mental and physical mediumship, how many mediums from Spiritualism's history could we name, and what did we think mediumship was exactly? Awtry addressed the last question right away. “Mediumship,” she said, “is a sacred faculty. This is a part of your spiritual you. This is a part of your soul.” Later in the lecture, she returned to this theme when she began speaking about Spiritualists who make light of spirit communication or tell jokes while communicating messages from the spirit world. She wondered aloud, “[i]f we Spiritualists don't respect what we do, how can we expect others to respect us?” (workshop, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale).

If participants understand and accept that mediumship possesses a deeper meaning, then a deeper meaning will be revealed through their experience. This will then result in an abiding improvement in participants' ability to contact the spirit world. The spirits that are drawn to communicate through mediums or mediumistic exercises are not always capable of offering spiritual enlightenment. If the individual does not grasp that mediumship is meaningful and spirit communication sacred then the kinds of spirits she or he attracts will tend to be unenlightened, unhelpful, and possibly harmful. Spiritualists tend to discourage the use of Ouija boards for exactly

this reason. Ouija boards are a mass-marketed form of entertainment whereby “players” in a “game” carry on a conversation with any spirits that are willing to speak through the players' collective interaction with the game board. They want to be entertained and so they are not “reaching out” for what Gehman calls “the highest and the best” of the spirit world. Consequently, their experience will tend to be trivial and lead to a personal devaluation of the significance of spirit contact (book club, 11 November 2011, CSE).

This broader purpose—to bring about a personal spiritual evolution—leads directly to the underlying technique for all attempts at spiritual attunement. Before covering the specific meditations and exercises that precipitate unfoldment, instructors like Awtry and Gehman reveal the philosophy underlying these techniques. The workshop lecture serves to situate Spiritualist phenomena within a system of principles or laws that allow participants to understand how and why attunement works. Whereas initiates receive Spiritualist philosophy piecemeal through Sunday service lectures, converts receive it in a more comprehensive form in workshops and classes. The lecture at a Sunday service is usually around twenty minutes long. By contrast, the six lectures Gehman gave in her class series were an hour long, and Awtry lectured for three hours at her mediumship workshop. A newcomer receives Spiritualist philosophy in bits and pieces, but an unfolding convert must develop a fuller comprehension of Spiritualism's system of thought.

The fact that the philosophy of spirit contact is only given comprehensive treatment at unfoldment workshops and classes is not necessarily an optimal choice.

According to Awtry, Spiritualism's philosophy

should be stressed in every discourse or oratory from the platform every service. Unfortunately the leaders of Spiritualism got on the wrong track and the people followed. For six years now I have expounded on the need to get back on track and present the philosophy.... If the philosophy was properly presented all the time—Spiritualism would be the light of the world. People would find peace (pers. comm., 15 August 2011).

Gehman echoed Awtry's complaint when she told me that

a lot of people call themselves Spiritualists who don't know the philosophy [and so] there's a lack of enlightenment.... Mediums don't take the opportunity that they have to teach. For example, if you go to a medium in Lily Dale everyone wants a reading and that's what they do. It's very commercial and that's very unfortunate. I think every medium has the duty to teach as they're giving a reading. I always give people a copy of our principles in an effort not to convert them but to inform them. And I don't know any medium who does that. I feel that's an essential part of what we should all do then people will become more conscious of our philosophy (interview, 22 January 2013, Gehman house).

The philosophy is communicated to converts at workshops and classes as a way of catching them up on a broader understanding of Spiritualism that they should have been receiving beginning with their earliest experiences in the church. It becomes especially important to catch up on the philosophy because the significance of accepting the everyday influence of the spirits is crucial to the success of spiritual unfoldment and attunement.

Awtry explained that mediumship functions according to a series of laws. The first of these is the Law of Desire, which Awtry breaks down into a three step process: (1) “have a clear conception of what you want to accomplish,” (2) “your

thinking needs to be positive and not negative,” and (3) “your thinking must be constructive and have a goal.” (workshop, 4 August 2011). The Law of Desire stems from participants' beliefs. The injunction to be clear, positive, and constructive dictates that sitters must want to achieve contact with the spirit world and believe both that it is possible and they are capable of accomplishing it as individuals. The Law of Desire is the bedrock of unfoldment, but it is complemented by several other principles: the Law of Cause and Effect dictates that “thoughts create things” or material results; the Law of Awareness indicates that “you become aware of what you're doing in proportion to the difficulty of what you're attempting;” and the Law of Vibration contends that “all things seen and unseen in the universe have a vibration” (ibid.). Thus, directing one's thoughts, actions, and awareness toward contacting the spirits allows sitters to attune to the vibration of the spirits and achieve communication between worlds.

Awtry's Laws are also central to the practice of many New Age adherents. Followers of the *Course on Miracles*, for example, believe that by asking God for something we can cause ourselves to receive it. In the best of all worlds, adherents should learn to ask for happiness and leave it to God to decide what the practitioner needs to achieve happiness. However, practitioners can just as easily ask for and receive more specific material boons like a car or a parking space. The power to ask for and receive is referred to as “magic” (Kemp 2004: 20-23). Although Spiritualists and *Course* followers agree that, through the law of desire, they can receive the things they request they differ on the nature of those things. *Course* followers are ambiguous

in the ends that can or should be achieved through this law. According to New Age scholar Daren Kemp, “[o]n the one hand [material desire] is rejected along with the illusory material world; but on the other hand... it is affirmed” (ibid.: 23). For Spiritualists, the only valid use of the law of desire is spiritual enlightenment, which can only be achieved by asking for and receiving non-material direction, encouragement, and assistance from the spirits in order to become attuned.

The intellectual transformation achieved through the lecture has an important function in altering participants' understanding of the role of the spirits in their lives. Situating spirit communication and healing into a broader system of principles is a form of religious rationalization. In his crystallization of Max Weber's theory of religious rationalization, Clifford Geertz argues that “the problems of meaning which in traditional [or magical] systems are expressed only implicitly and fragmentarily, [through rationalization] get inclusive formulations and evoke comprehensive attitudes” (1973: 172). The messages, healing, and impressions achieved through Spiritualist ritual are, from the sitter's perspective, idiosyncratic and personal. Each message is different, and each healing has its own unique effect on the sitter. Through an understanding of the philosophy, these variegated experiences are situated into a generalized system of thought that abstracts their meaning into encompassing laws and transforms the personal into the universal. Rationalization has the effect of “disenchanted” the world for magic-based cultures who believe that there is a spiritual dimension to all aspects of everyday existence such that “the divine can no longer be apprehended *en passant* through numberless concrete, almost reflexive

ritual gestures strategically interspersed throughout the general round of life.” The act of abstracting experiences into generalized ideas draws them into a “nucleate,” which is accessed indirectly at a specific place and time. To counter this, some cultures resort to “individual experiential contact with the divine via mysticism” (ibid.: 174).

While this would seem to describe the process of a Spiritualist convert, many begin from an already disenchanted atheistic or Judeo-Christian perspective. For Spiritualists, rationalization is meant to overlap with mystical experience such that rationalization is inseparably intertwined with the mystical encounter. As Geertz contends, “religious rationalization is not an all-or-none, an irreversible, or an inevitable process” (ibid.: 175). Whereas Weber's theory shows that rationalization creates distance between religious practitioners and the supernatural, Spiritualists use rationalization to bring them closer together. Awtry's laws show how the universe functions in such a way as to render spirit contact a natural if not inevitable part of daily existence for anyone who seeks to recognize it. Mediums may seem to be specially endowed individuals, and my own contact with the spirits may seem idiosyncratic and miraculous. But, the philosophy reveals that these experiences are, in fact, single instantiations of a general rule. My everyday, quotidian life is in fact infused with spiritual influences that I simply have not recognized. For Spiritualists, rationalization functions to generalize and diffuse mystical experience into practitioners' entire existence rather than separate it into special times and places. This transforms Spiritualists' perspective on the world and renders attunement a more natural and accessible state of being.

The Unfolding Convert's Commitment

How significant is it that Spiritualists gain an understanding of Spiritualist practice through live lectures rather than books? Instructors often encourage their students to read further on the topics covered in the lecture, but the pursuit of knowledge often either begins with the lecture or, if it begins with internet research and books, leads to a live workshop. Classes not only teach didactically about the seriousness of purpose and intensity of desire requisite for unfoldment, they elicit and instantiate these attitudes in attendees through the fact of their participation. Classes require a much deeper investment of time, money, and effort than simply purchasing a book on Spiritualist attunement. This investment becomes the psychological and social platform or starting place for the existential and spiritual transformation achieved through attunement. Unfoldment is, essentially, a non-linear series of rites of passage meant to transform participants into adepts. Participants travel, attend workshops and classes, and join circles in hopes of achieving a progressive transformation that will ultimately allow them to make contact with the spirit world. They learn privileged, esoteric knowledge from skilled practitioners in the company of fellow initiates so that they can become skilled practitioners themselves. But, as Myerhoff contends, the transformation into an adept and the concomitant spirit contact is not guaranteed. Unfoldment is dependent upon the participant's willingness and capacity to unfold. Consequently, the performances that comprise the unfoldment

process are designed to elicit the commitment necessary to allow the transformation to take place.

Unlike the healing service, which includes its own ritualized form of preparation immediately beforehand, the rituals of unfoldment call for an extended preparation process that takes place over the course of months and years. This process demands earnest commitment from participants. Gehman's unfoldment class, for example, requires participants to attend at least five out of six sessions on Tuesday nights in order to qualify for membership, and many attend the class in addition to Sunday services. Participants who meet this requirement are given a certificate at the end of the course marking their achievement. The unfoldment class is the first instance when attendance becomes compulsory. Spiritualists make no effort to compel participants to attend Sunday services. There are no consequences—spiritual or social—for missing a service, and many participants attend regularly but not consistently. Unfoldment requires a kind of dedication that messages and healing do not.

The Pilgrimage to Lily Dale

To what extent does the pilgrimage to the Lily Dale Assembly advance Spiritualists beyond what they can achieve in classes with their home congregation? Lily Dale draws groups of tourists who have little or no familiarity with Spiritualism and are only interested in having a reading with a psychic medium, but it also serves as a pilgrimage site for converted Spiritualists seeking unfoldment, offering classes

and workshops every day for aspiring mediums and developing Spiritualists.

Pilgrimage is a central feature in many religious practices, even today. Muslims travel to Mecca or Medina, Jews observe their “birthright” by visiting Israel, Buddhists travel to temples throughout Asia, and Catholics seek out the shrines of saints where miracles have been said to occur like Fatima and Lourdes.² The Lily Dale Assembly or “City of Light” is a small gated community located beside Cassadaga Lake, fifteen miles from Chautauqua Lake in Southwestern New York. The site of the Hydesville Rappings is roughly two hours away and Cora Richmond's birthplace in Cuba, New York is an hour-and-a-half drive east. In the summer months, the town is home to just over forty registered mediums as well as a variety of guest mediums and healers.

Gehman has a second home across the street from the dock on Cassadaga Lake that she stays in through the months of July and August. Although Lily Dale has residents and mediums that live there year round, it opens its gates to visitors beginning at the end of June and lasting through Labor Day. When I visited in 2011, Lily Dale was in its 132nd year as a Spiritualist community.

² Not all members of any of these faiths observe these pilgrimages, but they continue to feature as a prominent aspect of all of these religious traditions.

