

A Qualitative Analysis of Mediumship Development among Ordained Spiritualist Ministers: A Research Study

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Introduction

Not all Spiritualist mediums are ministers, but, as a rule, all Spiritualist ministers are indeed mediums. A common prerequisite in becoming an ordained Spiritualist minister within the majority of associations and seminary programs (in the United States) that actively ordain ministers within the religion of Modern Spiritualism require a demonstrated ability to communicate with the so-called dead. In other words, to be developed mediumistically to the point of being able to relay information in the form of messages involving “spirit communication” from those entities who have passed to the other side.

Spiritualism teaches that those who have passed on are not in an unconscious state of being. The Spirit is very much conscious and well. No longer is that Spirit hampered by the burdensome physical body. No longer is there the tormenting physical pain, the anguished mind. The Spirit is free at last. Free, and yet, with its “will” to do the many things the physical did not allow, or the element of time or weather, that now in the Spirit World can all be accomplished. Indeed, it is a proven fact that Spirit is very much alive and active, even more so in the Spirit World than when on the Earth Plane. (Scher, pp. 2-3)

The process in which Spiritualist ministers develop their mediumship, however, varies widely comprising several key components: 1) a natural ability or propensity to connect with Spirit and/or one’s personal spirit guides; 2) the opportunity to develop one’s mediumship under the concentrated direction of a certified mediumship development teacher; and 3) the amount of time and effort the aspiring medium and/or minister is willing to devote to developing his/her mediumship. All are equally important.

The largest portion of recognized programs that actively ordain Spiritualist ministers—whether it be through a church-based program, a Spiritualist seminary, or a Spiritualist association which sponsors mediumship and ministerial training—require the aspirants to give public messages in the form of mini-readings and “platform work”¹ which primarily is clairvoyant or clairaudient-based² messages that can be confirmed by those receiving the messages. As with any course of study, mediumship development is largely dependent upon the amount of time and effort students are willing to devote to perfecting public

¹ Historically, “platform work” refers to the custom of having the Spiritualist medium stand on a raised platform in front of a congregation or audience to give intuited messages to those in attendance. The term is used widely among Spiritualist mediums that refer to their mediumship as “serving Spirit on platform” or “working on platform.”

² Referred to as the “clairs,” mediums make contact with spirit entities through either one or a combination of clairvoyance (clear-seeing); clairaudience (clear-hearing); clairsentience (clear-sensing or feeling); or clairgustance (clear-smelling or tasting).

message work through active training and experiential practice.

From aspiration to attainment, a long road exists—in mediumship as well as in any other highly specialized gift. And in the situation of mediumship, most of the work in traversing that long road rests upon the efficiency of the spirit guides. After all, comparatively little can be done by the aspirant in attaining mediumship goals other than providing “time” and “conditions” necessary for the spiritual people to produce their phenomena. (Bias, p. 30)

As stated above, mediumship development involves connecting with one’s spirit guides in order to make contact with disincarnate spirits that want to relay a spirit-communicated message to a loved one or acquaintance. A “gate-keeper” or “door keeper” guide is designated by the medium before beginning to give messages to serve as a go-between between the earth plane and the spirit world. (Greer, p. 7) The gatekeeper spirit, which acts as a screener of sorts, lines up the spirits who wish to relay messages and is often the medium’s “Joy Guide” or “Doctor Teacher.” This entity serves as a go-between with the spirits wishing to make contact with those on the earth plane.³ In addition, most working mediums develop a system of “symbols” which are personal to them and their spirit guides.

In order to make the best use of time (a seasoned medium can give between 12-15 spirit messages in a fifteen minute slot during a church or “all message” service), the medium must not only trust his or her guides implicitly, but also must build up directly a system of symbols that serves as a type of “spiritual shorthand” that allows the medium to discern, decipher and deliver the message to the intended person. (Barnes, pp. 6-7)

Symbols are in our lives every day; get a working agreement with you and your guide of what each symbol will mean to you. Example: If you see a casket, does it mean a death or a new birth to you? If you see a bridge, look closely, is this bridge in good condition, is it wood, stone, or rock, is there water under it, is it muddy, dry, is it deep, is the water deep, calm? Can you see how the symbol can be telling you that someone could be crossing into a change in their lives? If the bridge is pretty strong and the water is calm, the crossing could be pretty smooth. If the bridge is strong and the waters rough, the crossing will be difficult, but there could be some undercurrents, etc. (Greer, pp. 17-18)

Narrowing the field of possible meanings is paramount in the delivering of the message. As well, specific names, dates, and any identifying information help the medium tremendously in intuiting the message correctly.

