

In the face of recessionary disenchantment and the new individualism, thousands of people have rejected the uncertainties of religion and existentialism in favour of a spiritual alternative. Kay

Parris asks, "Is anybody there?"

Hot line to heaven

Holding their skirts above their ankles, the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York proved they weren't creating the rapping noises that plagued their house in 1848. Years later, Margaret Fox, stony broke and alcoholic, declared that her knee joints had caused the rogue raps. But by then the Spiritualist Movement was already well under way.

All over the US and, soon, Europe, ludicrous claims were matched by astounding pieces of "evidence" that humanity survives the grave. Ectoplasmic materialisations, voices, moving tables, and reports from beyond stunned many cynics into conversion.

The movement grew, especially in the UK, where The Spiritualist Association of Great Britain and the Spiritualists' National Union are now the biggest organisations of their kind in the world. In the last few years, spiritualism has seen something of a boom, as the timeless incentives of bereavement and ego ("I? Die?") have been boosted by recessionary blues and the new individualism. Thousands of people seem to have rejected the uncertainties of faith and existentialism alike to seek tangible evidence of an eternal life. Many come to believe survival of the spirit makes scientific sense. But how scientific can the evidence be?

Exponents say that the "out of body" experiences claimed by people who brush with death (and those who deliberately practise the art) prove our spirits can exist separately from our bodies; that when a figure seems to materialise physically during a communication, the medium loses weight; and that a trance medium temporarily controlled by a spirit may expound eloquently on subjects or in a



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language totally alien to them – a scientific impossibility unless you accept that spirits are real.

Spiritualists believe in the eternal evolution of each spirit towards perfect wisdom and love. We move through spirit, as through physical life, at our own pace, making mistakes, clinging to family and friends for a while, but then, hopefully, moving on to realms beyond human imagining. Mediums claim

they have unusual sensitivity to the presence of spirits, which provides them with proof of continuance. But the problem for would-be believers is that these human messengers become the linchpins on which evidence of everlasting life depends.

The Spiritualist Association of Great Britain (SAGB)'s Oliver Lodge Hall in central London is named after the physicist whose endorsement of spiritualism after

the First World War boosted the respectability of the movement. With taped piano playing in the background and rows of pews, the hall takes on the serenity of a small chapel. (Many spiritualists believe Jesus was the most evolved spirit ever to walk the earthly plane and was himself a fine medium.)

On my first visit, I tried to absorb that serenity in preparation for any communication that might

come my way. Through each person's silence, you could hear a common plea: please mum/brother/wife, make contact with me.

The chair for the evening rose to address our sparse assembly. "Our medium for this evening will be providing us with proof of the survival of the spirit. Don't forget to reach out to the spirits with your love and with your voices. Mediums act very much like a telephone exchange, so when our spirit friends call us, we do need to respond."

A few moments of silence in which our medium (let's call her Anne) strove to open her channels of communication. Then disaster as she launched at my companion. "I have a gentleman for you here, I feel you are surrounded by trauma... confusion... grief... moving house."

The meaninglessness of the words became excruciating. It was a bad start and Anne was left floundering until our chair offered to 'take' the name Jack which Anne had tossed in vain around most of the congregation. Then she rounded on a young man with long dark hair and an American Indian-like complexion: "I have a Running Bear here, who's telling you, 'Keep going!'" To a Japanese lady: "Does the name Osaki mean anything to you?" "Perhaps you mean Kawasaki?" the lady suggested.

At a Sunday demonstration soon after this, the SAPG's small Conan Doyle Hall housed 30 people and a more vibrant atmosphere. Initially I felt intimidated by the crowd and the stridency of the medium. I tried to keep a low profile, at the same time planning how, if picked, I would research any nonsensical message until I learned its meaning. This formulaic response is quite typical, signifying the faith of the sitter (that's me, the spoken-to) in the medium, and protecting the medium from losing face in public. By many accounts, it can turn up startling truths the recipient might not even have known at the time of attending a demonstration.

Twenty minutes later, all I wanted was to catch the medium's eye. She gave various messages from distant relatives who members of the assembly could not immediately identify. But she also gave detailed reports that struck home. "I have your mother here," she told a woman in front of me, who was not old enough to be guaranteed to have lost one. "She says you have been decorating."

"That's true, I have," agreed the

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woman eagerly. "She says you've been rearranging photographs above the fireplace." "Yes!" "She says you've been wondering whether to keep the framed one of her that's a bit out of focus. She says do please keep it, or even have it enlarged." "I will! Thank you!"

Turning to a woman at the back. "There's a boy on a scooter with auburn hair, riding straight towards you." "It's my son!" "He says to say hello to, is it Peggy?" "No, Debbie." "He says, 'Do you remember when you used to sit beside the old well in the back garden?' He's cracking jokes about someone with bandy legs you knew called Peter. He says he still reads comics..." It all seemed so accurate that the only cynical option was to accuse the woman at the back of being a plant.

But everyone needs their own evidence, and the only way to guarantee a medium's attention is to have one to yourself. The SAPG has 10 private meeting rooms. The half-hourly arrival of each new sitter shows a cross section of ages and classes, testifying to the broad appeal of the spiritualist message.

A velvety monotone emanated from Room 8, contrasting with the blood-curdling wails that had issued from Room 9 before my first private sitting. That sitting offered a few interesting associations but nothing evidential.

Now another medium, another message. My hopes deflated slightly when 'Jane' asked me to look into her palm and tell her what colour I saw ("Pink," I said, but the spirits apparently were sending green) – and then collapsed when she insisted in her velvety way that an old lady in spirit who died when I was 12 still felt I was her own. Jane refused to accept I knew no such person, but changed tack to speak of a friend of mine still living whose name began with "M". We parted after five minutes. I could have my £10 refunded or make another appointment. I chose the latter. 'Audrey' had a real sincerity

about her and her comments seemed plausible. I admitted I wanted contact with one special person, something that makes a medium's job difficult, since spirits are supposed to call on them and not vice versa. The only hope is that the sought-after spirit is as eager to contact you, and is capable of this kind of communication.

Audrey sat with her eyes closed and gradually began to describe the nature and course of an illness with which I was all-too familiar. She accurately said that a member of my family would shortly be going to Canada, described another relative who was having a hard time and identified some of my main interests and character traits.

My closest encounter to date left me feeling weird. Arriving home, I reached for Linda Williamson's *Mediums and Their Work* (Robert Hale, 1990) which, like Ivy Northage's *Mediumship Made Simple* (Psychic Press, 1990), Patrick Francis' *The Grand Design* (Regency Press, 1991) and a host of other books, argues intelligently in favour of survival, condemns the low standards of many mediums and gives breath-taking anecdotes from the authors' own experience.

These writers warn spiritual explorers never to accept the truth of continuance until they have gleaned solid evidence for themselves. Such cautions contain a certain promise, but that promise risks engendering obsession.

For myself, I'll continue to explore the case against death until scepticism or evidence win through. If I do get my evidence it will mean the world to me. I will take it and step back down to earth where for now, I think, I'm meant to be.

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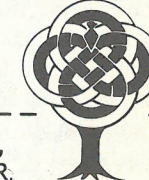
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