On the surface, Lily Dale does not appear to be a sacred site for dedicated Spiritualists to gather. Messages, readings, and healings are the accentuated attractions at Lily Dale, and they are primarily geared toward newcomers (see Figure 8). Like the message services at the CSE, they assume that some or even many in the audience will have little familiarity with Spiritualism, and so they take the time to remind participants that the services are religious and that there are certain rules that must be followed during the proceedings. Lily Dale prepares itself for large groups of tourists who experience the town as a kind of roadside curiosity on the way to the Great Lakes or Niagara Falls. The tourist traffic grows so dense and the dress code so



Figure 8: A crowd of tourists gathered at Lily Dale's Inspiration Stump for a message service. Photograph by Katie Lesser.

lax that in the warm summer months Barbara Sanson keeps shawls and drapes in the Healing Temple to give to those who are not “properly dressed” for a religious service (workshop, 30 April 2011, CSE). Lily Dale also attempts to take advantage of

this opportunity to share the seriousness of Spiritualism with casual tourists by, for example, listing the daily worship service held at 2:30pm in the auditorium at the center of town as the “Guest Speaker and Clairvoyant.” Visitors arrive expecting messages from an experienced medium and have to wait through a traditional Spiritualist devotional service including hymns, prayers, and the recitation of Spiritualism's principles, before the messages begin.

The casual tourists who gather at Lily Dale are not only potential initiates but also a test audience for student mediums to develop their skills. At the message services I attended, between a third and half of the mediums who served were students, often attending for a limited period of time with other students from their home congregation. Less advanced students like myself who are not sufficiently skilled to give public readings come to Lily Dale in order to attend classes. In Lily Dale's fifty-five page summer program, two pages are devoted to the well-attended daily services and forty are provided for the various workshops and classes in distinctly Spiritualist subjects like spirit healing and communication but also in broader topics like yoga, reiki, and reading tea leaves. Lily Dale resembles education-centered New Age pilgrimage destinations like the Esalen Institute in California, which draws religious seekers with the promise of a workshops in yoga, spiritual dance, and eastern religion guided by expert practitioners, except that Esalen does not include spirit communication among its offerings.³ The printed program, which I first discovered beside the CSE's bulletin table in March 2011, is largely intended for initiates seeking unfoldment. Facilities like the museum and library, which preserve

³ www.esalen.org (accessed 13 November 2012).

and display important artifacts and records from Spiritualism's history, hardly draw any notice from the tourists roaming the town, but they signify Lily Dale's educational mission and serve the interests of initiates and converts who arrive in Lily Dale with a commitment to Spiritualism and a desire to learn more.

I decided to travel to Lily Dale after discovering that many of the CSE's members—new and old—had been there, often more than once and for extended periods of time. For these members, Lily Dale did not introduce them to Spiritualism. Rather, they traveled to Lily Dale because of an interest and a commitment that had already developed through their experiences at the CSE. I attended classes on physical mediumship and unfolding mediumship. In these classes, I discovered that all of my fellow students were either members or aspiring members of a Spiritualist congregation in the United States or Canada. And they had all come, primarily, to further their understanding of mediumship and Spiritualism. Interestingly, several of my classmates knew the instructor because the instructor was a pastor or medium at their home congregation, and many had taken similar courses or the same course before. Members of the CSE have been known to attend Gehman's workshops even though she offers the same classes in Falls Church. And many of the mediums who teach in Lily Dale offer similar courses when they visit other congregations, including the CSE. Indeed, many of the experiences offered at Lily Dale—including a class on healing with Barbara Sanson, a gallery reading with Sarah Lerner, and a lecture and discussion on the biographical book *The Priest and the Medium* with its subjects Anne Gehman and Wayne Knoll—are also available at the CSE. If workshops and

classes are the Spiritualists' primary motivations for traveling to Lily Dale, why bother making the journey to Western New York when they can attend similar events at home?

The trek to Lily Dale is almost never convenient. The town is located in a rural area and there is very little in the way of stores or accommodations around it, which may explain why Lily Dale has its own hotel and restaurant. I stayed at a campground on Chautauqua Lake—the nearest major attraction in the area—and drove for about twenty minutes each day to get to Lily Dale. The nearest city is Jamestown, just under twenty miles south, and the nearest major city is Buffalo, roughly sixty miles to the north. The nearest airports receiving regular flights are in Buffalo and Rochester, just over an hour away. Many CSE members (and many of the people I met at Lily Dale) made the journey by automobile. The trip from Falls Church, VA is just under seven hours. The people I met at workshops had driven from various places in the Midwest, Northeast, Canada, and Mid-Atlantic states. Visitors from Florida—which were abundant the week I was in Lily Dale—generally flew and then drove in from Buffalo. In short, the trip always requires a degree of effort and commitment to make, particularly as compared to the much easier weekly journey to one's local Spiritualist congregation.

The difficulty of the journey, however, is significant to the town's religious value. Lily Dale's ability to function as a spiritual center where unfoldment can occur depends, in part, on the commitment that the journey to the town elicits. As Victor and Edith Turner observe, “[m]iracles or the revivification of faith are everywhere

regarded as rewards for undertaking long, not infrequently perilous journeys and for having temporarily given up not only the cares but also the rewards of ordinary life” (1995: 6). The difficulty of reaching Lily Dale enhances the separation it instantiates between the traveler's daily life and the traveler's experience in the town. Lily Dale's distance from the secular world—even in its surroundings in southwestern New York—render it a distinctly liminal space and endow it with the capacity to literally immerse visitors in Spiritualism (c.f. Graburn 1977, Selwyn 1994, and Brown 1996). This immersion lends Lily Dale's Spiritualist pilgrims a heightened sense that they are more likely to “feel the touch of spirit” and undergo a breakthrough or significant advancement in their unfoldment process.

Lily Dale recognizes and promulgates the notion that it is a place of particular spiritual power that can facilitate contact with the spirit world by promoting the spiritual energy of its spaces to visitors. In this way, Lily Dale resembles Catholic pilgrimage sites like Lourdes, where a grotto is said to produce waters that possess miraculous healing properties.⁴ The first and last message service of the day take place in Leolyn Woods at a large tree stump called “Inspiration Stump.” The forest and stump are described as a “sacred space” that was originally honored by the Native Americans who lived in the area and has since accumulated a spiritual energy from the generations of mediums who have practiced there (reading, 1 August 2011, Lily Dale). The entire town takes on a supernaturally energized significance when mediums like Gehman, Awtry, and Sanson encourage congregants to make the

⁴ Lourdes gained notoriety as a holy site when a young girl, Bernadette Soubirous, saw the Virgin Mary appear eighteen times in the year 1858. Since then, Catholics and non-Catholics alike have made the pilgrimage to Lourdes to receive healing from the grotto there, a practice that is still popular today. *Saturday Evening Post* (March/April 2012).

journey there. These mediums never give a specific reason beyond the fact that Lily Dale is a “special place.” Gehman—like many of the mediums in Lily Dale—has a home in the town where she spends the summer (see Figure 9). At the CSE, whenever I would mention that I was planning to visit Lily Dale, congregants that had been before would often talk about the special quality of their experience with the site itself, explaining that they could “just feel” the closeness of the spirit world while walking the streets the of the town.



Figure 9: Gehman's summer house in Lily Dale. Photograph by Katie Lesser.

Creating a Community of the “Like-Minded”

The commitment elicited by the unfoldment process in classes and in Lily Dale provides participants with a community of fellow believers to reinforce and validate that commitment. In Gehman's unfoldment class, for example, the fact that everyone in the class was willing to make a commitment to unfoldment differentiated them from the group that gathers at a Sunday service in that there are no newcomers or spiritual tourists hiding within the class's ranks. This allows for a heightened sense

of community that affirms the legitimacy and value of the commitment that participants are making. In the first moments of the first class session, Gehman encouraged us to “get to know one another. Find like-minded people. It is important to be able to discuss these things openly and honestly. Friends and family might not understand, but here everyone is of like mind” (class, 25 October 2011, CSE). While a strong and cohesive bond did not form among all class members, a definite sense of community developed over time. On Sundays, classmates would often approach me to talk about our Tuesday experiences. Even many months after the courses ended, I continued to receive a special greeting from classmates that can only be characterized as a kind of joyful recognition of an equal. Within the larger congregation, classmates form their own unacknowledged clique of fellow travelers, all occupying a similar place on our spiritual path. Kathy Riley marked this bond by distributing homemade jewelery to all of her classmates at the last session. The women got earrings, and she gave me a polished stone that she had fashioned into a necklace. When I began practicing with a weekly home circle, four of the five participants were members of my unfoldment class.

Lily Dale also affords participants a heightened sense of community—akin to but on a different order than the kind of community achieved in local workshops—which further enhances their commitment to Spiritualism. To begin, Spiritualists encounter a much larger group of newcomers at Lily Dale than they would ordinarily see at their home congregation. Workshops and classes—which tend to draw only the more dedicated converts or aspiring converts—are less well-attended but still

generally better attended than the CSE's events. The average attendance at the workshops I participated in was twenty. Most of the people I met in these workshops introduced themselves by identifying the congregation they ordinarily practiced at before asking where my congregation was and who the mediums were that practiced there. Gehman's name was recognizable to nearly everyone I spoke with and became an important identifying marker for me. According to the Turners, “[a]t major pilgrimage centers, the quality and degree of the emotional impact of the devotions... derive from the union of the separate but similar emotional dispositions of the pilgrims converging” on the site, in this case, from various parts of the North America (1995: 13). Our shared commitment to Spiritualism brought us together to share in the process of unfoldment in Lily Dale. In this way, Lily Dale helps Spiritualists to realize in a visceral way that Spiritualism stretches beyond the confines of their individual congregations, bolstering their sense of the significance and value of Spiritualist practice. The preponderance of newcomers interested in discovering the potential truths of Spiritualist practice further heightens their sense that Spiritualism is a worthwhile pursuit and a valuable spiritual path.

Exercising the Spirit

Workshops and classes emphasize that participants need to further develop a particular skill set in order to pursue unfoldment. The exercises attempted in the workshop are an introduction that is meant to teach participants the most effective techniques for achieving spirit contact. In order to practice for unfoldment, participants must develop both natural and supernatural skills. Awtry began the

experience portion of her full-day course on “Applied Mediumship Energetics” with two exercises that had no recourse to mediumistic or psychic ability. These exercises were designed to teach the class the importance of developing seemingly quotidian abilities in order to achieve extrasensory experiences. In the first exercise, Awtry laid out a tray full of random objects including jewelery, soap, rocks, office supplies, and various knick-knacks and asked the class to walk to the tray and attempt to memorize as many objects as possible in a set amount of time. Then, with the tray out of sight, we recorded what we could remember (workshop, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). This exercise was designed to teach the value of awareness to mediumship. Spirit sensations are often very subtle, and so they require a heightened awareness on the part of the medium in order to help assure that they will not be missed. A spirit sensation may be buried or tangled up in the unfolding medium's thoughts or other experiences. The lesson is to develop an increasingly powerful awareness and mindfulness of one's environment and one's experience of that environment, and this will precipitate the unfolding medium's ability to notice a spirit sensation when it occurs.

The second exercise Awtry used involved a series of bowls containing a half inch of water at the bottom. With eyes closed, we raised our hands perpendicular to the bottom of the bowl and slowly lowered our fingers inside, intending to stop ourselves the moment we felt the water on the tips of our fingers. A more sensitive person would perceive the water and stop her or his hand just before the fingers touched the surface. I touched the bottom of the bowl before I even realized my

fingers were in the water, identifying myself as physically insensitive (ibid.). The lesson of this second exercise was that, just as we had to sharpen our minds to become more aware of our surroundings, we had to sharpen our bodily senses in order to take in the subtle sensations produced by the spirits. By enhancing our physical sensitivity, we could bring ourselves closer to being able to perceive sensations that came from the spirit world. In order to practice physical sensitivity, Awtry taught us an exercise that bridged the mundane and the psychic worlds. We held our hands over three playing cards arranged face down and side-by-side on the table in front of us. Awtry explained that the black cards would give off a subtle cold energy and the red cards would give off a subtle warm energy. With practice, we could learn how to discern between them, thereby enhancing our physical sensitivity.

What Awtry achieves in her students through these exercises is the sense of a boundary that they did not perceive before. It had never occurred to me before her class that my inability to feel the relative temperatures of playing cards was any sort of deficiency. In this way, students are encouraged to raise their awareness of a lack of awareness. By concentrating on overcoming this lack, they build the skills necessary to attune to the spirit world. David Morris contends that, “the infant develops by reacting against worldly interventions” (2004: 78). Students take up a kind of mediumistic infancy when they are introduced to the interventions that, up until that point, they had failed to recognize. They then orient this sense of discovering and overcoming interventions in an effort reach out for non-physical experiences.

