Contemporary Mediumship: Anthropological Perspectives on the Long Island Medium

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Abstract
Bereavement following the loss of a loved one has and always will remain a panhuman constant. An increasingly popularized form of healing is asserting itself in the form of mediumship. This paper seeks to investigate contemporary forms of mediumship in North America through critical analysis of the TLC show, *Long Island Medium*. Rather than questioning the validity of such practices, it instead strives to deconstruct the symbolic healing system surrounding the medium. This healing system serves to assure cultural constructions of an afterlife while acknowledging the presence and ability of spirits gaining agency through after-death communication. Furthermore, this paper seeks to assert that mediumship can in fact draw the bereaved from the liminal state of mourning into active life once again.

Keywords
Sociocultural anthropology, medical anthropology, traditional healing, symbolic healing, death, afterlife, mediumship, mourning, grieving
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Rasha Darghawth

Traditionally, the role of mediumship in North America incites the typically skeptical perspective of mediums as charlatans or “quacks” (Moore 2000). Historically, mediumship emerged as a wildly successful industry, cited as one of the emerging American professions in the 1850s (Moore 2000). In spite of its status as a fad of the time, its root—that of scientifically proving the existence of an afterlife and the souls that inhabit it—endures to this day. *Long Island Medium* (2012), a television series broadcast by The Learning Channel, follows Theresa Caputo through daily life in Hicksville, New York with her husband and two children in suburbia. “I like to think of myself as a typical Long Island mom”, she says in the show’s intro. “But, I have a very special gift… I talk to the dead” (Caputo 2012f). Theresa is a medium, able to connect with people who have “departed the physical world” (Caputo 2012d). With a waiting list of two years, Theresa’s services consist of channelling messages of assurance from departed loved ones and imparting them upon their grieving relatives.

Aside from being a wildly successful show (garnering impressive ratings for new episodes), the show raises existential questions concerning the finality of death, our tendency to foreground our physical bodies and the process of mourning. Furthermore, it highlights how these three elements merge to catalyze a healing process otherwise unavailable in a biomedical context. Specifically, these questions pertain to the issue of bereavement and burden; after experiencing loss, how do we heal within a biomedical paradigm intent on curing, rather than coping? I intend to argue that mediumship has become an increasingly exercised form of symbolic healing, contingent on sustained skepticism surrounding the finality of death and the notion that spirits gain agency through the physical nature of perceived events, such as after-death communication.

I stress that I am not examining whether mediumship is scientifically rational or “real”. Instead, I adopt an interpretive approach and focus on the narratives and experiences of those who have experienced after-death communication or sought counsel from a medium; they believe they have felt or seen the spirits of their loved ones. For these mourners, spirituality and mediumship are as arguably “real” as the objects surrounding you, and must be respected. For this reason, I do not engage with the traditional perspective of mediumship as charlatanry.

In the first section, I begin with questioning death’s finality as potentially healing in two ways. First, it implies the reassuring existence of an afterlife and consequent enduring relationships and second, assumes this platform lessens anxieties regarding death. Both constitute “small turns” (Waldram 1997) of a culturally constructed symbolic world, which at first glance appears to be a resulting “drastic change” (Waldram 1997:76) catalyzed by mediumship (note this concept of “small turns” will be further addressed).

