

SPIRITUALISM

The Past, The Present

and

The Future?

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Introduction

My deep involvement in Spiritualism may be traced back almost fifty years, during which time I have gradually amassed an extensive library of books, cassette and CD recordings plus various Spiritual paraphernalia.

Amongst the collection are long out-of-print Spiritualist and Psychical Research books and also recordings of elderly Spiritualists (most of whom have since have departed this earth) recollecting their past séance room experiences with Physical mediums who today we can only read about. Additionally, I am the proud possessor of such items as Mrs Maud Gunning's one time celluloid séance room trumpet. Although a powerful Physical medium, she was in many ways a private medium whose name rarely came before the public, so that sadly her wonderful séance room manifestations are largely unknown to present day Spiritualists.

In respect of the fascinating experience recordings in my possession, they have now sat on my library shelves for (in most instances) well over 20 years, during which time doubtlessly they have sadly deteriorated. However, in recent times, I have determined to preserve them whilst there is still time.

Therefore the long process of transferring them onto CD has begun, and for that I am greatly indebted to several of my acquaintances who, with the necessary equipment, kindly undertook the task on my behalf. Once completed, various extracts were selected and then grouped together onto 'Compilation' CD's which are now available to Spiritualists and all other interested parties. For anyone interested in the Physical phenomena of the Séance room, those accounts may well transcend the 'boggle factor' and will perhaps convey to the listener the reason why the Spiritualist movement was once so very vibrant and progressive.

Is it therefore not lamentable and a cause for concern that today Spiritualism has become a mere shadow of its former self – a former self which this past half century has been transformed into one of ineffectual mediocrity?

However, should you disagree with that statement I would simply ask you to consider the vitality that once invigorated the movement which led to over a century of dynamic progress and then compare it with what it has subsequently become.

I would also pose the simple question: where today are the movement's champions, those men and women who had a high public profile and yet risked everything by fearlessly proclaiming the truth of what the movement, at one time, presented to the world as 'The New Revelation'?

Amongst them were men and women of letters, journalists, scientists, nobility, men of the Cloth etc. Leading the clarion-call were names such as; W. T. Stead, St. Clair Stobart, Conan Doyle, Sir Oliver Lodge, Maurice Barbanell, A. W. Austin, Hannen Swaffer, Paul Miller, Arthur Findlay, Sir William Crookes, Lord Dowding, Harry Boddington and clergymen; Arthur Chambers, Vale Owen, Charles Tweedale, Drayton Thomas, – the list was endless.

Then let us ask ourselves how many mediums today could match in quality the greats of yesteryear, such as Daniel Dunglas Home, Robert James Lees, Emma Hardinge Britten, George Valiantine, Alec Harris, John Campbell Sloane, Pearl Judd, Stella 'C', Eusapia Palladino, Elizabeth d'Esperance, Mina (Margery) Crandon, Jack Webber, Maud Gunning, Helen Duncan, Mollie Perriman, Hunter Selkirk, Leslie Flint, Ronald Strong, Estelle Roberts, Arthur Ford, Geraldine Cummins, Grace Rosher, Edgar Cayce, Gladys Osborne Leonard, Leonora Piper, Lilian Bailey, Louisa Bolt, Coral Polge, Frank Leah, and Gordon Higginson. And those are just a few amongst the many. Of course, out of every age there has emerged mediums of note who stand out from the many, but I would suggest that during this past half century there has been a literal dearth of them. Similarly we can count our champions of social, public and academic standing on one hand – in fact we would be hard pressed to name but a few.

Clinging to a falsehood?

Understandably, in spite of what I have just said, there will be some (perhaps many?) readers who will remain unconvinced and prefer to cling resolutely to the falsehood that everything in the garden is rosy - or at least not quite so bad as I have claimed! My reply would be that in adamantly refusing to face the stark reality of the lamentable situation they do the movement no good whatsoever.

Many times I have wondered when and how it all started to go wrong!

A thousand times I have contemplated how the Movement has come to this!

And repeatedly I have bemoaned the unalterable fact that clearly it has betrayed the hopes of its brave pioneers and consequently the hopes of the Spiritual World.

In my opinion it has, this past half century, allowed over 100 years of positive progress to slip away. As I have stated in my book *An Extraordinary Journey*, like Nero it has fiddled whilst Rome has burnt. And I would further maintain that contemporary Spiritualism has 'gone in upon itself' to the detriment of the larger picture and in so doing it has lost sight of the ultimate goal and become insular. Now – Aint that the truth!