Participants transition into practicing a supernatural skill set when they attempt to attune to the spirit world and then commune with the spirits. In Awtry's class, we began with a psychometry exercise in which Awtry passed out envelopes containing mystery images. We had to guess the contents of the envelope based on the mental impressions we received while holding it. We also attempted telepathy in which we worked in pairs: one sender and one receiver. Senders selected a card and concentrated on the shape on the card—which remained unknown to the receiver. The receiver then attempted to guess the shape on the card. For telekinesis, we placed a pencil parallel with the lines on a lined note card and tried to move the pencil so that we could perceive the movement against the background of the card. Finally, we attempted dowsing with copper rods. The rods—housed in metal cups such that they will not move according to the movement of the person holding them—are pointed straight forward. As one person moves toward another, the magnetic aura of the second person forces the rods further and further outward the closer the first individual comes. The class was the most successful at this last exercise because it did not rely on our individual ability. The rods simply demonstrated the existence of an aura. The other exercises resulted in considerably more failure. I was able to accurately guess vague impressions from my envelope: blue, clouds, an upward motion, spring, and light for an image of a butterfly. Two out of the fifteen classmates came up with accurate descriptions of their envelopes, the same percentage had more than 10% success with the telepathy cards, and everyone struggled to make the pencil move.

It often takes extensive practice in order to achieve any result through an unfoldment ritual. Buddhist meditation, Hindu yoga, and Christian and Jewish mysticism all function according to a similar principle: practice builds spiritual ability and yields more profound spirituality in the form of enlightenment or increasingly direct contact with God. Practice is essential for growth (Harvey 1990; Iyengar 2008; Steinbock 2007). Gehman criticized mediumship instructors who promised their students that they would achieve spirit impressions in a single workshop or weekend. By contrast, Gehman tells her students that it often takes months and even years of practice to achieve results (class, 22 November 2011, CSE). Medium Gloria Saide told me that she practiced for three months before she was able to achieve any deliberate sensation from the spirit world (circle, 21 February 2012, Simon house). Awtry scolds her mediumship students for arriving at her sessions and expecting results having failed to practice meditation throughout the week. According to Awtry, participants cannot expect to make contact with the spirits unless they are willing to practice attunement regularly (class, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). Implicit in these workshops is the demand for greater commitment. Commitment is essential in order to take the classes. More commitment is required to take the journey to Lily Dale and participate in classes there. But, still more commitment is required to actually achieve unfoldment. The lectures and exercises taught in Spiritualist workshops and courses precipitate minimal (if any) direct contact with the spirit world. If participants really want to commune with the spirits, they must practice the techniques taught through the classes—often with no result for an extended period of time—until, at last, they

achieve an experience that they can verify as a psychic or mediumistic encounter.

Classes are the first step. They provide general preparation for spiritual unfoldment. If Spiritualists truly want to achieve unfoldment, however, they must extend their efforts beyond the introductory activities engaged in the classroom.

Awtry's exercises also point toward another, equally significant lesson about attunement: it can only be fully realized through external confirmation. If I am properly attuned, it will show in the fact that the contents of the envelope will match my impressions, I will correctly deduce the shape on the card held by my partner, or the pencil will make a visible shift on the lined note card. The rituals of attunement are best understood as a form of rehearsal. Attunement is practiced in private settings away from a critical audience, and the success of the ritual depends on the participant's own experience, not on the evaluation of an observer. And yet, whether attunement is practiced alone at home or with a circle, it is always taught and internalized as an act that must eventually open up to an audience in order to receive validation. Attunement can not be realized in a vacuum. The existential transformations achieved through attunement all tend toward receiving some form of intersubjective confirmation from co-participants. Spirit communication must be performed for others who, although they may not necessarily be judging or evaluating the performer, are necessary to the practitioner's ability to fully realize her or his connection with the spirit world. Herein lies the *raison d'être* for the home circle.

The unfoldment process is essential to the effort to achieve a simultaneous state of attunement and awareness—Myerhoff's "transcendence" in which one is

simultaneously aware of one's surroundings and circumstances and in a state of flow—in the circle. The various facets of the unfoldment process—the lectures, exercises, and meditations—are all geared toward transforming the individual into an increasingly open spiritual individual, not just in the context of a religious ritual but as a permanent facet of the participant's being. The process draws out participants' commitment to achieve direct contact with the spirit world, instills them with a knowledge of their own inherent spiritual nature that informs all aspects of their lives, and provides them with a nurturing community of fellow travelers. This allows the participants to realize their direct connection to the spirit world in such a way that attunement becomes an increasingly natural and accessible state of being. Interestingly, for converts, the weekly message services comes to develop a similar function, encouraging a kind of communal attunement.

Performing with a Home Circle

The home circle is the ritual through which Spiritualists fully realize their spiritual unfoldment by making contact with the spirit world in a way that allows them to receive external confirmation from their fellow participants. The promise of all Spiritualist ritual is that belief will yield intersubjectively verifiable results. For messages, it is the intellectual confirmation of spirit-derived facts. For healing, it is the sensation achieved with the healer and concomitant physical and psychological health. And for the home circle, it is personal contact with the spirit world that can be confirmed by another member of the group. In the final session of her six-week

course, Gehman introduced her class to a home circle—my first experience with the ritual. The class sat in a circle facing each other, and, after a short meditation and prayer, Gehman invited us to share any impressions we had from the spirit world. Although I had been practicing Gehman's meditation regularly, I had not had much luck receiving impressions, and so I was surprised when she began to make her way around the circle asking sitters to tell what messages they were receiving. Some mentioned seeing faces, others heard words or phrases, a few saw full scenes with several spirits conversing, and others chose to pass. When my turn came, a sudden impression of the color violet and of flowers popped into my head. I shared it. Gehman asked if it had any associations for me. It did not. And I could not be sure if my impression had come from the spirit world or my own imagination (class, 29 November 2011, CSE). Clearly, I was in need of more practice. Two months later, Joanna Simon asked if I would be interested in joining a home circle that she was forming at her house, and my exploration of spirit impressions began in earnest.

Home circles are generally only convened by more dedicated Spiritualists. They tend to be limited to Spiritualist converts, but not all converts are able to devote the time or effort necessary for a successful circle. I would estimate that only about a dozen members of the CSE meet regularly with a circle. Home circles are focused primarily on unfolding participants' spiritual faculties, but this does not mean that they are limited to new converts or beginning mediums and healers. Mediums frequently join circles with beginning and experienced Spiritualists alike. In Lily Dale and at the annual Spiritualist convention, mediums convene circles comprised entirely

of other mediums. Circles can be “open” or “closed.” An open circle welcomes anyone who wants to sit for unfoldment, and the circle's membership can vary considerably from week to week. A closed circle has a fixed membership that occasionally welcomes guests or admits new members, but only with the consent of the regular sitters. The ritual itself can serve a variety of psychic and mediumistic purposes, depending on the spiritual needs and desires of the group involved. At a trance circle, the attention falls on a single medium and the other sitters meditate on energizing the medium so that she or he can enter a dissociative state in order to channel the voice of a spirit through her or his body. A circle focused on physical phenomena—usually called a *séance*—often functions in a similar way except that the goal is to aid the medium in forming an ectoplasmic emanation—a spirit-derived substance that projects in a material form from the medium's body. Physical phenomena circles might also work with a trumpet, slates, or table tilting. But trance and physical phenomena circles are relatively uncommon today. Most contemporary Spiritualist circles—including those convened by CSE members—are devoted to the kind of mental mediumship that is practiced at the message service.

I joined a closed mental mediumship circle with Joanna Simon, Kathy Riley, Jean Brooks, and Gloria Saide in February 2012. Riley, Simon, and I were first-time sitters. Brooks and Saide had sat with other circles in the past. Saide was the senior member of the group in terms of her knowledge and practice, and she served as a guide for the rest of us as well as participating as a member of the circle. Although Saide was clearly the most skilled and knowledgeable of us, she preferred to occupy a

more egalitarian role with her fellow sitters and share leadership with everyone in the group. The circle met on Tuesday evenings at 7:30 at Simon's house. It was important that we meet every week on the same day, at the same time, and in the same place. Saide even encouraged us to sit in the same seat at each circle. Gehman calls the fixed meeting time sitters' "date with spirit" (class, 29 November 2011, CSE). Saide explained that the circle's strict regularity allows the spirits to anticipate the meeting so that the spirits can join the sitters (circle, 7 February 2012, Simon house). Over time, the spirits learn that sitters will be gathering at a set time and place and the spirits plan to be present in order to give the sitters messages and healing.

The circle's consistency is equally important to the sitters' ability to unfold and make contact with the spirits who arrive. Saide emphasized to our group that we should spend each Tuesday in a perpetual state of preparation. While going about our daily activities at home and work, Saide told us that we should carry with us an awareness that the circle will be happening in the evening. The circle should become the most important event of the day, and the rest of the day should be oriented toward its success (circle, 28 February 2012, Simon house). To that end, we were to avoid anything that might impair our ability to concentrate fully on the circle in the evening including alcohol, medication, and negative feelings. Whenever a stressful situation would arise, we were to ask for the spirits' assistance to get through it or find a way to avoid it. Saide advised us that sitters should look forward to the circle with an attitude of joyful expectation. This expectation included an intention to receive messages from the spirits. The day's preparation should involve asking the spirits to bring as

much information as possible during the circle. By intending to make contact and receive impressions from the spirit world throughout the day, sitters could enhance their ability to achieve contact during the circle.

When sitters arrive for the circle, participants' immersion in this preparatory state of being—oriented toward spirit contact and away from any distracting influence—is further heightened. Gehman cautioned against making the circle a social event, warning us, “don't make it a tea party.” She insisted that we “make sure the attitude and purpose is well-established in the minds of everyone” (class, 29 November 2011, CSE). It was important that we keep the atmosphere of the circle peaceful, loving, and focused on the task at hand. Generally, when I arrived for a circle, after greeting Simon's dog I would go directly to my regular place at the end of her couch where I sat for every circle. Then, the group would carry on a light conversation until everyone arrived. The first month, we would talk about the Center and Spiritualism—speakers, events, messages, healing, Lily Dale, etc.—because these were the things we had in common. But, after awhile the group began to get to know one another better and the conversation turned to occupations, families, and friends. The tone of the conversation was always positive and encouraging. If anyone was late, Saide would advise us to stay as close to the set time as possible and get underway. After Simon checked to assure that all of the phones in the house were silenced, we would dim the lights. For the first month, Simon lit candles, but, by the third month she had introduced a blue light bulb at Saide's suggestion. According to Gehman, white light is too “stimulating” and prevents sitters from entering the

passive state necessary for attunement. Gehman suggested that a circle might try different colored lights to see what works best, and Saide informed us that blue light was particularly helpful for mental mediumship (class, 29 November 2011 and circle, 13 March 2012).

We experimented with several different methods for beginning the ritual itself, in part because Gehman gave us a variety of options during her class for opening the circle. Some nights we tried singing a hymn from the Sunday services. Other nights, Saide would give a short five-minute lecture on best practices for a home circle or for spirit communication in general. The transition from preparation to the circle—which Brooks referred to as “going into the silence”—was always achieved through prayer. The opening prayer was improvised. In the first month, Saide handled the prayer, but one night she asked someone else to try. I volunteered, and from then on, we took turns giving the opening prayer.

