

Sabbatical Report

Heather Joseph-Witham, P.hD.

I was one of the fortunate recipients of a sabbatical leave from my position in the Liberal Arts and Sciences Department at Otis during the Spring semester of 2010. I used this time to perform ethnography, to research and to write for an eventual book regarding customs used to contact those residing in an afterlife world. The book will be called: **A Guide to the Afterlife: Customs and Lore to Contact our Deceased.** It is based in the central concept that: **We are a Nation of Afterlife Junkies.** We live in a time where you can't turn on the tv without being confronted by psychics or ghost hunters, can't attend a festival without a tarot reader and can't turn on the computer without reading a pronouncement of imminent rapture.

Everybody dies. It's an unfortunate and unforgiving fact of life. Regardless of the inevitability of this occurrence, shock, wonder, horror and curiosity continuously accompanies each and every death. Curiosity is often reserved for several of life's great questions: why are we here?, how do we go on without the deceased?, and, where, if anywhere did they go? This last question has engaged all of humanity and every culture has sought to answer this question, or at least create traditions that allow some surcease of curiosity and bafflement. For me, the question has always been present. My mother and I frequented many a psychic trying to discover this secret of the ages. When my mother died, I was struck dumb by the utterance of many at her funeral. They said things like, "she's not in pain anymore," and "she's in a better place". I couldn't be mad at anyone for saying such odd things, as clearly they only mean to comfort a mourner. However, how could they know where she was? Did they know? Does anyone?

Where is the afterlife and what does it entail? How do we find some comfort about this supposed afterlife and how do we know what it looks like? There are numerous means in the 21st century used to contact those in their afterlife thus providing us with a glimpse of our inevitable destination. This book focuses on these customs, exploring how people try to talk to the dead and discussing the meaning and function of such practices for those involved.

I am less interested in the grand and exalted religious philosophies that provide landscapes of the afterlife. I am engaged rather with what people actually *do* that provides them with afterlife knowledge and contacts. Therefore each chapter is based in a fieldwork. In one of my ethnographic experiences I attended an afterlife conference in Connecticut put on by the Forever Family Foundation: an organization that exists in order to gather scientific proof of afterlife communication.



Indeed, the organization puts mediums through rigorous testing in order to certify those they deem to be authentic. This trip was to garner data for a chapter on psychic mediums and meaning. Also, I presented a paper based on this experience at the Popular Culture Association Conference in April, 2010 called *Mediums and Messages: Afterlife Contacts and the Transformative Experience*. I attended informative sessions at the conference, a ‘gallery’ readings where mediums would contact deceased individuals connected to audience members and interviewed a number of attendees. My experiences caused me to alter my focus away from the mediums themselves to the attendees and the causes that led them to visit mediums. I use a functional perspective to analyze the experience.

Another field experience was at the Conscious Life Expo, which was held at the LAX Hilton in February, 2010.



This was to garner information for a chapter on afterlife marketplaces. People can go online or to various ‘expos’ and purchase items or locate mediums to aid them in their attempts to contact the deceased. I found that various crystals, statues, meditation or dreaming techniques will allegedly aid one in contact. There were a number of mediums there and I avoided those with feathers in their hair and accompanying dogs. I participated in 2 psychic readings, both of which were filled with inaccuracies, absurdities and general rubbish. Expos may not be the best place to receive authentic messages from the beyond or to experience any form of *comunitas* with others or a sense of the otherworldly, but they do provide an entryway for those looking to explore.

I also visited Salt Lake City, Utah to visit members of the Wasatch Paranormal Society. I was acquainted with this ghost hunting and paranormal research team as I had been a guest on their radio program “Residual Hauntings” in order to discuss ghosts and urban legends. The team’s founder, Tom Carr took me to a multitude of ‘haunted’ sites in and around Salt Lake City.



The ghost hunters taught me the basics of spirit hunting at the deserted Fort Douglas Cemetery one night. This included using how to use temperature gauges to check for ghostly temperature changes, how to ask questions to elicit a verbal response and how to record Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP's).

On another evening the team gathered at the Baron Woolen Mill in Brigham City.



This has become a regular investigation site for the ghost hunters. It is a bundle of buildings and warehouses with cracked and broken windows, rusting equipment, a flock of nesting pigeons, stacks of wool on the ground, shadows in the corners and multiple narratives regarding on-site deaths and ghostly visitations.



While I am not sure about the success of our hunt I now understand the process and techniques of ghost hunting, the rampant fear that individuals in a group can feed to one another in a spooky place and the manner in which Mormons justify ghost hunting within an otherwise conservative belief system. Ghost hunting is a fun-filled, thrilling adventure that can uphold and bolster one's religious or paranormal perspective regarding different forms of afterlife beliefs.

I continued my ethnographic adventures by attending a faux séance at the Magic Castle in Hollywood, California in a purported attempt to contact deceased magician Harry Houdini. The experience had all of the wonderful trappings of the 19th century Spiritualist era during which a séance was a common Sunday afternoon activity. This inspired me to write about the sad disagreement between Houdini and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle was an avid believer and Spiritualist while Houdini, who early in his career pretended to be a medium, became a famous debunker of fake mediums and psychics.

Finally, I played on the ouija board! I say play because it is, after all, listed as a toy, both in advertisements and by a court of law. I wrote about how 21st century popular culture products along with primary experiences, urban legends and personal experience narratives have created an incredible fear of the ouija that resonates for people who are believers in the supernatural as much as for non-believers who wouldn't deign to go near the talking board due to abject terror. This chapter was based in my ethnographic work with Otis students as well as meetings with members of the West Coast Paranormal Research Society who count demon-hunters among its members, some of whom believe that the ouija is a portal for demons to enter the human realm. Otis students and I attended a ghost hunt at 'Suicide Bridge' in Pasadena where we were warned of the dangers of the ouija by other hunters.



Each of these field experiences was vastly important for my research. I have used this research to present 2 scholarly papers, will use it for my manuscript which I am continuing to write, will incorporate it into my keynote speech in August, 2011 for a Horror convention, and I have utilized all of it in my Integrated Learning course, 'Modern Mysticism and the Afterlife'. I would like to thank Otis College for this wonderful opportunity. It provided me with the most valuable commodity – time. I had time to think. That is an amazing and oddly rare thing in this era of busy-ness and constant connectivity. My sabbatical leave was filled with engaging experiences, interesting fieldwork, research galore and writing aplenty. I continue with my writing and am even more enmeshed and passionate about the core question of the work – where do we go and how do we know?