If that is so (and I maintain that it is) and it continues to bury its head in the sand and refuses to face the stark reality of its own creation (the retrograde transformation of a once vital movement), then the hopes of its pioneers and of the Spiritual World to convince

mankind upon this earth that life truly is indestructible will never be realised - at least not as a direct result of our once-proud movement.

When the messenger becomes more important than the message (which for far too long it has) then the way will always be lost. When we seek (perhaps with realizing it) to work in isolation and we stop listening to the 'Shining Ones', then we walk at a tangent away from the true path. And when we place commercialism and materialism (perhaps innocently and/or inadvertently?) before all else, then the ultimate goal will never be attained.

Although it would be a simple matter to court favour by joining the general throng of those in denial and expound that which may well sit comfortably with a great many Spiritualists, to do so would be singularly dishonest. To do so would be a matter of turning a blind eye to all that I consider is so patently wrong within contemporary Spiritualism. I must therefore ask readers to understand that I have composed this for no other reason than to express my sincere beliefs. These I shall not water down nor corrupt in order to achieve popularity, for to do so would be at the direct expense of truth and that, of course, would be unforgivable.

And why do I say all this? Simply because I care.

To Reclaim lost Ground

Now, if we as a movement can acknowledge that today we bear little resemblance to the progressive vital movement of yesterday, then surely we must ask ourselves what can possibly be done to reverse the tide. The pessimist of course may well consider that a rejuvenation is not plausible – that quite simply it is too late.

Granted there exists no simple solution to our movements' plight, because had there been one then surely it would long since have been applied.

Having said that, let us now dispassionately consider our options as a movement. Although what follows may well appear, at first sight, to be something of a mishmash of observations and suggestions – relevant and irrelevant - I would ask readers to bear with me whilst we explore possibilities.

Of course, although it is not my intention to appear somewhat vague, the plain fact is that Spiritualism's manifold problems have gradually developed over a long period of time and indeed are now so ingrained within it that quite simply there are no painless and facile solutions.

For that very reason I would emphasise that I shall not be offering definitive resolutions, but I do hope that at the very least what I have to say will provoke a positive reaction from those in positions of standing, status and influence within the movement - indeed from all thinking Spiritualists, because united we can possibly initiate a long overdue renovation for the greater good.

So where do I start?

Well, by acknowledging that if we do nothing in the hope that others will take up the challenge then nothing (as we have discovered in the past) will be done. Sadly, to date, that has invariably been the way of things whenever anyone has stuck their heads above the

proverbial parapet and broached this delicate, thorny issue. However, this must no longer be seen as an option because to follow that route will eventually (and I would suggest sooner than later) lead to the further demise of Spiritualism as its predecessors once knew it.

But let me now move on by asking readers to think on this. Some time ago I gave an interview to a well known Spiritualist newspaper, and, in response to one particular question, I stated that it was my opinion that many people within the contemporary movement simply paid 'lip service' to the claim that they were Spiritualists. It seemed to me that in reality they were so in name only. I went on to say that many conducted themselves in a manner which utterly failed to demonstrate even a modicum of Spirituality.

Oftentimes during this past forty nine years I have witnessed the display of petty jealousy, back biting, unkindly thought and action, and I queried whether those responsible truly believed in an Afterlife. Many years ago an extremely creditable and highly experienced, knowledgeable Spiritualist said to me; "Stewart, the only problem with Spiritualism, are the Spiritualists". At the time I failed to understand exactly what he meant by that. However, today, all these many years later, I think that I finally do! Therefore, the question that I must now pose is, 'Do You'?

The Media Mediums

Although now largely 'out of fashion', in fairly recent years we saw (in the UK) the emergence of the 'media mediums' and whilst they undoubtedly introduced a vast number of listeners and viewers to mediumship (which must not be undervalued) rarely – to the best of my knowledge – did our movement warrant so much as a mention. We heard nothing about our history, or about our teachings or philosophy, and indeed it would appear that such mediumistic/psychic demonstrations (shows!) were presented wholly as 'entertainment'. (Does this also apply to today's mediums who demonstrate in the theatres and in similar venues?)