Saide told us that the act of improvising a prayer was akin to receiving and reporting messages from the spirits. Allowing the prayer to come spontaneously helps the speaker to practice taking inspiration from the spirit world and relaying it to others, and it also invites a spirit presence into the proceedings from the outset. The fact that the words are—in some part—divinely inspired also makes them more efficacious for the other sitters. A similar ideology informs the inspired preaching of some Christian denominations. In the case of the Primitive Baptists, for example, “[n]o preacher can preach unless he is blessed to do so. Preparations in the form of notes, outlines, manuscripts are not allowed. Such would be an insult to the Spirit

which bloweth where it listeth” (Peacock and Tyson 1989: 122). The opening prayer at a home circle is a call for divine inspiration. If the prayer succeeds in bringing an otherworldly force into the room, this will bode well for the ensuing effort to make contact with the spirit world.⁵ Although the exact wording of the prayer and some of its content is spontaneous, it is important that all opening prayers express two key elements: the intention of the sitters to attune with the infinite and the invitation for the spirits of sitters' guides, teachers, and loved ones to draw close.

During the ritual, we sat in the conventional Spiritualist meditative pose: feet flat on the floor, hands open on our laps, and eyes closed. What followed was essentially a long silence punctuated by occasional messages and impressions from the spirit world. Whenever a sitter had a message, she or he would speak it aloud. If the sitter felt it was for a particular member of the group, the message would be addressed accordingly. Saide encouraged us to only relate the impressions that we felt derived from a non-physical source (ideally, the spirit world) and to avoid offering any interpretation of what we described. When receiving a message from another member of the group, the goal was always to avoid judging the message's validity and to limit what Saide called “conversation.” Conversation would be any response other than a simple “thank you.” The prohibition against conversation and judgment has a practical function in that it limits the amount of talk that goes on during a circle which may interrupt sitters' concentration. But it also suggests a fundamental premise of the

⁵ Compare this to the process of a Primitive Baptist Elder: “By rising to preach the elder engages in an action of hope. If he is 'taken up on the mountain,' that is, if he is blessed, his hope is confirmed. If not, he is not surprised. One young elder told us that when he is not blessed to preach, it reminds him that what he is trying to do is something real, and beyond his power to effect” (Peacock and Tyson 1989: 123). The Spiritualist hopes to make contact with the spirits during the circle, but this contact is not guaranteed, and the Spiritualist is not surprised if no discernible contact occurs.

home circle: the messages are as much for their speakers as they are for their receivers. The home circle is first and foremost a place to have and discover spirit impressions without necessarily seeking any recourse to proof. Criticism is limited, allowing sitters the opportunity to explore their experiences with the spirit world in a safe and comfortable environment. Even Saide felt less pressure to bring messages from spirits that we could identify. Practicing from the platform at a Sunday service, her messages were always detailed and directed at specific converts. By contrast, at the circle she described spirits that could not necessarily be identified including spirit guides and teachers and others who had gathered for our circle but were not necessarily related to or familiar with any of us.

After sitting for an hour, the circle closed with another prayer, thanking the spirits for any influence they brought to bear in the proceedings and requesting a blessing for those assembled. Sometimes this prayer would include requests for healing for loved ones, friends, and people who had been in the news as a result of a recent tragedy. If any members were absent for a given circle, we would also pray for them, especially if an ailment or personal problem had caused their absence. After each circle, we would discuss details of our experience that had not surfaced during the circle itself: challenges or successes concentrating, feelings we had that indicated the spirits were working with us, sensations of healing, and impressions that we were not confident enough to report. After our discussion, we would end the day, exchange hugs all around, and travel home. Gehman stressed that sitters should never linger after a circle had concluded. Mindful of keeping the ritual focused on spirit

communication, sitters should maintain the same attitude that they held before the circle began by avoiding extraneous socializing (class, 29 November 2011, CSE). As much as possible, the circle should maintain an exclusive focus on spirit communication and spiritual unfoldment, without any other motive or purpose clouding the circle's functionality.

The Challenge of Attuning to Perform

One night at Simon's house before the circle began, Simon was talking about a mediumship workshop she had attended the week before. She complained that during the exercise portion of the workshop she had felt pressured by the instructor to give messages and that this prevented her from attuning to the spirit world. Saide sympathized with Simon's difficulty, and reminded her that impressions from the spirit world cannot be forced. If we were to develop the ability to receive impressions, we had to practice so that it came naturally and without effort. According to Saide, we were to “practice inviting the light of spirit into your lives regularly” through “prayer and meditation, prayer and silence.” We should work daily toward developing “an attitude of joyful trust and expectation in Spirit” orienting ourselves toward the divine source from which our connection to the spirit world derives (circle, 28 February 2012, Simon house). I asked Saide if this was a skill that needed to be built up like a muscle and she said this was exactly the case. She said that we should practice inviting the light of spirit into our lives regularly. Actively intending to make contact with the spirit world is meant to be confined to participants'

preparation for the ritual and not carry into the ritual itself. Asking the spirits to help overcome distractions and to bring impressions from the spirit world could be done while sitters participated in the circle, but Saide advised us that it would be better if we could cultivate that attitude in advance so that we would not have to consciously ask the spirits for assistance as the circle was taking place (ibid.).

The performance of the home circle is the pinnacle of the unfoldment process, and the entire series of transformations that create unfoldment all tend toward the spirit contact achieved at a circle. Unfoldment is, then, an act of training for the circle in the way that an athlete trains for a first competition or an actor for a stage debut. Both athlete and actor continue to learn and improve as they perform, but the training process is required in order to gain the competence necessary to reach the level of ability required for a first attempt. And arriving at the first home circle does not end the need to practice outside of the circle. Sitters must continue regular meditation and attending workshops and classes just as athletes practice even after the first game and actors develop their craft even after a first performance.

The ability to attune is built up through the progression of intellectual, emotional, and existential transformations that comprise a Spiritualist's unfoldment. The knowledge and sense of commitment and community developed over the course of the unfoldment process develop spiritual “muscles” so that attunement becomes an increasingly natural and accessible state of being. The home circle then channels this accumulated ability and funnels it toward the hour when it is most needed, i.e. the hour of the circle in which sitters attune in order to reach out to receive impressions

from the spirit world. The act of intending loads the hour during which the circle takes place with the psychic energy of expectation that enhances the sitter's mediumistic ability. The long process of preparation is intended to allow participants to enter a state of attunement through a conscious effort with the greatest possible ease. With sufficient development, less and less of my energy and attention are required to achieve attunement and I can turn to other matters; specifically, I am able to reflect on the experiences I have as a result of my attunement in order to determine which are messages from the spirit world worthy of sharing with the group. Transforming attunement into a natural and simple shift in existential orientation allows participants to layer the requisite analysis on top of their immersive non-analytic experience, creating the state of “transcendence.”

Butler's notion of performativity returns again through the routinized repetition of the circle (1993). A regularized gathering establishes the norm that when participants come together, they will be reaching out to make contact with the spirits. The gathering itself is both an effort to make contact with the spirit world and a bringing to awareness of a state of being that has already been internalized through the workshops and classes given during the unfoldment process. The gathering activates the internalized notion that participants are personally connected with the spirit world and can achieve contact and receive messages whenever they choose. It is a performative act, giving body to the connection that participants already profess to believe in, which, in turn, allows that connection to be brought forth.

Confirming Contact among Participants

Unfoldment is essential to achieve the level of attunement necessary for the simultaneous reflective awareness required to achieve intersubjective confirmation. This is not to suggest that the entire process of unfoldment and learning to attune are about achieving intersubjective confirmation for a Spiritualist's own spirit communications. Rather, there is a symbiosis between developing Spiritualist belief and being able to communicate verifiable messages. They are inextricably intertwined in unfoldment and are emphasized in different degrees according to each individual practitioner. If I want to communicate verifiable messages, I must unfold my mediumistic ability by developing my understanding, commitment, and belief in Spiritualist practice and philosophy.

However, many Spiritualists—like Simon—have no interest in giving messages from the platform as mediums. They are more interested in the unfoldment process and look to intersubjective verification for their impressions as a sign that they have achieved a certain level of spiritual development. In this way, Spiritualism bears a certain resemblance to Christian Quakerism. Quakers gather at regular meetings to experience the Holy Spirit and to share their experiences aloud with a community of fellow-believers. According to Warren Steinkraus, “the goal of Quaker mysticism” is “to cultivate the individual's deepened awareness of divine love and to quicken the expression of that love in the close-knit fellowship of dedicated souls” (1995: 122). Many Spiritualists meet with home circles, not necessarily to develop their mediumistic skills, but to become more spiritually attuned; a goal that is

facilitated through gathering with like-minded individuals. Spiritualists—initially recruited through spirit messages—understand belief as something that can be verified. Intersubjectivity is then an important aspect of the home circle, although it is not the defining purpose of the ritual or the unfoldment process leading up to participation in a circle.

Our circle's first experience with intersubjective confirmation came in the form of our collective sensation of the non-material energy developed through our communion. As with the classes and the pilgrimage to Lily Dale, the home circle roots itself not only in members' commitment but in the community they form together. Unfolding Spiritualists are encouraged to meditate alone on a regular basis, but the circle is widely understood to be a more fruitful exercise because of the power that the group lends to the activity, as at a Sunday service. Gehman suggests that circles contain between eight and ten members, but whenever two or more gather for unfoldment it qualifies as a circle and will benefit the participants' process (class, 29 November 2011, CSE). Having others to practice with offers both practical and spiritual benefits to the unfolding convert. From a practical perspective, it gives sitters the opportunity to have their messages validated by an outside source. Other members also inspire greater commitment insofar as sitters will disappoint their fellow participants if they fail to arrive and meditate on the chosen night. From a spiritual perspective, multiple people working together create a stronger “beacon,” drawing spirits to communicate with the sitters and affording greater opportunity for sitters to make contact with a spirit. The group also enhances individuals' mediumistic abilities.

Saide contends that over time sitters blend their energies, creating a kind of metaphysical bond (circle, 7 February 2012, Simon house). The pool of energy that forms then facilitates both the individual and collective effort to commune with the spirits. The ability to draw on others' spiritual energy increases one's own energy, thereby enhancing one's capacity to connect to a higher realm of being.

Together, sitters experience what Victor Turner calls *existential communitas* insofar as they engage in a “concrete, personal, imagist mode of thinking” that precipitates a “direct relation between man and man, man and nature” (1969: 141). The circle—unlike the group that gathers at a Sunday service—is small enough to feel their bond in a literal way. For my circle, this often happened in the form of shared sensations that exceeded our physical experience with the room. These sensations included cold breezes, warm winds, or the sensation that healing was taking place. After a circle, we would often discover similarities in our individual experiences that seemed to bind our personal success to the group's success. Two evenings, for example, we all agreed that we had not been able to focus well and concluded that our collective energy was “scattered.” Conversely, there were circles at which we all agreed afterward that we had each experienced intense focus and a palpable feeling of spiritual energy working with us. In this way, we discovered that we were directly bound to each other in manner that rendered our non-physical link tangible. This also happened in more specific ways. For example, one night after giving Simon a message she told me that she had the sense I was about to speak to her in the moment immediately before I spoke (circle, 10 April 2012, Simon house). Two

weeks later, I gave the opening prayer and Simon immediately spoke up afterward. She had been surprised by an intense positive emotional experience that came on her as I was speaking. After the circle, she wondered if the sincerity and spontaneity of my expression might have been responsible for her unexpected response (circle, 24 April 2012, Simon house). The fact that we could feel this bond and share these sensations revealed that they possessed a kind of reality that exceeded our individual imaginations. And our intersubjective agreement about the sensations felt through this bond served as a prototype for the individual sensations that we would ultimately come to identify with the spirits.

Deciding What it Means to Feel the Touch of Spirit

In the beginning, my home circle remained mostly quiet, unwilling to open our individual experiences into an intersubjective space where they may or may not prove their legitimacy. Kathy Riley did not offer any impressions during the circle itself for over two months. Jean Brooks—who had worked with a circle before—began by offering a few short impressions at the first meeting and did not mention any images or sensations that could be identified as spirits until the third meeting. Simon and I both reported simple, impersonal sensations at the initial meetings. Simon's impressions came in the form of relatively amorphous thoughts. For instance, the incense and candles she experienced at the circle that I opened the chapter with gave her the thought of a ritual, but she could not attribute any more to the image. My impressions were mostly physical: a heaviness in my hands that made me think of

carrying bundles of wood, a numbness in my foot that made me think of an amputation, and warmth at the roof of my mouth and in my sinuses that had no associations for me. Saide was the only sitter who was able to discern spirits at the first meeting, often attributing them to other sitters (circle, 7 February 2012, Simon house).