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1 A biomedical context is one considered to be contingent on Cartesian dualism or the separation of mind and body. The biomedical paradigm views the body as a machine (existing wholly separately from the mind), locating the cause of disease within it. In the process, the illness experience (the subjective experience of suffering or any identifiable social locus of the disease) is overlooked (Kleinman 1988).
Historically, questioning death and a consequent post-mortem life has been the subject of extensive anthropological research with pioneers like Bronislaw Malinowski (1929) and Arnold Van Gennep (1960). Christian pedagogies emphasize the existence of a blissful heaven, while Trobriander myths envision Tuma, an island where spirits of the dead fancifully indulge in life and are able to shed old, wrinkled skin for a young, smooth alternative until their decision to be reborn into the physical world (Malinowski 1929). While mythical worlds range greatly, various constants persist: the afterlife is one analogous to ours (Van Gennep 1960), but is constructed of a “me but better” fabric (Kwilecki 2009:114). Spirits are viewed as healthy, happy, young, mobile and continue to occupy their former familial roles (Kwilecki 2009). Consequently, in the show, Theresa constantly refers to loved ones as “on the other side”, subtly implying distance while insinuating adjacency (Caputo 2012b). Additionally, she provides validation that, “Your loved ones are alive and well” on said “other side”, where physical ailments which may have hindered mobility and quality of life no longer exist (Caputo 2012e). Quite obviously, the practice of mediumship itself is predicated on the notion that the deceased do, in fact, ‘exist’ substantially enough to relay messages. Once this key existential question is addressed and validated in the process of mediumship, we see contingent concepts predicated on this crucial notion of a verified afterlife and its souls, such as the enduring nature of relationships and the buffering of death’s harmful effects. Both constitute building blocks of a greater symbolic world; one which will be unpacked further throughout this essay.

Linda Connor (1990) suggests that “social relations are transformed, not severed, through death” (399), stating that a shift towards acceptance of grief seems to be cultivating its acceptance. Bruce Greyson (2010:159) suggests the notion that “our unconsciousness might persist in some discarnate form…[is] widely held in almost every culture” and that “a wide variety of human experiences suggest to us that our consciousness may not cease when our bodies die”. Lastly, Kwilecki (2009) notes that “death ends a life… not a relationship” (119). For example, on Long Island Medium, participants frequently make statements like ‘I feel them with/around me’, referring to an inexplicable, ubiquitous presence. Essentially, mediumship serves to simply state that, “I’m okay. I’m nearby. I love you” (Kwilecki 2009:101). Thus, the departed are the same people who continue to fulfill the same roles, yet are occupying a different realm and matter. Perhaps your mother, father, brother or sister has lost their overt physicality in death, but they continue a happy existence in the hereafter and remain as such, despite lacking physicality. This persistent existence is reflected in the notion of symbolic healing as a mechanism for teaching people how to manage trauma and dysfunction (Waldram 1997). Specifically, mediumship affirms to the living that: ‘You will be able to cope because I am with you’; essentially, the deceased act as a coping resource. Or perhaps, ‘You do not need to cope, because I am still with you’ there is no need to grieve because they are still present, though in a different form.

Additionally, the validation of an afterlife and enduring relations through mediumship are crucial in the construction of a symbolic healing system. James B. Waldram (1997:73) states that the symbol is “any thing which may function as a vehicle for a conception”. The author gives the example of being “reborn” through a traditional North American Indigenous ceremony known as the sweat lodge (symbolic of Mother Earth’s or a woman’s...
womb), whereby men enter a receptacle and are shrouded with symbolic elements made to imitate the coming-again of life. Waldram provides a summary of the sweat lodge through the words of Aboriginal elder Campbell Papequash. Inside the sweat lodge (which is often constructed of willow frame and canvas tarps) participants endure slowly intensifying heat whereby the lodge is plunged into darkness and filled with pungent steam and heat (from sprinkling water on heated rocks). This procedure is accompanied by singing, drumming and praying until, sometimes, a few minutes’ relief of air is allowed before re-commencing. At its core, the sweat lodge embodies a plurality of symbolic associations with Indigenous worldviews. For example, the rocks which generate steam represent “many of our natures as human beings” (Waldram 1997:86), some of which are endurance, strength and sacrifice. The water is symbolic of “medicine and totality” (Waldram 1997:86), while the darkness within the lodge is akin to “the void and emptiness in our mind, body and spirit”. Opening the doors between rounds to allow light and air serves as both a functional and symbolic measure against such darkness by allowing physical relief in addition to the “Great Spirit’s light” (Wadram 1997:92), which is said to illuminate human ignorance. Essentially, the sweat lodge acts as a site of interaction within which a multitude of symbols representing the life cycle, rebirth, the universe and wisdom intersect, after which the individual is symbolically reborn as wiser or purer. Thus, as a vehicle for conception of rebirth, the sweat lodge is grounded in a symbolic nexus of wisdom, the life cycle and rebirth. In the case of mediumship, I argue that the medium acts as the vehicle for conception within which cultural constructions of an afterlife, the nature of existence within it, and death are layered (Connor 1990) and more importantly, validated.