One is therefore driven to the conclusion that there appears to be a disassociation between the media mediums and Spiritualism, and therefore this must surely beg the question: Why?

Is it because the mediums concerned were afraid of a possible backlash – a loss of credibility had they been seen to be connected with it?

Is that the reason why they largely remained silent, or can any reader suggest an alternative explanation? If not, then this would surely speak volumes about the sorry state of what all those years ago commenced life in a blaze of publicity and ultimately won over legions of followers throughout America, Europe and England.

So – what is to be done?

In what follows I intend to advance and propose a possible way forward, and although the issues discussed may be considered controversial (even revolutionary), all I would ask is that readers should not be glibly dismissive but should consider my thoughts (expressed here in words) carefully.

Spiritualism as a Religion

Firstly then, I would like to consider the matter of Spiritualism as a religion.

As we know (or should know), throughout our history there have been many informed, creditable Spiritualists who have vigorously opposed the very thought that our movement should be considered and labelled as such, since the very word suggests that it rests upon a system of 'belief'. Recently, a respected, creditable, and highly experienced medium/speaker at one of my own twice yearly seminars spoke about this very matter. He began by reminding his audience that many of the world's troubles throughout history could be attributed to established religion.

Then, he went on to say; 'Spiritualism arrived in our world half way through the 19th century and what did we do with it? Eventually we turned it into a religion''.

A very telling and legitimate observation indeed by a man who spoke from the heart about a nonsensical fact with which I simply cannot disagree. Of course it is not my wish or intention to offend anyone, but I must be brutally honest and say that this state of affairs – Spiritualism as a Religion - has long mystified me. Is it not so that today we have a worldwide system of churches and ordained ministers, and of course, in the U.K. and elsewhere we are recognised in law as a religion? However, in my view, when this occurred – when we took on the mantle of respectability with a religious structure of churches and ministers - then it marked the beginning of what ultimately may well prove to be the end. No doubt many Spiritualists will disagree with that view and it will win me few friends.

However, to me, the conducting of services on similar lines to the orthodox churches, with mediumistic demonstrations thrown into the mix, has – perhaps inadvertently – presented the message that Spiritualism, in common with other religions, rests upon belief.

Surely, survival beyond death and communication between the various levels of existence is (or should be) a demonstrable reality and it is that fact that once separated us from orthodox religions of any denomination.

Think on this: Medical science is a fact, but we do not seek to create a religion out of it. And yet this is precisely what we have done to our movement – we present to the world a structure that ties us in with religion and this has done us no favour, indeed, in my carefully considered opinion - the exact reverse.

Of course I have no argument with those Churches/Establishments that exist purely to promote Mediumistic Demonstrations and conduct mediumistic development workshops, nor those that conduct closed and open Circles and present lectures in respect of our glorious history and teachings etc. But services with religious overtones I have never understood.

And although we have allowed this to gradually evolve, I say again that our understanding of life and death surely owes nothing (or at least should owe nothing) to a belief system.

What, I must ask, has Christianity or any other established orthodox religion in common with Spiritualism? Yet, to my certain knowledge, many of our church services are tainted by them. In the name of common sense: Why?

Mediumship – the Bedrock

I turn now to the very bedrock of the movement: Mediumship. It is upon this that Spiritualism rests and depends, and no informed person can surely argue with that! However, the dearth of quality mediumship is, I believe, widely recognised and its present day scarcity is sadly bemoaned by Spiritualists throughout the world.

Without wishing to appear even more controversial, I would suggest that the general poor standard today (and for some years past) is an inescapable fact and this must surely beg the question: why?

To provide an answer to that is not simple, but recently a highly valued associate of mine addressing this very matter suggested:

Did the decline start after the second world war? (This was when Helen Duncan was horrendously dishonoured by the State.)

Life was a much simpler affair prior to 1939 - there were very few cars, no televisions, no computers, and pleasures were much simpler.

To a large extent, for most people, it was the same in the late forties and fifties. There was less yearning for the material things in life. Now people have televisions, computers, cars, money and lots to spend it on.

I doubt that any reader could disagree with any of that, and yet in spite of it we must – if we as a movement are to survive and attain the ultimate goal – find a way to develop tomorrow's quality credible mediums.