For Brooks, Simon, Riley, and I, our initial efforts were largely comprised of inchoate sensations that would not coalesce into anything that might be recognized as a spirit. At several meetings, Riley described feeling herself being pulled backward out of her body—an experience that ultimately prevented her from receiving any specific impressions. Simon told of receiving “thought forms” which she had difficulty expressing as an image or sound because they came in a nondescript bundle that she could not separate into any component sensations. And, more than once I was overtaken by a sensation of opening into an expanded space, as if the room around me had grown much larger than it actually was and the other sitters were arrayed at a great distance from me and each other. While inchoate sensation is sufficient for a laying-on-of-hands healing, it is inadequate to the ends of a home circle. Finally, these sensations must be expanded on and clarified to the point that they can be expressed coherently in a way that might precipitate a recognition and confirmation from another member of the group.

All of our experiences indicated to us that some non-physical energy or power was working with us—that we had begun to “feel the touch of spirit”—but that we would need further development before these sensations opened onto impressions.

This is not to suggest that any of us were positive that our experiences were necessarily supernatural, but rather that we were willing to understand them as a potential opening onto the spirit world. In our first month of meetings, we would often debate after the circle had ended whether or not our sensations indicated the presence of a spiritual energy or were the products of our own imaginations. We had each begun to develop cues that indicated to us that the spirits were working with us. Riley described feeling as though she were being lifted up through her own head, and Simon talked about an electric feeling that she rarely experienced while in the circle. Each of us had experienced feelings of joy or elation, and Saide encouraged us to interpret these feelings as sensations from the spirit world (circle, 27 March 2012, Simon house). She told me that, for her, the touch of spirit feels like

a quickening of the spirit when your own spirit realizes that you either are being touched by a teacher or you are communing with God. There's a closeness that you feel. Love in your heart. Tears start to flow. It's not that I'm crying. My cup runneth over (interview, 2 April 2012).

This feeling is deeply personal and while it may precede a message it does not prove anything in and of itself. And yet, each of the members of the circle had come to a determination about what it felt like to experience the energy of the spirits as opposed to any of the other sensations we had during our meditations.

How had we arrived at these cues? For each of us, they were marked by a sensation that extended beyond the confines of the mind. In other words, when an impression became not only mental but physical it registered as a possible spirit impression. Riley's altered relationship with her body and Simon's electric feeling were both distinctly physical. Even Saide's joy was embodied through her tears.

According to philosopher Judith Butler, “the body carries within it what remains enigmatic to consciousness, and so exposes the insufficiency of consciousness” (2005: 192). These embodied sensations possessed a greater fullness and legitimacy than any mental images, which may or may not have been entirely imagined. Gehman taught that the spirits work through “the path of least resistance” and that touch or physical sensation is often the first sense to unfold (class, 1 November 2011, CSE). For the beginning medium, spirit impressions rise out of the inchoate embodied feeling of attunement. And so, I began to concentrate on my body in an effort to discern sensations that might be supernatural in origin. Discerning a supernatural sensation from a natural one was almost entirely intuitive, and sometimes I was wrong. Thus, even though sensations registered in the body afforded a heightened sense that I was receiving a spirit impression, these sensations remained highly subjective and subject to doubt.

Usually a sensation would persist until I allowed myself to focus on it. I decided that, if my sensation was legitimately spiritual, it would pass once I expressed the sensation to the group. At one circle, I had an impression of the smell of plastic like the scent of a new toy and an image of small boy playing on the floor. I initially dismissed the impression as something I had imagined, but it was accompanied by a distinct physical impression. I felt an insistent pressure in the middle of my forehead that felt like a muscle agitation rather than a headache. The sensation nagged at me for several minutes and became very distracting. Finally, I decided to share my impression of the little boy and immediately the sensation in my

forehead passed (circle, 15 May 2012, Simon house). Several times, my sensation failed this test and, in a few instances, continued even after the circle had ended. I felt a breeze along my ankles, for instance, that I thought was a spirit impression but when it persisted after the circle concluded I determined it must be produced by some mundane source in the room (circle, 28 February 2012, Simon house). All of my fellow sitters applied similar tests in their efforts to distinguish between their own thoughts and impressions from the spirit world.

Criticism and the effort to reach for proof developed as sitters began to relate increasingly detailed impressions to the group. After three months, Riley gave her first message to the circle. She saw a ferret's face becoming a fox's face becoming a raccoon's face. That morning, I had discovered a gray fox outside my kitchen window that was suffering from mange. I had never seen a gray fox before and spent the better part of the morning trying to figure out what it was while waiting for animal control to come and bring it to a shelter. After Riley gave her message, I related those circumstances and told her I could confirm her message (circle, 15 May 2012, Simon house). According to my judgment, Riley had successfully discerned psychically or spiritually a fact about my life of which she had no prior knowledge. Brooks began to recognize and report individual spirits. At first, these were largely friends and relatives of hers, but eventually she began bringing in impressions of spirits that she could not recognize. After two months, she began relating her impressions to particular sitters. Often these more specific messages were a collection of images and sensations rather than particular spirits, but images of people also came through to

her. She brought images of the angel Gabriel to Simon and saw me dressed as a monk drumming with a band of spirits (circle, 3 April 2012, Simon house). Simon gradually incorporated more detailed impressions into the messages she gave, mixed in with less coherent images and sensations that she could not associate with anything more descriptive. At one circle, she saw herself against the background of the night sky with electricity all around her. A face began to surface as if in relief but she could not discern its features (circle, 27 March 2012, Simon house).

In the course of my development, I began to relate my physical sensations to spirits. I practiced “going into” my sensations, as Saide advised. The ability to switch from judgment to non-judgment takes months if not years of practice to master. Simon, Riley, and I began with single images that grew to three or four in succession over the course of several months. Brooks began with more images at first, but her impressions also grew in length over time. Having a single image or sensation marks the beginning of an effort to intuit the difference between a spirit sensation and a natural or imagined one, often rooted in the body. Extending that image into an unfolding series of sensations and images by “going into” the initial impression is a second-level ability that takes time and patience to develop. I practiced by simply focusing on the sensation and waiting to see if more impressions came to me. At my fourth circle, I had a sensation like a tugging on my hand and that was followed by the featureless outline of a little girl in my mind's eye. At my fifth circle, a tingling in my foot led me to picture images of a farm field. After ten weeks, a pulling between my thumb and forefinger led me to picture a little boy and brought the letters “A” and

“J” to mind. At each circle, these were not the only thoughts I had in the hour that we meditated. Rather, these were the thoughts that I intuitively attributed to the spirits rather than my own imagination.

Conversion as Performance

The home circle reveals the degree to which Spiritualists approach belief as a kind of performance. That is to say, belief is an incomplete and changeable act, always open to revealing a higher or better understanding of the nature of spirituality and existence, realized through active participation. The fact that I realize my belief through performance requires that I maintain an open perspective that will allow my belief to change through my experiences. The message and healing rituals anticipate the home circle by defining Spiritualism as an outlet to experiment, test, and try again. For newcomers experiencing spirit messages for the first time, some messages are persuasive and others are not. I have to try several and be willing to affirm a message that I find persuasive if I am ever to move along the path to belief. And, as the messages shift from persuasive communications from friends and family to less persuasive, more belief-oriented guide messages, I must be willing to go along with this transition. Similarly, sometimes healing is efficacious. Other times I feel nothing or nothing that I can positively affirm as spirit-derived. I must practice through participation until I achieve a healing that makes a discernible lasting change to my health and well-being.

In her unfoldment class, Gehman had just finished her lecture on receiving mental impressions from the spirit world and she opened the floor to questions. One student asked “what should we be asking from our spirit guides?” Gehman said, “We're in a mode of demanding in our world. We should be in a mode of silence and let spirit bring what it will bring. They bring what they can bring.” The student asked, “how about just sitting in the silence waiting for things to unfold?” Gehman said that when she was first training to be Spiritualist medium, “I would sit for an hour in silence with my teacher before the lesson would begin.” Then she made an abrupt but deliberate shift in topic, “Any workshop we bring in, [the instructors] are always talented and gifted, but I don't always agree with them.... Mediumship is not steps one, two, three. You discover your own path.” Another student asked, “How can we tell what's from spirit and what's from my own imagination?” Gehman replied, “You don't know for awhile. You only know as you practice. You learn to recognize a certain feeling that comes from spirit that isn't your own consciousness” (class, 22 November 2011, CSE).

As Diana Taylor argues in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, performance conveys an experiential knowledge that often cannot be shared or learned in any way other than through enacting the performance (2007). There are no specific steps to attunement or mediumship. One learns by doing. The emphasis on performance as the outlet for discovering belief allows the act of making contact with the spirit world to remain unfixed. The inchoate quality of the boundaries that define what it means to receive spirit impressions leave considerable room for variation. Just as I must

determine for myself what it means for a message to persuade, I must discover for myself what it means for me to make contact with the spirit world. My experience may resemble that of my fellow practitioners in the circle or the advice offered by my instructors, but it may also differ in its particularities. As Taylor contends, “the repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning” (2007: 20). Riley, Brooks, Saide, Simon, and myself all had a slightly different experiential understanding of what it meant to feel attuned to the spirit world, and the messages we brought through differed considerably in content and length. In her workshop, Awtry told a story of a student she worked with who would stand on his head to receive messages. Since her student was unfolding and not performing from the platform, Awtry encouraged him to “do what was comfortable” (workshop, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). The circle is unique because it allows for the greatest possible freedom in order to discover one's own connection with the spirit world. The privacy of the ritual allows participants to explore.

But to define belief through performance is also to identify certain discernible if shifting boundaries around what it means to believe: “guidelines with lots of flexibility” according to Awtry. The freedom to actively discover through the home circle is only awarded after a long process of unfoldment through which practitioners are given extensive teaching in Spiritualist ideology and practice. Participants are entrusted with the freedom to explore in the home circle because they have internalized the meaning and seriousness of the ritual. But lectures are only one way that Spiritualists learn the terms of unfoldment. They also learn through their

experience with the healing and message services. The boundaries of a persuasive message and an efficacious healing are more clearly and officially delineated in classes, workshops, and Spiritualist documents than the boundaries of what it feels like to be in contact with the spirit world. These less advanced rituals—although complex and inchoate in their own ways—construct the existential patterns through which I approach my effort to contact the spirit world.

Spiritualists realize belief through performance in a two-step process whereby the performance first defines participants' expectations and then works to satisfy those expectations. The act of defining expectations does not guarantee the ritual's success. Rather, it determines who will and will not advance from newcomer to Spiritualist convert to Spiritualist adept. If I have no capacity to believe in spirits or no inclination to validate the kinds of information given in a spirit message, then I will not become a believer. Likewise, if I do not have the belief to make the existential step necessary to receive healing, I will never experience what it feels like to be healed. These two rituals narrow the pool of participants down to those who intellectually affirm the existence of spirits and validity of spirit communication and who are also able to achieve an existential immersion in the flow of spirit energy. In this way, messages and healing form the background for the kind of experience Spiritualists seek to achieve in a home circle. The process of unfoldment is then an effort to build on these two distinct but interrelated capacities: to understand and be able to recognize a spirit and to attune to an experiential encounter with the spirits. When these two capacities are fully developed they result in the ability to make direct

contact with the spirit world and to recognize when that contact is taking place; a simultaneous effort of both non-analytic self-immersion and critical evaluation that represents a thorough integration of Spiritualist scientific and religious consciousness.