The medium, however, as a human being has to deal with a number of outside stimuli that can affect his/her ability to give an accurate message—one’s physical condition (the fact of whether the medium

³ Spiritualists believe that every person has five primary spirit guides which are with them from before birth: 1) Doctor Teacher; 2) Master Teacher; 3) Chemist; 4) Indian Protector; and 5) Joy Guide. Each guide has specific duties and assists the medium uniquely. For example, a medium’s Doctor-Teacher is closest in that this guide will offer on-going intuition and guidance to the medium, whereas the Master-Teacher is the most highly evolved entity attending to the medium, offering him/her guidance of the highest form and often oversees the other guides in the band. The Chemist serves as the go-to guide for all things spiritual, guiding and assisting the medium’s spiritual growth. Mediums are said to draw their strength from their Indian Protector guide because this guide works to ground the medium and assists the medium in daily life activities. Finally, the Joy Guide is the most whimsical of all those in the band of guides in that the Joy Guide often manifests itself as a child (often female). The Joy Guide is considered to be the chattiest of the guides and will often be used as a “control” guide at a séance or while giving messages (meaning this guide will line up the Spirits who want to give messages and will often act as the go-between between the medium and Spirits who want to make contact).

is rested or exhausted); the ego (or the need to interpret too much of the intended message by allowing one's own feelings and ideas to sully the purity of the message); the attendees receiving the messages (energetically they must be open and willing to receive and accept a message from spirit); or the location or atmosphere of the message service (the surroundings, temperature, or comfort level of the venue). It is physically impossible for even the most experienced and developed mediums to be correct 100% of the time due to these personal and outside factors and conditions.

Hence, it is important that mediums develop a code of symbols with their guides who can assist them in interpreting the message in order to direct them more succinctly and clearly to the person for whom the message is intended. (Greer, p. 17)

When I am on platform giving messages, I will see people, colors, or objects that are shown to me by my spirit guide. This directs me more clearly in determining who the message is for and what it pertains to exactly. For instance, if I see my own grandmother in spirit in my mind's eye, then this symbolizes to me that the message is from a grandmother. If I hear a name clairaudiently, this helps narrow down who may be able to accept the message. Another example, if I see an American flag folded, this is symbolic of a spirit who either passed during battle in the military or it symbolizes that the spirit had been in the military and this will allow the person receiving the message to recognize who it is.

My guides and I spent years working out symbols through trial and error. It is quite helpful when doing public message work to get to the person who the message is for, allowing me to touch upon more vibrations in order to give as many messages as possible in the shortest amount of time. After all, the message's main purpose isn't so much the content of the message but more to confirm and prove to the person receiving it the continuity of life and to offer solace that the person's loved one is indeed OK. (*Subject L*)

As delineated above, mediums depend upon their guides to communicate to them messages through a series of symbols that mediums have worked out with their guides in meditation, channeling, clairvoyantly, clairaudiently or through mind-to-mind consultation.

Mediumship occurs naturally for all people, but varies greatly in how adept they are at doing it. (King, p. 5) Just as anyone can play the piano to some degree—even if that means randomly hitting keys to make sounds, to being able to play beautiful music by ear with no formal training, to playing with some level of expertise after years of study and practice—so it is with mediumship. Some mediums are naturally gifted and are able to connect with Spirit with ease, while others must develop their mediumship over a period of time.

