

# Speaking for Myself

## Spiritualism and Religion

Bobbie Stephens-Wright

I have never considered myself capable of writing more than short articles, but last year an old friend informed me that she wanted to write a book about her experiences working as a medium and clairvoyant here in the UK and also in many other countries.

Of course all this sort of thing is anathema to the ideas of SOF readers and they may have mentally switched off already, assuming that the folk who would consult such a person are uneducated and thoroughly ignorant. I do believe that it was first Freud who suggested that it said little of us if we were not prepared to understand what he loosely termed 'oceanic feelings'. Not that Freud had ever experienced such feelings but he certainly had respect for at least one friend who had informed him of the reality of such feelings.

Dorothy has among her long term friends, who were once her clients, a Japanese professor who informs our government about human rights and other matters. As she sat working, in Belgrave Square London, for the Spiritualists' Association of Great Britain, or SAGB as it has been more commonly known, she was familiar with many a celebrity and government minister. Seeking reassurance seems to be universally sought by certain types of person.

Dorothy moved into the town where I live just over two years ago and we became reacquainted, having previously known each other when we were both involved in Spiritualism as mediums in the Spiritualist Church. On these grounds I felt that perhaps I could help Dorothy with her book when she gave me an outline of what she wanted to say. I started to write an account of Dorothy's experiences from childhood to becoming a loving and responsible wife and mother and then onward to working as a medium at home and abroad.

For Dorothy, her talent was a gift from God and she had guides who informed her work. Spiritualists long ago protected themselves from accusations of witchcraft by creating the religion known now as Spiritualism. For myself this had nothing to do with any god or religion but the wish to understand the reasons for my odd ability to drift into altered states of consciousness. For sure, I could act as a medium but without the notion that this was a divine gift. Through my work abroad and my own reading and research I became familiar with the idea that I suffered from a Borderline Personality Disorder.

Dorothy finds this description of me offensive in a way that I do not and the book that I hope to write is very much about the reasons that I would seek for certain phenomena that others would not trouble themselves about. What has emerged from her wish is a book about two lives informed by very different narratives. The infant world of Dorothy only presented one narrative in religious terms. There was one God above and a hell below. Dorothy in adulthood married a Roman Catholic, Bruce, and proceeded of her own volition, not his, to convert to Catholicism. As she laughingly tells me, she eventually knew more about Catholicism than he ever did.

For my own part, the narrative in my own childhood was very contradictory. My mother and her family were Methodists, who became Spiritualists. A mere 15 years after the beginning of Spiritualism and during the years of the First World War, the only male child of her family, and her beloved playmate and brother died of diphtheria, common enough in those days. When my maternal grandfather returned from the trenches of France where he had been a medic, to his consternation his wife – my grandmother – had become a Spiritualist, along with many thousands of others suffering from the losses of the Great War.

My father and his family, by contrast, were atheists. It must be admitted that his version of reality did not initially have the allure of what I found at the Methodist Sunday School, which I faithfully attended each week. There was no trouble to get me to go there as I still remember the enchantment of hearing of the miracles of Jesus from the very kind and attractive female teacher.

At this stage there was no real need for me to trouble myself about the reality in which I lived. Later there became a very pressing need to explain the strange personality traits which emerged. My father presented a very perplexed and worried face when he became aware of my strange abilities, whilst my mother basked in the glory of my very odd 'gift', as others would name it.

For a number of years mediumship presented me with the biggest ego trip I was ever likely to experience. After the events it would prove to be rather like coming off alcohol or perhaps drugs, not that I have any experience of the latter. When the adrenalin dropped I would feel empty and suffer bouts of depersonalisation. If you spend many hours connecting with members of a congregation and finding or feeling you are living their lives rather than your own, this becomes understandable.

Eventually Dorothy and I would work at Stansted Hall, the Headquarters of the Spiritualist National Union. Dorothy then pursued her ability as a medium. By contrast, I was invited by a German writer and psychoanalyst to visit Germany and hold workshops for her professional friends to demonstrate my ability for interpersonal connection. In this exchange I found that the opportunity to understand my behaviour lay within the language of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Now I had found a new narrative which resonated within and allowed me to leave the narrative offered in Spiritualism behind.