All Spiritualist ritual is an outlet for discovery. Will the medium's message match my expectations? Do I believe strongly enough to feel any sensation in a laying-on-of-hands healing? What does it feel like to be attuned, and how do I know when I am receiving an impression from the spirit world? The only way that I can discover the answer to these questions is through a live personal engagement with the rituals themselves. The significance of personal engagement and experimentation are instilled in Spiritualists from their first experience with Spiritualism and are the qualities that differentiate a committed believer from a newcomer and an unfolding adept from a regular convert. The experiment is always oriented toward discovering if and to what degree I can be in contact with the spirit world, and the performance adjusts to my level of religious commitment and spiritual unfoldment. The more I believe, the more responsibility the performance places on me to achieve contact with the spirit world, the more direct my engagement with the spirits becomes.

By learning to experiment and discover my own connection with the spirit world, I move closer and closer to the spiritual elevation and extrasensory skill of mediumship. Marilyn Awtry tells her students that unfolding mediumship is a way to assure that “you don't start at the kindergarten of the soul when you pass to the other side” (workshop, 4 August 2011, Lily Dale). Self-improvement is understood as a natural consequence of making direct contact with the spirit world. Reaching out for

confirmation in the circle helps sitters to determine when their experiences are legitimately spiritual, and, consequently, when they are in touch with the spirit world. This improves their experiential understanding and leads to better, stronger connections, which, in turn, improves their spiritual being. Ultimately, unfoldment is intended to lead sitters into public mediumship and healing. According to Gehman, serving others is a responsibility that comes from developing the ability to make direct spiritual contact. Gehman contends that the charge to serve others gives mediumship meaning and purpose: “[m]ediumship is... joyful. It's sacred.... There must be a sincere desire to serve humanity and to bring knowledge of the unseen world into this one” (class, 22 November 2011, CSE).

Conclusion: Performing Between Empiricism and Belief

Spiritualists believe and perform their practice as both a science and a religion, and so, from the perspective of its detractors, it is neither a science nor a religion. James Randi laments that Americans “must take the blame for having invented the 'religion' known as Spiritualism,” purposefully using the word religion in quotation marks (1982: 241). And, according to the Skeptic's Dictionary:

“[t]he Hollywood version of séances is fairly accurate: people sitting around a table, holding hands in a darkened room, a faked trance by the medium who passes on to the group any information given by the spirit... For many, spiritualism was 'scientific proof' of life after death, which didn't involve any of the superstitious non-sense of religion.”¹

The quotation marks that Randi uses to bracket Spiritualism's identification as a religion are wielded by the skeptic's dictionary to the exact same end in reference to Spiritualism's scientific claims. In both cases, they imply an insufficiency at best and a negation at worst. Spiritualism is either less of a science than other sciences and less of a religion than other religions or a “fake” mockery of both disciplines. I suggest that it would be more productive to think of Spiritualism as an alternative approach to science and religion that operates according to a different standard and allows investigators to acquire a different kind of understanding that is neither strictly scientific nor strictly religious but is never-the-less valid and useful.

The cultural prejudices that tend to dismiss Spiritualism outright seriously limit the scope of intellectual inquiry. A totalizing approach to science and religion

¹ <http://www.skepdic.com/spiritul.html> (Accessed 8 November 2012).

that sets them in two irreconcilably separate camps deprives humanity of the possibilities that can arise from their collaboration. Anthropologists and sociologists like Paul Stoller, Edith Turner, David Hufford, and Michael Harner, have taken steps to reconcile these factions as well as physical scientists including Rupert Sheldrake, Raymond Moody, and William Tiller (1992, 1982, and 1980; 2003, 1975, and 1997).² Spiritualism reveals the unique contribution that performance can make to this discussion. Although belief and criticism do not fully encompass the perspectives of religion and science, their integration in Spiritualist performance demonstrates the potential for a productive collaboration. Belief can be subjected to criticism and criticism can be subjected to belief without undermining the functionality or purpose of either action. If I believe that spirits can communicate with the living or that I can be healed through the power of the spirits, this does not preclude me from evaluating my experience with a spirit medium or healer in order to judge the efficacy of my encounter. Among Spiritualists, many committed believers receive messages that they deem inaccurate or are healed but fail to experience any result. My propensity or willingness to believe orients me to have a particular experience, but I can always reflect back on my experience in order to determine for myself whether it can be explained entirely through belief or if some other force is at work.

Performance is the driving force of this integration insofar as it creates the experience that participants then subject to critical reflection. Without the direct

² Sheldrake is a biologist who studies what he calls “the extended mind” in both animals and humans and identifies quotidian experiences like correctly guessing that one is being stared at are, in fact, indications of verifiable telepathic power. Moody is a medical doctor who has written on the similarity between patients' accounts of near-death experiences. Tiller is a physicist who has studied the engagement of what he calls “subtle energies” with human consciousness.

engagement created through live performance, belief and criticism are deprived of any space in which to interact. When belief is oriented toward a particular experience, it establishes a set of conditions by which the experience will be judged. A spirit message must have a certain accuracy, a healing must have a certain feel or effect in the body, and a spirit impression must make a certain connection with another person in a home circle. Within this experience, belief and criticism compromise. Criticism must acknowledge that the ability to judge the efficacy of a message or healing is confined to a personal encounter. In judging a message, I am evaluating my own subjective experience, a much less empirically definitive subject for analysis than a feature of the natural world. Similarly, belief must acknowledge that it can only achieve validity after standing up to personal evaluation. Spirit messages and healing promise to prove themselves, and so it is difficult if not impossible to believe in them without receiving some evidence of their validity (according to the participant's own subjective judgment) through participation.

When religious belief and scientific criticism can be brought together through performance, it opens a space for subjective experience to gain validity as a legitimate means for understanding reality. This is not to suggest that spirits are necessarily real but rather that they have a reality. The difference is subtle but significant. Even if we supposed that spirits were wholly imaginary, we would have to ask if and how they provide persuasive information, give sense impressions, and heal the minds and bodies of believers. They have a place in the world. They manifest themselves and do things in the empirical universe such that they are not entirely confined to the minds

of Spiritualist believers. As Merleau-Ponty contends, all reality is filtered through subjective experience and all subjective experience is based in reality (1962). The spirits occupy a distinctly honest and woefully under-examined mid-way point between intersubjective reality and subjective experience. In their exploration of the spirit world, Spiritualists reveal the nature of this liminal, metaphysical realm and seek to discover its meaning and impact for the way we understand existence.

At our third unfoldment class, Gehman decided that the evening's topic would be physical mediumship (class, 8 November 2011, CSE). She began with a lecture surveying the complex and fantastic world of physical phenomena—through which spirits make themselves empirically present to mediums and non-mediums alike. We learned about rapping—the taps through which the first spirits communicated with the Fox sisters. We learned about trumpets and slates—instruments through which spirits communicate directly with sitters, writing or speaking messages that all participants can perceive. We learned about independent painting through which a spirit causes a visual image to appear on a canvas without the intervention of a living hand and materialization through which a spirit becomes visible and sometimes tangible. For tonight's exercise, we would be participating in a table tilting séance. Table tilting is a form of physical mediumship in which the spirits cause a table to tip such that one or several of its legs are no longer on the ground. During table tilting, spirits can communicate messages with participants by tapping answers to yes or no questions.

Before beginning the séance, Gehman asked if we had any questions from the lecture. I raised my hand. If physical mediumship was so prevalent in the nineteenth century, I asked, why was it so rarely practiced today. Gehman had a ready reply: “[s]ociety today moves too quickly and people are always on the go. The old mediums used to take years and years for unfoldment. And so they took time to allow the energy to develop both in the séance and in the medium's overall practice.” Gehman admitted that, although she had experienced rapping and materialization during the course of her career, physical mediumship was, by and large, beyond her ability. She brought a trumpet and slates to the class and kept them nearby in the hope that the spirits might be moved to make use of them. But she warned us that, if writing did appear on the slates or the trumpet did rise and emit sound, it would be the first time such a thing had ever happened at one of her séances and so we should not expect it. If contemporary Spiritualists lacked the physical medium's purportedly objective empirical manifestations, this was, according to Gehman, a direct product of an insufficiently strong religious commitment among mediums and their congregations. The pace of life and preponderance of modern distractions prevented mediums from applying themselves to the long hours of meditation and practice required to facilitate ectoplasmic emanations. Furthermore, contemporary Spiritualists were too impatient and over-scheduled to meet nightly with a developing physical medium as the Eddys' audiences did in the 1870s.

Contemporary Spiritualists are impatient because they expect results too quickly. As Gehman says, the “energy” required for a physical manifestation takes

time to develop. But to practice without receiving any results requires a certain amount of faith that the practice will eventually yield the desired manifestation. If I did not believe that physical spirit manifestations were possible, it would be ridiculous to attempt to produce them. The same could be said of spirit messages, healing, and the home circle. It takes a certain amount of faith to see past vague or inaccurate messages or a healing that produces no result in the hope of eventually having a persuasive experience. And, for several of the members of my circle, including myself, there was nothing especially encouraging about the first few meetings. It took time and patience to begin to have experiences that I was willing to entertain as possible engagements with an otherworldly dimension. In short, the spirits can only be made available to those who are both open and willing to commit themselves to experiencing them. This implies that Spiritualist converts come to Spiritualism with an inclination or desire to believe. But this inclination to believe does not necessarily negate the legitimacy or significance of the experiences Spiritualists have on their journey to conversion.

A willingness to believe pervaded the group as we gathered for the table tilting séance. We were all initiates on the path to conversion, and we had all affirmed a general belief in the continuity of life and spirit communication at our first day of class. We formed two circles. A small circle sat around the table, and I sat in the larger circle surrounding them. The circle in the center placed their hands lightly on the table with their thumbs together and their pinky fingers touching each of their neighbors. Gehman sat with the larger outside circle and asked that we begin by

singing. We tried a few verses of “Old MacDonald,” but the table did not move. Gehman suggested we try something a bit more uplifting and asked if we knew the words to “You Are My Sunshine.” After two verses, Gehman stepped up to the table and sat with the inner circle. Within moments of placing her hands on the table, it began to tilt. The table tipped one way and then another, rocking back and forth and swirling. In a moment of particular intensity, the table began to move with force and vehemence, finally balancing up on one leg. Excitedly pushing back her chair, Gehman wondered aloud if the table might begin to levitate, but no sooner had she mentioned the possibility than it began to settle back onto the ground.

The skeptic James Randi offers a perfectly natural explanation for table tilting. He describes an experiment in which he placed cardboard behind the elbows of a table-tilting medium and thereby discovered that the medium could not tilt the table without pulling her elbows back, lifting the table up with the palms of her hands. In Randi's case, the medium was accompanied by her son who served as a confederate, tipping the table in the opposite direction to create a more persuasive effect (1982: 240-243). I cannot definitively attest to the movement of Gehman's elbows, and, although I believe she had no accomplice insofar as I knew and trusted my classmates, there was no way for me to know for certain. What I did observe, however, is that for a short moment during the séance, Gehman stood up and stepped away from the table, and, despite her absence, the table continued to rock and tilt. She did this casually, in the midst of speaking to a member of the group, seeming to have no awareness of her action as being at all amazing. From what I could tell of my

fellow participants, I was the only one to take note of this movement. Gehman's moment away from the table may confound Randi's explanation for the phenomenon, but there are always other justifications available to the creative skeptic. For example, the tilting table could be caused by the unconscious movement of a group so intent on believing in the power of the spirits that they unknowingly moved the table themselves. Or perhaps—though I seriously doubt it—the table could have been rigged with some sort of remote mechanical device. The point is, no matter how many tests or how much evidence a committed skeptic gathers, the skeptic can never affirm the Spiritualist explanation for the tipping: that it was moved by spirits. The choice to affirm the presence of spirits, even at a seemingly objective demonstration like this one, is subjective. Spirits are non-material, and, as such, they are subject to doubt. According to Gehman, the spirits form what she calls “cold rods,” invisible, non-material entities that rise up from the floor and are able to make the table tip from underneath. From the perspective of Randi and atheist apologists like Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007), the world is entirely material. And, if the world is entirely material, there can be no place for non-material spirits in any effort to explain what happens within it.