Of course, to do so in today's world is not without the kind of distractions highlighted above, most of which simply did not exist in yesterday's world. But, my fervent belief is that the importance of this matter cannot be overstated. So, let us now consider how best we can seek to overcome this undeniable problem and turn the tide by breeding a whole new future generation of mediums who are worthy of the name and in whom we can take great pride.

Were then should we start?

Well, perhaps by considering the past and what has changed in recent years over and above that which has already been stated, for, in my view, additional factors have led directly to the decline of exemplary mediumship.

So, I would ask readers to think on this: if it can be conclusively proved that this earthly life is but a prelude to a larger one, then, as I have often heard the Spirit World insist, 'You can have heaven upon earth', and is that not worth the effort and sacrifice to attain?

With that thought in mind let us now analyse the development of mediumship today and the widespread general belief (perhaps born out of commercialism) that it can be taught. The first thing that I would seriously question is that contention.

The Development of Mediumship

Today there appears to be a proliferation of courses on offer which suggest (or at least appear to suggest) that at a price anyone has the potential to develop Mental, Trance or even Physical mediumship. Whatever you wish to pursue, it is catered for, and perhaps with guidance, plus a little patience and perseverance, it can be unleashed or fine-tuned, or perhaps your link with 'Spirit' can be strengthened. These are just some of the assertions that prospective parties are led to believe can be turned into a reality.

So, whilst leaving aside emotion, let us coldly and rationally apply reason and plain common sense to this entire market which appears to exist in order to appeal to sincere potential future mediums. No doubt that the intention of participants is good and honourable and that this is largely true of the provider, but I would very seriously question how often that route to development leads to an acceptable standard of mediumship. If the answer to that is rarely, then one is bound to wonder 'why'?

However, in drawing attention to this matter and in posing this question, I am not being dismissive of tutorial courses designed to assist development and tutors that engage in them, but I am questioning their overall effectiveness.

To be blunt, I consider (rightly or wrongly) that the only authority in such important matters are the Spirit people themselves – those from the other side who choose to work with and through the aspiring medium.

That is not to negate the good intention and sincerity of qualified tutors, because I fully appreciate that in terms of guidance and encouragement and support, their role can be extremely important to the aspiring student.

But I believe strongly that whilst everyone has a psychic/mediumistic aspect to their nature, it is only a few who can develop mediumship to any degree such that it is capable of public demonstration. In respect of people who present themselves as qualified tutors, I am aware that some lack the knowledge and fundamental understanding vitally necessary to fulfil that most important role and responsibility. Although they present themselves as all-knowing authorities, in reality occasionally it can be a matter of 'the blind leading the blind'.

I believe firmly that this is an unforgivable travesty, and I often wonder how many gifted, promising mediums have lost their way and failed to meet their potential simply because the tutor has failed in his/her incumbent duty.

Often I have heard it said that student mediums have been taught not to do this or not to do that, because 'it' (whatever 'it' may be!) is unacceptable in the public demonstration of mediumship. If that wasn't tragic it would be laughable. Mediumship – where it truly exists – should not be shackled. It should not be limited by rules and regulations, and in my considered opinion, its gradual unfoldment depends wholly upon firstly an inborn ability and secondly upon the cooperation of the Spirit World.

It cannot be taught. It can only be encouraged and possible guidelines suggested. It would seem, however, that today individualism is no longer acceptable according to man-made rules which apparently must not be broken. There are far too many 'Do's and Don'ts – far too many restrictions which stand firmly in the way of natural ability by shackling and stifling promising potential.

Mediumship is, or at least should be, a perfectly natural expression of the individual – it is unique to the individual.

I have long believed that my own Physical mediumship was finally realised when I found what I have always referred to as 'The Key'.

Prior to a public demonstration, I invariably follow the same pattern of behaviour (the exact same ingrained procedure): I wear the clothes that I have always worn at my public séances and the music played must always be the same as it has always been. Nothing new or different is ever introduced, and in that way - 'The Key' is turned and this invariably leads to a connection with the Spiritual World.

Take any of those factors away and I am certain that the connection would gravely suffer.

Perhaps it is true that psychology plays a large part in that, but really that is of no consequence. Some footballers cross themselves before taking to the pitch or perhaps wear a lucky talisman, and although that may appear strange to the outsider, it is evidently of importance to them in their desire to play to the best of their ability.