The Research Study

This study⁴ was conducted on Spiritualist ministers who either reside in Spiritualist camps, have their own churches and congregations, or who are certified members in good standing of a recognized Spiritualist association. The participants had to be ordained Spiritualist ministers in order to participate in this study. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to Spiritualist ministers using a variety of methods to contact ordained Spiritualist ministers. Sixty-one of the surveys were completed and returned, with a total of 54 respondents being accepted into the study (N=54).⁵ The majority of the subjects were

⁴ A portion of the demographic data included here was previously published in Leonard (e) and (f), 2012.

⁵ Seven surveys were discarded for a variety of reasons: 1) it was apparent that the subject had not been properly certified as a medium or was not ordained by a legitimate church or association; 2) the survey was improperly filled out and/or large sections were left blank; or 3) the subject was perhaps a certified medium but had not been ordained at the time the survey was given.

initially selected through referral, meaning that once a core group of ministers was selected through personal contacts, these people then distributed the questionnaire on to other ordained ministers with the above criterion in place. This type of research sampling is referred to as “snowball sampling.”

In snowball sampling researchers identify a small number of individuals who have characteristics in which they are interested. These people are then used as informants to identify, or put researchers in touch with, others who qualify for inclusion and these, in turn, identify yet others—hence the term snowball sampling. This method is useful for sampling a population where access is difficult, maybe because it is a sensitive topic or where communication networks are underdeveloped. The task for the researcher is to establish who are the critical or key informants with whom initial contact must be made. (Cohen, *et al*, 104)

A decision was made early on to make the study as pervasive as possible in order to extrapolate the most up-to-date and accurate data reflecting the current conditions of ordained Spiritualist ministers today. Although the primary instrument (fieldwork questionnaire) utilized a combination of a Likert scale (*e.g.* “please mark accordingly—strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree”) and checklist scale (*e.g.* “please check the items that pertain to you”), several portions of the questionnaire involved more open-ended questions, generating a large amount of research data that needed to be collated and interpreted.

In retrospect, perhaps a survey that encompassed only a checklist or rating method might have made it easier to collocate and analyze the data generated, but ultimately it was decided to combine both configurations in the question design in order not to limit the subjects in their responses. Also, I could not assume to know all the possible responses that subjects might be able to provide—which certainly was the case, as many respondents mentioned areas and experiences that I would never have thought to include in a checklist or Likert format. The responses, in general, were thoughtful, lengthy, and rich with detail.

Statistics on the Gender of the Participants

The genders of the participants in this study were 70% female and 30% male. The research data shows that the religion is predominantly made up of women. Historically, this is also true from its inception. Spiritualism and spirit communication eventually served to offer women an active voice in religion, as well as positions of authority in churches, at a time when women were largely relegated to doing housework and to raising a family. Eventually, Spiritualism would give women a vocation—a career—in which they could nurture a profession that was separate from their dependence upon any male figure (whether it be a husband, father, brother, uncle, grandfather, or son). (See Leonard (a), 2005; Leonard (b), 2005)

Women were expected to accept and be satisfied with secondary and subordinate roles—not only in society, but also in church leadership, church services, and even in church politics. Women were generally not allowed to preach from the pulpit, and were largely forbidden from becoming ordained. Spiritualism as a religion and belief system offered women equality by changing many of the steadfast, traditional rules that had governed women, religion, spirituality, and equality. Goldsmith (1998) points out:

Perhaps the most startling discovery was the extent to which Spiritualism and the inception of woman’s rights were intertwined. At a time when women had no power to achieve equal rights, they relied on the “other powers” provided by Spiritualism to sustain their efforts. Through the mouths of trance speakers came words of wisdom from long-dead seers, and from the spirits came the courage to go forward. (xiii-xiv)

The data gathered for this study indicates that Spiritualist women still find great comfort in the religion and enjoy an equality of the sexes still denied many other women who adhere to mainstream religions. Spiritualism boasts one of the highest percentages of female ministers in organized religion. This is due in part to the fact that historically, and even today, Spiritualism not only offers women a voice, but an opportunity to be heard on equal footing with men, as well as to participate commensurately in church-related leadership roles. In most Spiritualist organizations and many Spiritualist churches today, women are the undeniable leaders of the religion. Also, Spiritualism still is “intertwined” with many social issues of the day, offering an alternative view to and acceptance of marginal members of society, from all races, creeds, economic and social backgrounds, and sexual orientations.