Anthropologist Susan Greenwood observes that “[t]he history of the development of science has shown a sustained emphasis on reason, rationality, and the separation of the thinking mind from a lifeless matter... such a science tends to ignore the experience, the personal and what it calls 'the irrational'" (2009: 131). This is, in large part, why skeptics are no longer invited to performances like this one.

Finally, no matter how a non-physical world manifests itself—in messages, healing, or table tilting—it can only be affirmed through subjective belief. By calling their practice a science, Spiritualists ask that science acknowledge a dimension of experience beyond empirical testing. For Spiritualists, this means accepting that there is a non-material world of spirits, auras, and psychic traces. Many Spiritualists believe that the hard sciences will eventually affirm the existence of such a world. I have no interest in weighing in on the debate as to whether the world is or is not wholly material. Rather, I assert that the choice to look beyond the limitations of empirical testing could simply be an expansion of Merleau-Ponty's (1962) argument that all experience is based on subjective perception. Our seemingly objective judgments are based on our individual firsthand perceptions of the world. Some of these judgments are more intersubjective—that is to say they have been more widely affirmed by multiple sources—and some are less intersubjective. But no phenomenon or experience is absolutely valid in all circumstances. Unknown species like the millions of pea-sized purple crabs that washed up on Hawaiian shores in July of 2012 and theoretical physical phenomena like the Higgs Boson are initially too unfamiliar or idiosyncratic to be understood and categorized by the physical sciences, but they eventually find their way into the canon of scientific knowledge.³ And some observations—like recent recordings of radio waves from outer space—are so idiosyncratic that they may never be able to receive a definitive scientific explanation.⁴ The spirits may always be confined to a more subjective dimension of

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/18/mysterious-creatures-wash-ashore-hawaii_n_1682633.html (Accessed 8 November 2012) and *Times* (New York), 4 July 2012.

⁴ <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn18775-mysterious-radio-waves-emitted-from-nearby-galaxy.html> (Accessed 8 November 2012).

experience, but more subjective experiences are no less worthy of serious study than less subjective experiences.

The important question is not whether to study these phenomena but rather how. The spirits exist partway between intersubjective experience and subjective judgment. And so, any investigation of phenomena like spirits can and should acknowledge the role that belief and intention plays in an experience with spirits. To acknowledge the role that human meaning plays in a phenomenon is not to devalue its reality but rather to study it on its own terms. Spirits move tables and so they cannot be dismissed as purely psychological or imaginary. But they only move tables for those who are willing to believe in their existence. A skeptic cannot deny that the table moves, but a skeptic can deny that it is moved by spirits. And so, the spirit's reality—while not imaginary—is also not the same as that of a crab or a particle. Scientists have marveled at the changes in brain patterns achieved by Buddhist monks and nuns in meditation and extrapolated theories and data about the health benefits of the practice and the implications for brain functioning (Dobbs 2005). But, from the perspective of the practitioners, the value of the practice and the reason it causes these changes is the spiritual improvement achieved through the exercise—a result that cannot be measured or quantified. Like the table-tilting spirits, the actual effect of Buddhist meditation is neither purely physical nor purely psychological; it rests somewhere in between in a spiritual realm that is subjective but also possesses an intersubjectivity. By calling itself a science, Spiritualism expands the scope of scientific investigation to include phenomena that cannot be fully measured or

affirmed through empirical observation but never-the-less manifest themselves in discernible ways in the empirical world; an effort that is already underway in many of the social sciences.

But Spiritualism's challenge is not only directed at scientific criticism. Insofar as Spiritualism also calls itself a religion, it offers a significant critique to the meaning and value of religious belief. After the table had established a steady tilt, Gehman instructed us to begin asking yes-or-no questions of the spirit controlling it. If the table tapped three times with its leg, the answer was “yes;” two taps was “no.” At random, group members began pitching questions to the table. Before each question, the table was tilting and swirling, but once the question was asked it fell still before tapping out a reply and returning to its rocking. They asked if the spirit was male and if it was the relative of someone present. Eventually, the group identified the spirit as Kathy Riley's father. Gehman encouraged Riley to ask the spirit a question. She asked if he was happy, and he said yes. Gehman suggested that there were many spirits present who could control the table and that we should continue asking questions. One woman asked if her sister—now in the spirit world—had made peace with her. The spirit said yes. Gehman—receiving a mediumistic impression from the sister's spirit—said that the spirit wanted to know if the woman had made peace with her. The woman replied, “at times.” Gehman said she would do well to keep working on finding peace with her sister. Simon—who was also a member of the group—spoke up. She was feeling a tightness in her chest. Gehman suggested that this might be one of Simon's loved ones, and Simon said she believed it was her

father. Gehman instructed her to “acknowledge his presence and let it go.” I asked if there was anyone present from another time. When the table responded, “yes,” someone followed up asking if the spirit was from the Civil War era, and we discovered that the spirit was from the period before the Civil War. Through a series of questions, we finally identified the spirit as a Native American who served as a spirit guide for one of the people at the séance.

These exchanges reveal a fundamental tenet of Spiritualism as a religion: that belief is a product of firsthand experience, tested and affirmed. The opportunity to ask questions of the spirits controlling the table was a chance to gather direct evidence as to their existence; to doubt them and investigate them. Even though the séance's participants were all believers, it was still important that they evaluate and explore the value and legitimacy of this ritual. Just as academic science must abandon any claim to absolute objectivity in order to participate in Spiritualist performance, religion must abandon any claim to absolute transcendence. Fundamentalists believe in the infallibility of their scriptures. All answers and all truths are contained within them and their authority is unquestionable (McFarland 1992 and Antoun 2008). The spirits, by contrast, demand to be questioned and have an incomplete rather than transcendent knowledge. They are, like the living, on a spiritual path; perpetually seeking higher degrees of spiritual perfection, but always necessarily falling short of the divine perfection of God. A spirit, like a living person, is only ever partially enlightened. For example, Kelly, another séance participant, asked to know if she would ever write a book. The table remained still and silent, refusing a response. Gehman interpreted this

to mean that what happened in the future was dependent on Kelly's free will and was beyond the spirits' ability to predict. Whether messages come through mediums or tilting tables, they are never comprehensive and always suspect. They offer encouragement and reassurance, not definitive statements on ethics, metaphysics, or the ontological nature of the universe.

Absolute truths—in the form of scientific objectivity or religious transcendence—have no place in the finite, temporary, and fleeting act of performance. And so, the spirits—which are constantly eluding both objectivity and transcendence—can only find expression through the act of performing. To attempt to record or to extrapolate any generalizable truths from a Spiritualist performance is to miss the point. You cannot truly believe in table tilting unless you are present to witness the performance firsthand just as you cannot confirm a message that is not directed at you or experience healing if you do not sit on the healer's bench. In this way, the Spiritualist's path resembles Michael Harner's description of the shaman's journey: “truly significant shamanic knowledge is *experienced*, and cannot be obtained from me or any other shaman” (1980: xviii). The incomplete knowledge that the spirits convey is specific to the individual practitioner and cannot be learned except through a live engagement. I must receive my own messages if I am to truly believe in spirit communication. And I must meditate if I am to truly discover the meaning and value of direct contact with the spirit world. That these individual, idiosyncratic experiences have amounted to relatively consistent ritual practices and

religious principles is a product of the fact that they are all oriented toward the same goal: spiritual enlightenment.

According to Alice Rayner, “performance might be understood as standing in for or covering for an absent, unstaged act, which is a 'thing of nothing'” (1994: 30). For Spiritualists, this unstaged act is the reception of God's ultimate truth; the fully verifiable and objective, transcendent and divine, undeniable expression of Infinite Intelligence. The tilting table, mediated message, and healing touch stand in for this ultimate knowledge which is, as Rayner observes, a “thing of nothing.” That is to say, no matter how long or how intently a Spiritualist practices, the final truths of the universe will never be revealed to her or him because they cannot be revealed. As Derrida, Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Merleau-Ponty attest, the ultimate truths of the universe are beyond human comprehension. For Derrida (1974) and Wittgenstein (1975), transcendent truths about infinite beings like spirits and God cannot be spoken of or otherwise entered into discourse and so that places these truths beyond the reach of human inquiry. From an existential perspective, Levinas (1961) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) argue that the infinite can only be reflected through the imperfect prism of our subjective experience and so neither affirmed nor denied. Gehman concurs when she teaches her students that Spiritualism's principles are “our best understanding” of the nature and meaning of the universe and are subject to change (25 October 2011, CSE). Speaking about South American shamanism, Michael Taussig says, “what is at work here is an image of truth as experiment, laden with particularity, now in this guise, now as that one, stalking the stage whose

shadowy light conjures only the deconjure” (1986: 445). Spiritualists persist to perform because performance affords them the opportunity to stand in the shadow of the divine where they receive glimmers and reflections of a universal knowledge. These glimmers are too individual and particular to ever assume any transcendent meaning, but they are the best Spiritualists can hope for and so well worth the effort. Fallible and suspect as they may be, the spirits are the best means for the living to achieve spiritual upliftment. And so, the Spiritualists have decided that it is better to receive the spare illumination that falls around a shadow than to stand in complete darkness.

In the final week of my research, I sat down with Gehman at her kitchen table for an interview, and I asked her what she thought about the future of Spiritualism. She said,

Spiritualism is really like a golden thread through the fabric of all religions. And I think the concept of oneness is uppermost in all real religions as you grow within it. I think there's a longing in the human heart to know God, to know Spirit, and to know something about what happens beyond this dimension of life. Because I think there's a knowingness that death is not the end and that there is a continuity. And I think that Spiritualism fulfills that. I was talking with Marilyn Awtry... we were talking about the future of Spiritualism. She feels that Spiritualism came into the world to accomplish certain things and that it would phase out. But I see Spiritualism as that which has always been and always will be... as an organized or disorganized religion. I see that part of it [the organization] may phase out [but] I think that the teachings of Spiritualism will never die (22 January 2013).

From Gehman's perspective, Spiritualism as an organized religion is an effort to access a human need. The fundamental truths of Spiritualism about the oneness of the universe and the continuity of life are universal, but Spiritualism itself is not. Thus,

performance in its impermanence becomes a metaphor for Spiritualism. Through the practice of Spiritualism, individuals access an indefinite but profound understanding or “knowingness” that can never be fully documented or institutionalized into a lasting creed. And so Spiritualism was never meant to persist as any sort of permanent organization or organized movement.

Back at the séance, the table had stopped responding to our questions and the tilting slowed to a halt. Gehman said that the spirits were giving us a sign that we should close the session for the night. We shut our eyes and sat with our feet flat on the floor and our palms open in our laps and began to meditate. Gehman asked that we focus on feeling our connection with the universe and our oneness with all things. She asked that we allow the healing light of God to enter our bodies and to project a healing light into the world around us. After a few minutes of meditation, she thanked the spirits and God for the opportunity to gather together in their presence and closed by saying “Amen.” We opened our eyes and sat together for a long moment in silence. Gehman said we could go when we wanted, but we continued to sit, unsure of what to make of the experience we had just had and too overwhelmed to speak about it. Gehman looked around and cheerfully observed, “Nobody wants to go.” We laughed, breaking the silence. After moving the chairs out of the circle, we gathered our things, and made our way to the parking lot. When I got to my car, I sat for the next hour, recording everything I could remember from the evening and struggling with a gathering awareness that I would never be able to fully capture the experience.