Therefore, not only does the practice of mediumship serve as the potential to heal, but it also validates the assumptions on which post-mortem existence is predicated. By doing so, mediumship exercises what Kleinman (cited in Waldram 1997:76) calls “small turns of change”. To illustrate these, Kleinman (cited in Waldram 1997:76) provides the example of psychotherapy, questioning whether “specific techniques of psychotherapy invoke specific effects or are such effects the product of… shared components of these techniques?”. Additionally, Kirmayer (cited in Waldram 1997:76) suggests that “even dramatic changes may… be found to be composed of these small turns”. Specifically, while modern psychotherapy is largely reliant on talk therapy or cognitive behavioural therapy, the potentially beneficial results may not be fully exclusive to the therapy itself. For example, the individual may have reaped such rewards partially due to the accompanying self-mastery that often precludes seeking therapy (especially at a time when mental illness is still stigmatized) or from the psychologist being boldly confident in their improvement. Thus, the psychologist indirectly becomes symbolic of self-mastery and success. This symbolic link may exist unaware to the patient, who may subscribe to the belief that the psychologist’s skills alone ‘cured’ them (Waldram 1997). These “small turns” of change (self-mastery and belief of success)—which may initially appear as drastic changes—reflect that although people who have consulted mediums report rapid relief (feeling like a ‘weight has been lifted’), this may not be fully commensurable to reality. Rather, mourners experience what seems to be a “grand sweep of healing” (Waldram 1997:76) through “small turns” of change that the mourner may not be aware are
occurring. I assert that these “small turns” are essentially mediumship’s greater contextual bedding: recognition of an afterlife and of death not as an end, but a passage to the hereafter, as well as the possibility for strands of communication to be salvaged through mediumship.

Lastly, questioning the finality of death, mediumship serves a functional purpose in buffering the anxiety of confronting death, a concept that engages with Arnold Van Gennep’s analysis of rites of passage. Van Gennep (1960), in his attempt to classify ceremonies that enable individuals to pass from one defined position to another, identified rites of passage. They are composed of the pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages, otherwise referred to as separation rites, transitional rites and reintegration rites. Life events such as birth, social puberty, parenthood, class ascension and death “come at the cost of disturbing the life of society and the individual and it is the function of rites of passage to reduce their harmful effects” (Van Gennep 1960:12-13). Boys undergo periods of separation prior to initiation, then, as men, experience the loss of their childhood or youth and enter into the social realm of adulthood. Thus, childhood is lost in exchange for adulthood through a socially recognized ritual. Essentially, then, rites of passages assert that the individual, in passing through various life stages is symbolically killed and reborn into a new social position.

Mediumship serves to “cultivate acceptance of death” (Kwilecki 2009:119) in that it presents death as merely another cyclical rite of passage, just as social puberty, parenthood or class ascension would. If we accept that mediumship validates the existence of an afterlife and enduring post-mortem relationships, we are implying that death in itself does not constitute an end to consciousness (Greyson 2010). Essentially, rites of passage function to affirm that death need not be feared, as we have been symbolically killed and more importantly, survived. If we have already died, why fear death?