Statistics on the Sexual Orientation of the Participants

Through interviews, onsite research, as well as discussions with a number of Spiritualist ministers, I encountered what seemed to be a higher than average percentage of male (and to a lesser degree, female) ordained ministers who are homosexual as compared to mainstream Christian denominations.⁶ The survey indicated 72% of the respondents to be heterosexual and 28% to be gay, lesbian or bisexual. Of this percent, 19% were male (gay or bisexual).

The sampling was rather limited, and because this question was not expanded upon adequately in the original questionnaire, these assumptions cannot be regarded as scientifically sound. But from the data I gathered which can be regarded as significant, it can be generally deduced, perhaps, that this trend can be loosely compared to that of women in the early days seeking out Spiritualism as an alternative to other mainstream religions: it offered no religious or spiritual restrictions based on gender or sex; hence, regarding the issue of sexual orientation, it is also a non-issue in relation to participating in and taking leadership roles in the church. (Leonard (b), 2005)

The idea that Spiritualists are “free thinkers” and place no moral judgment upon the actions or personal lives of other people (this is to be worked out between the individual and God once the person makes his/her transition to the spirit world), allows homosexuals a place in which to develop and nurture their spiritual selves. Spiritualism seems to offer this stratum of modern society, just as it did for women in Victorian times, an avenue in which to practice their religion freely and openly (as homosexuals) without fear of being judged; it allows homosexuals a haven in which to worship and practice their faith, regardless of their sexual orientation.⁷ Also, it is interesting to note that since the majority of ministers are women, and many of the male ministers I interviewed and spoke with were gay, it prompted me to hypothesize

⁶ It is difficult to ascertain reliable statistics regarding percentages of homosexual ministers in mainstream Christian denominations because many churches condemn homosexuality so vehemently that a homosexual Christian minister cannot admit his/her homosexuality publicly. Conventional wisdom, however, would suggest that a cross-section of Christianity—which is a group or population—has roughly the same incidence of homosexuality as any other cross-section of society. The difference, however, is that a majority of gay-Christian ministers must suppress their homosexuality in order to participate in the religion; Spiritualism on the other hand embraces diversity and openly accepts homosexual ministers in its churches (which is reflected in its belief system which does not view homosexuality as sinful, but rather as another expression of love toward another human being).

⁷ This aspect of modern Spiritualism intrigued me, so I inquired further to a number of Spiritualist ministers, both homosexual and heterosexual, as to the reasons for the attraction of gays to Spiritualism and vice versa. It was pointed out to me that this was not always the case. There was a time when Spiritualist mediums and ministers (who were gay or lesbian) had to hide their sexuality from the majority, fearing they would be asked to leave the movement. Spiritualism, however, does view issues from a more progressive point of view, and usually does precede everyday society in the general acceptance of current issues and controversies. Just as Spiritualism was on the cutting edge working towards the abolition of slavery in the 1850s, and embraced women and women’s rights at a time when society was fighting issues of equality with a vengeance, so does Spiritualism today embrace those searching honestly and purely for their own spiritual truth and place in society—regardless of their sexual orientation. (Leonard (b), 166)

if “mediumship” work is somehow connected to a type of feminine energy (this is not to suggest the men are “feminine,” but that perhaps the spiritual aspect and vibratory energy needed to make spirit contact is somehow feminine in nature). This was explained to me in the following way by a heterosexual Spiritualist minister:

When you do this kind of work, we are all electromagnetic, and we all have male/female energy—which is not sexual. When you do mediumship, you use the “feminine” energy more than the “male” energy. Many straight men are uncomfortable with tapping into this female energy. Gay men are more comfortable tapping into it, so more male mediums tend to be “gay.” Straight men are often conditioned from childhood to deny their feminine energy-side, so they do not tap into it very much. Society tends to emphasize to men that they are not supposed to “feel,” for instance, “real men don’t cry.” You can’t be a medium without being able to feel deeply. (Brown, 2004 in Leonard (a), 2005)

Conclusive results of this assumption will have to await further research in the future, as data on this aspect was not adequately collected to form a theory in which to make a definitive deduction on the subject.