Appendix A

Event Index

Book Club Selections

The Power of Myth Part I, CSE, 14 January 2011
The Power of Myth Part II, CSE, 25 February 2011
The Priest and the Medium Part I, SSE, 11 November 2011
The Priest and the Medium Part II, CSE, 2 December 2011
What the Bleep Do We Know (Film and Book), CSE, 20 April 2012
Nobody Dies in Lily Dale (Film), CSE, 16 March 2012
Proof of Heaven, CSE, 30 November 2012

Unfoldment of Your Higher Spiritual Gifts Course with Anne Gehman Lesson Series

Introduction to Spiritualism, 25 October 2011
Psychometry, 1 November 2011
Physical Mediumship, 8 November 2011
Spiritual Healing, 15 November 2011
Spirit Guides, 22 November 2011
Home Circles, 29 November 2011

Advanced Mediumship Energetics Course with Marilyn Awtry Exercise Series

4 August 2011

Relaxation: Deep breathing, finger relaxation, grasping and releasing hands and feet.
Awareness Test: Attempting to memorize as many objects in a tray as possible.
Sensitivity Test: Dipping hands into a bowl of water with eyes closed; the goal is to stop moving the hand downwards when the water is first felt.
Psychometry: Discerning the contents of a sealed envelope.
Billet Reading: A form of psychometry; we select a question, color, or number at random from a hat and attempt to discern it without reading it.
Telepathy: Reading the mental vibration of a partner who is looking at a symbol on card and trying to send the image to the partner mentally.
Telekineses: Attempting to move a pencil while it sits on a note card.
Dowsing: Using dowsing rods to discover the size and power of the human aura around a partner.

Appendix B

SUNDAY SERVICE PROGRAM

CHAIRPERSON – CAROL CAESAR

ORGANIST – ELOIS KING

HEALING & MEDITATION: 10:00 -10:30 AM

Musical Prelude

Call to Service

*Hymn: *HS #1*

Morning Has Broken

*Prayer for Spiritual Healing (inside back cover of hymnal)

Healing Meditation

Many of our healers are students working toward their certification. If you experience a change in your condition that you attribute to their healing, please request an affidavit form.

Welcome Your Neighbor

Please take this time to greet one another.

LECTURE & MESSAGE SERVICE: 10:30 - 11:30 AM

Announcements

*Hymn: #95

Truth Makes Free

*Invocation

Declaration of Principles (*inside front cover of hymnal*)

Introduction of Speaker

*Hymn: #159

Open My Eyes

Speaker: **Dr. Wayne Knoll**

Love Offerings

Offertory Prayer

Introduction of Spirit Messengers

*Hymn: #157

Isn't It Wonderful

Messengers: **Reverend Anne Gehman**

This portion of the service is conducted or overseen by an NSAC certified mediums. If a certified medium is not present, we will not hold the message service. If the message ministers are students, they are working toward their certification in mediumship. If the message given to you is accurate, providing you with proof of the continuity of life, please request and complete an affidavit form for the student. Each student must acquire affidavits as part of their certification process.

*Hymn: #203

Let There Be Peace on Earth

*Benediction

*Please stand, if you are able. (New hymns will be played through once before singing.)

Appendix C

Church Hierarchy

Center for Spiritual Enlightenment, Falls Church, VA

Pastor, Anne Gehman Assistant Pastor, Patricia Stranahan	
Ministerial Council	Board of Directors
Student Mediums	
Members	
Non-Members	

Glossary

attunement: the state of being in connection with the spirit world.

aura: the non-physical aspect of the individual that radiates out from the individual's physical body and can be perceived by some psychics. The color, size, and opacity of the aura reflect the individual's mood, personality, and personal development.

automatic writing: a form of mental mediumship wherein the medium communicates messages from the spirits by writing them on slates or paper.

cabinet: any enclosed space in which a medium can separate her or himself from others who have gathered to witness a performance of physical mediumship. Cabinets are most closely associated with full-form mediumship, but they were also used to produce other phenomena including the disembodied playing of musical instruments.

circle: a gathering—usually private—of individuals attempting to make direct, personal contact with the spirits often in order to develop the participants' ability to achieve contact with the spirits.

clairaudience: the ability to hear spirit impressions (see also *impression*).

clairsentience: the ability to feel spirit impressions (see also *impression*).

clairvoyance: the ability to see spirit impressions (see also *impression*).

class: (see *workshop*).

discourse: an address given by one or several spirits through the body and voice of a trance medium. Discourses could be communicated directly to audiences or recorded and published.

dowsing rods: two L-shaped metal rods, meant to be held one in each hand. The rods are placed in specially designed handles such that the rods themselves remain pointing straight forward regardless of how the user moves her or his hands. The rods are used for various purposes including finding water, oil, and graves, but in Spiritualism they are generally used to detect the non-physical aura of living people and spirits. When a spirit or living aura draws near the rods, they are pushed outward, forming a straight line.

ectoplasm: the physical substance through which spirits manifest themselves as visible and tactile entities, generally thought to derive from the body of the medium.

Spirits produce, sculpt, and animate the ectoplasm in various forms including clouds, limbs, faces, and full bodies.

fishng: a controversial approach to giving messages wherein the medium names or describes a spirit to a large group and asks if anyone in the group can identify the spirit as someone she or he has known in life. Most trained Spiritualist mediums select a particular living individual to receive a message before giving any information about the spirit; a method that Spiritualists generally consider to be more persuasive.

full-form manifestation : a form of physical mediumship wherein a spirit's body becomes fully visible and sometimes tactile to witnesses. This body resembles the way the individual looked in life. (see also *ectoplasm*)

gallery reading: a public event at which a medium communicates messages from the spirit world to multiple sitters. All who attend a gallery reading could receive a message, and all who attend witness all of the messages conveyed during a reading to other attendees.

healer: a person who makes contact with the spirit world in order to provide mental, physical, and/or spiritual healing to her or himself or another person. To heal is to improve an individual's condition in some way.

home circle: a circle that takes place in one of the participant's homes. (see also *circle*)

impression: a physical sensation or mental image that a Spiritualist practitioner (usually a medium or healer) identifies as deriving from one or several spirits. Impressions are only perceptible to the person who receives them and can be visual, audible, tactile, olfactory, or gustatory.

independent painting: a form of physical mediumship wherein spirits cause visual images to appear on a canvas without the direct intervention of a medium.

Infinite Intelligence : the official Spiritualist term for the highest power in existence. This entity is akin to God but is not necessarily an individual, sentient being. Individual Spiritualists differ widely on the nature of Infinite Intelligence, but most agree that the entity can be characterized as force that governs and controls the workings of the physical and non-physical universe. (see also *Natural Law*)

lecture: an address given by a speaker to the congregation at a Spiritualist service. Lectures do not include a display of psychic or mediumistic ability and they need not discuss Spiritualist philosophy or practice directly.

materialization: see *full-form manifestation*.

meditation: the primary means for Spiritualists and nascent mediums to achieve attunement. Meditation is silent or guided by an experienced practitioner. The practice is stationary and concentrated on opening a connection between the individual and the spirits.

medium: a person who has purposefully developed her or his ability to make contact with spirits. There are varying degrees of medium within the National Association of Spiritualist Churches. A student medium has not had her or his ability tested and affirmed by the Association. A registered medium has been tested and affirmed according to the Association's standards as being able to contact the spirit world.

mental mediumship: a practice wherein a medium communicates information from the spirit world without the spirits manifesting in any way that can be perceived by witnesses. (see also *physical mediumship*)

message: a communication from or about a spirit conveyed by a medium to an individual who is unable to perceive the communicating spirit her or himself.

Natural Law: the principles that govern the ways in which the physical and non-physical universe function. For some Spiritualists, Natural Law is God or Infinite Intelligence.

paranormal: any entity or phenomenon the existence of which is questioned or denied by mainstream authorities but affirmed by a particular group of adherents. Paranormal phenomena are understood by their adherents to manifest in ways that can be evaluated and affirmed by non-adherents. Haunting, extra-sensory perception, telekinesis, and extra terrestrials are all examples of paranormal phenomena.

planchette: a board on which is written the letters of the alphabet that is the precursor to the Ouija Board. A spirit would communicate by tapping whenever a medium or interlocutor pointed to the next letter in the word the spirit was attempting to spell.

platform: the state of offering messages from the spirits to an audience or congregation. Whenever a medium gives messages in a public setting, she or he has taken up or assumed a platform. The term alludes to but does not necessarily entail stepping onto a raised stage. (see also *message*)

physical mediumship: a practice wherein a medium allows the spirits to manifest themselves in ways that can be empirically perceived by witnesses using the physical senses. Examples of physical mediumship include rapping, table tilting, transfiguration, and full-form manifestation. (see also *mental mediumship*)

psychic: a person who is able to perceive non-physical elements of the physical world. For example, Spiritualists believe that all people have a non-physical aura that radiates out from their physical body. A psychic may be able to perceive that aura even though it is invisible to the physical eye.

psychometry: the practice of discerning the history of an object or an object's owner based on the psychic discernment of non-physical traces left within the object. The basic principle of psychometry is that objects carry their history with them in a non-physical record wherever they go and that this history can be perceived and read by specially skilled psychics. (see also *psychic*)

rapping: a sound made by disembodied spirits that is empirically audible to anyone present to hear the sound. Raps or taps often communicate by answering yes or no questions or through the use of a planchette.

reading: a specially designated session at which a medium communicates messages from the spirits to one or several sitters. (see also *sit*)

séance: a gathering at which a medium and a group of non-mediums gather in a circle in order to make contact with the spirits. This contact may manifest in the form of mental or physical phenomena, but the group knows in advance which variety of phenomena to expect.

service: a weekly ritual that follows a set order of events. Spiritualist services begin with thirty minutes of healing followed by a devotional service including prayers, hymns, and a lecture, and end with thirty minutes of spirit messages.

sit: to place oneself in a position to make contact with the spirit world either indirectly through the mediation of a medium or directly.

slate writing: a form of physical mediumship wherein the spirits write directly on a slate. Slates are often placed within a fabric sleeve with a piece of chalk at a physical mediumship séance. The spirits write on the slate while it is concealed inside the sleeve.

spirit: the non-physical aspect of the individual which continues after the individual's death. Spirits retain the personality and memories of the individual and often manifest to mediums in the semblance of their physical bodies. All people are understood to have (or to also be) spirits, and many Spiritualists believe that the same is true for dogs, cats, and other animals.

Spirit: when used with a capital "S," Spirit is another term for Infinite Intelligence. (see also *Infinite Intelligence*)

spirit guide: a spirit at a high level of development who is able to offer assistance to a living individual, often in ways that the living individual is not aware of. Spirit guides work with individuals throughout their lives, and individuals can become aware of their guides through unfoldment.

spirit world: the non-physical, spatio-temporal dimension in which spirits reside. The spirit world encompasses and exceeds the physical world.

supernatural: an entity or phenomenon that cannot be perceived by the physical senses. All paranormal phenomena are supernatural, but not all supernatural phenomena are paranormal. God in a mainstream Christian context, for example is a supernatural entity because God cannot be perceived using the physical senses; however, the Christian God is not a paranormal entity because God does not manifest in ways that can be evaluated or affirmed. Rather, one has faith in God's existence.

table tilting: a form of physical mediumship in which the spirits cause a table to tip such that one or several of its legs are no longer on the ground. During table tilting, spirits can communicate messages with participants by tapping answers to yes or no questions.

telepathy: a psychic ability to perceive the thoughts of others.

trance mediumship: a form of mental mediumship wherein a medium's body and voice are controlled by a spirit such that the spirit can communicate directly with witnesses.

transfiguration: a form of physical mediumship wherein ectoplasm forms the appearance of various different spirits around a medium's face. These appearances resemble the way the spirits looked in life.

trumpet: a conical tool that spirits use to communicate directly with sitters at a physical mediumship séance. The trumpet will levitate, and the spirit will form an ectoplasmic voice box at the mouth of the trumpet and speak through it.

unfoldment: the process whereby a Spiritualist develops her or his ability to make contact with the spirit world and, as a consequence, becomes a more spiritually advanced individual. Regular meditation, attendance at workshops, and participation in a home circle are all part of unfoldment.

upliftment: the state of being lifted up by the spirits; becoming more spiritually knowledgeable and developing a stronger or more evolved spirituality with the aid of the spirits.

workshop: a gathering at which a designated teacher or teachers instruct a group of students about some aspect of Spiritualist practice. Often, workshops include a period of guided practice in which students attempt one or several skills that relate to the topic of the workshop.

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