For example, recall the Trobriand Islanders conception of the afterlife (Malinowski 1929), where spirits of the dead frolic in the afterlife upon their choice to re-enter physical life. Here, death is the catalyst for all birth. Moreover, conception begins at death. While this conception myth is central to the Trobriand Islanders and not necessarily a North American readership, it shows that the notion of mediumship, like the Trobriander conception myth, embodies “alternate way[s] of knowing” (Emmons 2000:71). While the legitimacy of their conception myth may be perceived as questionable by a North American readership, in actuality it serves a functional purpose of buffering the inherent pain that accompanies loss of life by noting that all birth begins at death. This concept, I argue, is validated in a diluted form through mediumship, thus gentling the inherent grief that accompanies death. This is reflected in Long Island Medium (2012) when participants frequently assert that “I know he or she (the deceased) is alive in my son/daughter/grandchildren” or, “When I look at Darryl [a participants’ son], I see my mother”. In one unique episode, Theresa (2012a) relays to one couple, “God has granted you a wish by allowing your daughter’s soul to re-enter into one of your grandchildren. This soul has re-entered into this lifetime”.

While these Long Island families most likely do not subscribe to the Trobriander conception myth, they are subconsciously bringing their loved ones back to life through death, by indicating that existence surpasses death through the lives
of their descendants. This, I argue, constitutes an “alternate way of knowing” (Emmons 2000:71) – one which largely negates scientific rationality within which we are so deeply embedded – and instead, suggests that death can be viewed as another cyclical trip through the ritual passage of life.

Mediums act as the site of interaction for these concepts, instigating various “small turns” of healing in what appears to be a “drastic change” (Waldram 1997). But how can we rationally analyze the most intriguing and consequently, disputed aspect of mediumship or “spirits” in general? That is, are spirits “real” and can they appear to us? I now turn to a historically questionable aspect of mediumship; one that has been largely glorified in popular media (Ghostbusters, Paranormal Activity and The Sixth Sense): after-death communication.

As eerie as it is captivating, post-mortem communication constitutes the essence of mediumship. However, Kwilecki (2009:109) offers the notion that “a sense of the presence of the dead... is not an experience that society should encourage people to conceal”. Experiences are characterized by sightings, the flickering of lights or constant ringing of the phone (Chappele et al. 2011), “meaningfully timed appearances of birds and butterflies” (Kwilecki 2009:101), an overwhelming sense of a spiritual presence or in one case an “explosive, fast-moving force radiating love and bliss” (Kwilecki 2009:104). Through mediumship, participants discover that deceased relatives have attended weddings and acknowledged events that occurred after their passing (Caputo 2012c). I quickly began to wonder, though: how? If after-death communication is something experienced and felt, heard and seen, how is it done? If what ascends to the afterlife is truly an immaterial quality of the unconscious, how does this immaterial nature gain agency through physicality in order to manipulate phones to ring, lights to flicker and to be seen? In order to rationalize this, we must acknowledge that spirits exercise physicality through perceived signs of assurance or ‘visits’, thus gaining agency in the healing process.

For the purposes of this paper, I define agency in its predominantly corporeal form; the ability to act upon the physical world through the manipulation of lights and objects in addition to making perceived appearances (as orbs or balls of light or in seeming physicality). I acknowledge that a spirit’s agentive role is evident in the ability to instigate the perceived rapid improvement in mourners (recall Waldram’s “drastic changes”). This role is evident in incidences of after-death communication.

Take this example of after-death communication:

Several months after his mother’s death, [Julian] was shocked to see her [his mother] standing in his kitchen, looking beautiful in an unusual blue dress he had never seen before. Burton said he felt as though a weight had been lifted from him, especially after his sister recalled that their mother had tried on a dress of that description during a shopping trip shortly before her death, information he thought confirmed the reality of the ghost. Profoundly affected by the experience, he began training for a counseling career. (Kwilecki 2009:108).

Or this strange tale:

It was about half eleven at night, my sister had gone up to try and get a couple of hours sleep, ‘cos we knew none of us were going to sleep well, I was just staring at the wall and this, I saw a shape here, against the door ( . . .)
it was like a very faint ball of light, and it just drifted out the back door. I screamed, I was hysterical, and my sister who’s a quite hardened police woman came to the top of the stairs, ‘What’s up, what’s up, what’s up?’ I said, ‘I’ve just seen Sandy, I’ve just seen Sandy’, and even my sister was crying, saying, ‘You’re scaring me, you’re scaring me’. And I said, ‘It’s okay, she’s just come to say goodbye’ (Chappele et al. 2011:8).