Statistics on the Age of the Participants

The age of the participants ranged from 35 to over 74 with only 3% indicating they were between the ages of “35-44”; the highest percentage of respondents indicated they were between the ages of “55-64” (39%). The second largest percentage were grouped in the “65-74” age category (35%); and 16% of the subjects indicated they were between the ages of “45-54.” Five percent marked the category of “Over 74.” Interestingly, no subjects marked the “Under 25” or “25-34” categories.

This data is revealing in that it suggests a very mature group of subjects, which in itself, is not surprising. In general, Spiritualism is an aging religion, with the majority of mediums and ministers being elderly (see Leonard, 2005). The research for this paper uncovered that many of the subjects began studying towards ordination later in life, often as a second career choice after pursuing totally different professions earlier in their lives. This makes sense as only 12% of the respondents indicated they were “life-long” (cradle to grave) Spiritualists which means that a large percentage followed other religious traditions before settling on Spiritualism as their chosen belief system. It stands to reason that after finding the religion, practicing the religion for a period long enough to decide to develop one’s mediumship, requires a bit of time. Then, once a decision was made to pursue ordination, this again adds to the length of education, making the aspiring minister older and more mature. Likely is the case in other mainstream religions, the aspiring minister grew up in the religion and the decision to pursue the ministry occurred earlier, perhaps soon after finishing high school.

Awareness of Mediumistic Gifts

When asked at what age the subject first became aware of his or her mediumistic gifts, the responses were quite varied from the age of 2 to the age of 48 with an average age of 14. This is quite significant in that it suggests that the gift of mediumship is believed to be innately present from childhood.

In contrast, the average age that the subjects became “certified mediums” was much later in life with an average age of the subjects being 43-years-old. This suggests that even though the subjects were well aware of their mediumship ability from an early age, it was not until much later that the subjects pursued certification as developed mediums.

Reasons for this gap in time could be related to an inability to accept fully their mediumistic tendencies; no available outlet to develop with a teacher; no core group of like-minded people in order to share their gift(s); an unawareness of a program that would allow the person to develop his or her

mediumship; a fear of being ridiculed by others for pursuing mediumship formally; or an inability to devote the necessary time and effort earlier in life to such endeavors due to the need to pursue a career that would be more stable and income producing. Of course, these hypothetical reasons for why subjects tended to be much older when becoming certified as mediums as compared to the early age when they first realized their mediumistic gifts cannot be confirmed categorically as the subjects were not specifically asked to elaborate on the reasons. In a future study, it would be interesting to include several items to ascertain exactly the reasons for this wide differentiation in years between realizing one's mediumship ability and becoming a certified medium formally.

Initial Experience with Mediumship

The survey item dealing with the subjects' first experiences with mediumship was informative in that several of the respondents offered thoughtful answers indicating a more "passive" rather than "active" experience (meaning that they happened upon mediumship as a bystander of sorts which made them recognize their ability, rather than actively experiencing mediumship through his or her gifts).

Subject H: "...during a healing [I received] when I was ill."

Subject K: "...[sitting] in a séance in Cornwall, England in 1973."

Subject NN: "...my first experience was when I was 10 or 11 years old with a platform message I received."

Overwhelmingly, however, the respondents indicated that they first realized their mediumship as a result of seeing or conversing with a spirit of a relative (usually a parent or a grandparent) which prompted them to realize their mediumship gifts. This type of introduction into mediumship offered them not only confirmation of the possibility, but also closure in most instances, allowing them to pursue mediumship without fear because of the consoling and comforting experience they had with a loved one who eased them into mediumship, allowing them to accept their gifts of mediumship more readily:

Subject F: "...I saw my little guide before school age. I also heard and saw loved ones."

Subject G: "...my mother appeared and spoke to me; she had made her transition 5 months before that."

Subject I: "...seeing my grandmother [in Spirit] on the day of her transition and after her transition. I was 4-years-old."