I came to describe the manner in which I demonstrated as an ASC or altered state of consciousness. The altered state allowed me to dissociate from reality in order to communicate



Bobbie at a football match

with others. I read extensively in psychoanalytic theory in order to understand the process but also to understand that the things that I had encountered as a medium could be explained in a language that was other than religious or supernatural. The very best summation of my search to find myself was in the work of analyst and writer Nancy McWilliams. From her writing I came to understand dissociation as a psychological defence mechanism:

People who use dissociation as their primary defence mechanism are essentially virtuosos in self-hypnosis. Movement into an altered state of consciousness when one is distressed is not possible for everybody; you have to have the talent. Just as people differ in their basic levels of hypnotisability (R. Spiegel & D. Spiegel, 1978), they differ in their capacities for autohypnosis.

In this short paragraph I was immediately reminded of the famous Irish medium and parapsychologist Eileen Garrett (1893-1970), whose written work *Awareness* is still sought after today. Apparently, Garrett was perfectly happy to be tested as a medium by the early parapsychologists. Of the altered state she described her ability to yawn herself out of existence. Clearly the narrative that Garrett uses is very different from the one that I have used in my work.

It will be fairly obvious that in the exchanges between myself and the analysts my understanding of myself changed radically. That I

do not suffer from a personality disorder is very much due to the connection with analysts during my time abroad. In the mutual exchange there was the opportunity to ask professionals from what madness I could be suffering. My question, at first, was greeted with much laughter and I had to ask my friend Dr Niedecken what they were actually laughing at. Her explanation was that folk who are mad are usually unaware of their madness. The answer I was seeking was very helpful and it was, they thought, most likely due to some kind of trauma. Not something that I would remember easily but the fact that I was asking this question gave one doctor the idea that I was ready to remember. She advised that I should not struggle to remember because it would most probably be remembered when I was very relaxed.

A short while after my return to England I was relaxing one morning in one of my favourite places, the bathtub, when I recalled an event of which I had never spoken to anyone. When I was 12 years old a man attempted to abduct me from the street on a busy Saturday morning in our little market town. It was a busy day but my habit was to take all the quiet roads and streets on the way to my Aunt's house for lunch. I saw no one approaching, as I always walked looking at the ground, until two large male feet planted themselves in front of me barring my way.

'Hello sweetie,' he said to which I immediately replied, 'I don't know you'. He went on to tell me that he knew my father who was parked in a car around the corner. I knew this could not be true and I quickly side stepped. He grabbed me by the arm but was unprepared for the swift kick that he received. Then I ran as fast as could to my Aunt's home.

One would have thought that I would immediately tell her what happened to defend myself over being five minutes late for lunch served promptly at 12 noon. The interesting part of this story is that it was never told until I was over forty years old when it simply horrified my mother. I did not tell because, of course, I was a child who suffered from low self esteem and thought that most things that went wrong were my fault.

Following my trips abroad there was no longer the need to be a medium, no compulsion to dissociate whilst knowing that I could and still

can easily do so. I do feel the wish to enlighten and show that strange phenomena can be explained using different models of understanding.

As my real love is for philosophy, I have no argument with religion and hence no argument with Dorothy's picture of reality. After studying religion at university I may have wanted to argue about certain issues but I feel no need to inflict my worldview on others. This rather came to a very abrupt conclusion when I came across *Sea of Faith* in 1997. On hearing Professor Don Cupitt I was immediately reassured that others thought as I did. I need not think that my way of looking at mediums is the definitive explanation but it is mine and has guided my life since. Years ago I allowed my philosophy tutor to read my M.Phil. thesis and he was very unhappy that I did not, in the end, fully denounce Spiritualism but I felt no need to do so.

It worried me that I may mislead people over the life after death issue, so I gave up platform appearances. The adulation was very briefly missed but I would rather be centred within myself and happy with life and fully at terms with death than go back to this strange time in my life. Let me be clear that I do not believe in anything supernatural. I never present anything as a definitive truth; it is only ever my humble opinion.

The differing stories of Dorothy and me are shaping up as a book which is almost at an end and I do hope that the differing explanations of mediumship will be of general interest. It has become apparent that if you do not know anything about the life of the medium then you will never understand them. For sure, I have never known any medium who has not, at some time in their life, suffered from very low self-esteem. This is completely reversed through the ability to act publicly as a medium or clairvoyant and Dorothy herself has admitted to her low self-esteem as a younger woman. I must add that she is very happy to be referred to by her name. If anyone out there could suggest a publisher who might be interested I would be most grateful.

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