In both cases, the spirits appeared physically (if we assume seeing something constitutes its physicality) and served a purpose. The notion that these spiritual visitations provided closure (comfort in seeing his mother’s beauty or saying goodbye) implies that spirits are agents in therapeutic interventions of closure (Kwilecki 2009) by imparting perceived messages of reassurance to survivors. These spirits are impervious to temporal disintegration (as they have shed the degradable human body) and thus, provide healing resources to mourners in assuring their unremitting presence.

Aside from utilizing spiritual vessels, spirits can provide healing benefits through our own physicality (Lynch 2005), by gaining agency in cultivating the healing process. An example is the practice of mediumship itself, whereby the “medium… acts as a liaison between earth and the spiritual planes” (Fishman 1980:218), allowing survivors to heal through communication. Another example originates in Fortaleza, Brazil, where “psychic surgeries” (Lynch 2005:11) are performed by spiritual entities, particularly by Dr. Adolf Fritz. Said to be the spirit of a German doctor who passed in 1917, he “allegedly incorporates himself into, or takes over the physical body of, various mediums in order to perform surgeries” (Lynch 2005:12), the full success of which is credited to him, as opposed to the medium. In an ‘autobiography’ dictated through mediumship, Dr. Fritz claims he was a medical doctor in World War II who specialised in general surgery (Lynch 2005). With firm believers and rumoured treatments of the American actor, Christopher Reeves, Dr. Fritz gains physicality (in the operating room) and agency (through successful healing rates or his autobiography) through the bodies of mediums. Therefore, I assert that the notion of spirits proving their physicality –be it through “psychic surgeries” (Lynch 2005:11), compelling a phone to ring or lights to flicker–is evident of the notion that they seem to gain forms of materiality and thus, agency in the physical world. Mediumship serves to verify these experiences by the witnessing of spirits, thereby allowing the participant to embrace the possibility that the spirits of the deceased will remain nearby, unaffected by temporal disintegration.

In conclusion, I have argued that the medium as a site of intersection of various cultural constructions of death, serves to act as a symbol validating existential assertions. Not only is there a perceived afterlife, but its existence infers that relationships can pervade death and that death need not be feared, if we accept that life may constitute a ritual passage into the perceived afterlife. Spirits are more than mere entities, but are perceived to act among and upon us, compelling us to heal through their residences in physical and spiritual bodies. All of these concepts constitute “small turns” of a greater symbolic world or context, which at first glance, appear as a “drastic change” to the mourner. Combined, they constitute a powerful healing system, which relays specific messages to mourners and addresses broader existential and unconscious fears.
Finally, I note that fundamentally, mediumship serves to catalyze a symbolic death out of the liminal state of mourning and consequent rebirth into social life; the “drastic change” mourners initially experience is a cathartic release from liminality. If we accept mediumship as such, I assert that Theresa Caputo is symbolic of a reintegrative rite, whereby mourners are drawn from bereavement and subsequently absorbed into resuming social life. Mediumship assists mourners in transcending liminality; to no longer “waver between two worlds” (Van Gennep 1960:18), but to actively embrace life once again. This rebirth offers mourners an incomparable healing experience through which they slowly begin to manage life in the aftermath of traumatic loss. Consequently, questioning the validity of mediumship in this context becomes obsolete. Rather, it is largely based on perception.

We should preserve what some interpretive anthropological approaches protect, such as the human condition. This narrative encourages and allows human experience to be analyzed as truth; an uncommon approach in most disciplines. By using such an approach, we allow various perspectives to emerge. For example, by emphasizing the existence of the “dead”, I have adopted an approach that negates the “irrelevance of the dead to the living” (Kwilecki 2009:124). In fact, it was my intention that this paper allow such a framework to emerge in a reasonable and valid manner. I hope this paper illustrates the benefits of considering such a perspective; death, not as an end, but a continuum. By doing so, death becomes redefined as a different form of life.

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