Subject M: "...communication with my grandmother. While meditating, she would give me information through inspirational writing about Mom and her family which was confirmed by them. This was before I even knew about Spiritualism."

Subject R: "...seeing and talking with my father who was killed in an accident 3 months prior to my birth. I cannot remember a time when he was not with me."

Fantastic or Memorable Mediumship Experiences

When asked what was the respondents' most fantastic or memorable experience as a medium, nearly every subject answered this question in detail. The majority of the responses offered very personal, experiential stories of how their mediumship affected them. Some of their responses are as follows:

Personal Experiences

Subject C: "...I was in a séance and my father [in Spirit] said 'hold out your hand' and his wedding ring appeared out of thin air and fell into my hand."

Subject M: "...helping other, non-Spiritualists in the belief 'through proof of continuity.' Especially parents who have lost children. The first reading I received in a Spiritualist church.

The medium brought my grandmother to me and said I would be up on platform as a medium someday and I said HA! She was right.”

Subject W: “...being able to talk daily with my Mom who passed in 1970. Always my greatest love and guide.”

Reading for Someone Else

Subject G: “...a husband coming through to his loving wife.”

Subject U: “...I saved the life of a child several times by what I saw and heard—and told the parents. Also, bringing through a 16-year-old to his mother so he could tell her about his death. It was a healing experience for her.”

Subject V: “...bringing in a son to his mother with very clear evidence and being able to hold his energy in front of her (which she felt) while she told him everything she wanted to say but didn’t get a chance to [before he died].”

The Use of Tools in Mediumship

A question was asked to ascertain whether or not the mediums used any tools (i.e. tarot, numerology, astrology, etc) to assist them in giving a reading. Sixty-three percent of the respondents said that they never use any outside tools in their mediumship; in fact, many of these respondents indicated quite assertively that they indeed did not use any outside tools to jumpstart a reading, but relied strictly on “old-fashioned clairvoyance” to connect to Spirit. This question was asked purposefully because a widely held and popular image of mediums in society is of a woman dressed in wildly bright colors and eccentric costumes usually involving some sort of headpiece like a turban or a scarf, while peering into a crystal ball with tarot cards laid out on a table.⁸



Figure 1: Carol Lombard



Figure 2: Joyce Compton

⁸ See Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 [Source: <https://www.facebook.com/HistoricLilyDale?fref=ts>].



Figure 3: Rita Hayworth



Figure 4: Jane Russell

Hollywood is largely to blame for this image of mediums and psychics which places Spiritualist mediums and ministers in an awkward and often times uncomfortable situation because certified Spiritualist mediums regard their work not as entertainment, but as a part of their religion. Many mediums I interviewed for this study lamented how the popular image of a medium in society is quite different from the reality of what they do and how they do it. Spiritualist mediums consider their work to be sacred, and by offering their gift of mediumship to those seeking closure from the death of a loved one, or by giving a person confirmation from a loved one in Spirit, are serious responsibilities in proving the continuity of life after death to the parishioner or client seeking comfort.

Conclusion

Being a Spiritualist medium and/or ordained minister requires a certain level of dedication and not mere dabbling. The mediums who participated in this survey are clearly dedicated and believe sincerely in what they do. This study was undertaken, in part, to determine how and when the mediums discovered their gifts of mediumship initially, and when they made the decision to become certified mediums. Also, this study endeavored to find out what personal mediumistic experiences the Spiritualist mediums had as they were developing their mediumship formally. Several research questions were examined to offer more in-depth, qualitative analysis on the factors that affect the mediums and their mediumship. All questions consisted of a content analysis approach using a questionnaire.

This ethno-religious study of Spiritualist mediums and ministers offers new insight into mediumship, in general, and more so into the motivations and personal lives of the mediums themselves. In the end, it is hoped that this study offers new insights and research data not previously found in the area of mediumship. As evidenced in this paper, for Spiritualist mediums, mediumship is not a game or form of entertainment, but instead a very serious calling that allows them to use their gifts to help others. For many, it is a way of life and they dedicate themselves to offering evidentiary messages to those seeking comfort and consolation to know that their loved ones are around and are indeed able to communicate with their loved ones on this side of the veil.

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