So – the key is located and turned - and then, in respect of mediumship, what really matters is the result and nothing else. Not the way or the manner in which it is presented but the evidential value. For me what is and what is not acceptable is restrictive nonsense. My own belief is that Mediums could stand on their heads if the evidence they present benefits as a result.

A Unique Expression

As a case in point I would cite the international medium Stephen Holbrook, who has to be one of the finest demonstrators in the UK and who I have been privileged to see work on numerous occasions over a twenty year period.

He is unquestionably unorthodox in his work and yet a literal breath of fresh air.

Although some may consider his work unpalatable because of the unique manner in which his mediumship functions, there can be no doubt that he enthralled his audience and as a result has, over the years, built up a legion of admirers in respect of his undoubted talents.

Highly entertaining and often comical, he embraces and captivates his audience who cannot help but appreciate the highly evidential aspect of his high-energy, charged demonstrations.

Now, the point that I am making here is that his mediumship has developed and functions in a manner best suited to him and to his Spirit helpers, but if it was to be shackled then undoubtedly it would suffer as a result.

In short and to repeat, mediumship is unique to the individual and it really cannot be contained. Its free expression is paramount and yet this is often stifled by some 'tutors' who take it upon themselves to dictate what they believe is acceptable behaviour.

One wonders what frustration the Spirit World must endure whenever they witness true mediumistic ability limited and held back by ignorance, no matter how well intended. And yet, this sad state of affairs has undoubtedly evolved within our movement in the relative recent past and has contributed to the holding back of progress.

This therefore begs the question: has this system, in spite of my stated concerns, helped in a general sense to create mediums in whom we can take pride? Respectfully, I would suggest that the plain answer to that is obvious and therefore we must – in the name of sanity – ask what has changed in respect of the development of mediums?

To find the answer to that we need not look far.

Whilst unquestionably the world in which we live holds a great many distractions which mainly did not exist fifty and more years ago, the fact is that in spite of those there is no shortage of individuals who would like nothing better than to become mediums. If however we were to largely remove or downgrade from the equation those development courses which exist to attract aspiring mediums - what do we have left?

The Home Circle

Well, what remains and what I would encourage with every fibre of my being is a return to the system which for over 100 years produced some of the finest mediums in history: the Home Circle. For it was within those that the work of the Spirit was best realised. These Circles worked hand in glove with the shining ones. Behind closed doors, unhurried and sincere, all were sitting in the hope of achieving the ultimate goal: a true connection with the Spirit realms. All sat for each other on the basis that if just one of their number developed, then the circle as a whole stood to gain. Such Circles were free from jealousy and pressure to perform and met at the appointed time each week, month after month, year after year, and they sat with great patience and optimism.

Groups of people prepared to wait upon Spirit with no thought of a short cut but intent upon being of service should that prove possible.

They often sat together for many years before the slow but steady hoped for development began to occur in an atmosphere best suited for it to emerge, and all of this was under the direction of the Spirit people who, of course, could and can see the complete as against the incomplete and perhaps incorrect picture.

Trust developed between the two – the Earthly team in unison with their counterpart Spiritual team – and the two merged to become one for the duration of each sitting. That is surely what it is all about?

The Home Circle séance room is the laboratory of the Spirit World – the holy of holies. Once the very backbone of our movement, today its potential importance to Spiritualism and its questionable future tends to be overlooked. Instead of encouraging the formation of Home Circles and educating people in respect of them, we have largely chosen to encourage a tutorial route to the possible development of mediumship.

I believe firmly that this is a gross mistake and that the welfare and progress of Spiritualism lies with the Home Circle. The continued failure to recognise this will, in the not too distant future, lead to a movement which, for 150 years, promised so much but in the end may well fail in its mission. How sad that day would be, for we have it in our hands to act now and arrest the sad decline.

In Conclusion

And so I come now to the end of this article. Much more could have been included but I considered that to be unnecessary.

What I have written about will hopefully shout out that Spiritualism desperately requires a radical rethink and corrective action, although I fully appreciate that my arguments will meet with differing reactions.

Without doubt, some readers will agree with the issues that I have done my best to outline, others will disagree and present counter arguments.

That, of course, is their right, but I can only record here that nothing that I have written has been the product of glib consideration – rather the reverse.

And so I end as I started, by stating that my deep involvement in Spiritualism may be traced back virtually fifty years and that I have composed this article for one reason and one reason only: because truly I care.