

**“IT’S CHAOS AND IT’S PEACE”:  
UNEXPECTED MEDIUMSHIP AWAKENINGS AFTER THE  
LOSS OF A LOVED ONE, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR  
MENTAL HEALTH PRACTICE**

---

Lenore Matthew, PhD, MSW

65<sup>th</sup> Annual Parapsychological Association Convention

Oslo, Norway

August 3-6, 2023

# Introduction

---

- There is a research base on mediumship (i.e., the ability to dynamically communicate with deceased people); but most literature centers on professional, “born” mediums.
  - Many studies aim to ascertain if the mediumship abilities are valid.
  - Some exploration of professional mediums’ well-being, including mental health (e.g., Roxburgh and Roe, 2013; Wilde et al., 2019) and histories of trauma (e.g., Andrew et al., 2008).
- Sudden awakenings of mediumship in adulthood have been less explored.
  - NDEs (e.g., Greyson, 2021) and the end of one’s own life (e.g., Kessler, 2014; Vlahos, 2023).
- Studies on griever’s experiences focus on receiving signs from deceased loved ones and sensing them (e.g., Dagget, 2005; Keen et al, 2013; Kwilecki, 2011).
- Less consideration of griever’s mediumship awakenings or what the experience means.

# Research Questions and Aims

---

- Questions:
  - What is experience of one's mediumship unexpectedly awaking with the loss of a loved one?
  - What does it mean to the person experiencing it?
- Aims:
  - To understand the phenomenon of unexpected mediumship awakenings after the loss of a loved one.
  - To normalize our experiences and suggest practical solutions and support.
- The study was inspired by the author's lived experience.
  - I am a researcher/practitioner and professional working medium, whose ability suddenly awoke when my late husband passed away.

# Data and Methods

---

- Interviews conducted in English; pre-interview questionnaire
- Videorecorded and provided to participant, lasting 60-120 minutes
- Data credibility: Triangulation, respondent validation, purposive sampling
- Some interviews transitioned to mediumistic communication
- Community-based participatory research (CBPR) and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) used in data collection and analysis.
  - CBPR is research carried out with and by the people who have experienced a phenomenon, rather than research being conducted on them (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995).
  - IPA “produces an account of lived experience in its own terms rather than one prescribed by pre-existing theoretical preconceptions. It is a particularly useful methodology for examining topics which are complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden” (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

# Researcher Positionality

---

- I am an experiencer of the phenomenon studied.
  - My mediumship opened when my late husband passed by unexpected suicide in 2020.
  - Formally-trained evidential psychic medium.
- I am also a researcher/practitioner from the field of Social Work with specialization in trauma, grief, and evaluation research.
- Some of the participants are peers as well as former students and clients, or referred by trusted mediums or actors in the mediumship, grief, and spirituality communities.
- We are a vulnerable community; the personal connections enhanced rapport, openness, and trust, as well as data credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness.
- Research was not funded and had no compensation for participation.

# Sample

---

## Sample Description ( $n = 31$ )

Gender	Women (28) Men (2) Non-binary and gender non-conforming (1)
Nationality <i>*3 participants self-identified as having dual nationality</i>	US (24) England (2) Scotland (1) Canada (1) Ireland (1) France (1) Taiwan (1)
Mediumship self-identification: <i>*Mediumship status elevated for 5 people between data collection and analysis phases</i>	Professional working medium (7) In mediumship development/training (5) Not in development but giving informal readings (5) Does not read and has not read for anyone else (14)
Passed loved one who opened participant's mediumship	Partner (14) Child (6) Parent (4) Grandparent (4) Sibling (2) Friend (1)
Cause of passing <i>*Not explicitly collected</i>	Sudden illness, prolonged illness, accidental death, suicide

# Results: Types of Communications (1)

---

- Participants reported receiving communications through a variety of modes:
  - Visions (clairvoyance), voices and other auditory communications (clairaudience), telepathic conversations, intuitive “knowings” or “downloads” (claircognizance), emotional exchange (clairsentience), dreams.
- Communications were repeated, dynamic (e.g., two-way conversations), intelligent (i.e., beyond the experiencers’ conscious thoughts), oftentimes verifiable with objective information; happened immediately to years after passing.
- All participants communicated with their deceased loved one; some also able to communicate with other deceased people.

## Results: Types of Communications (2)

---

“I have seen him physically. He was glowing around his body. I could see something like water droplets on his body. It was glittering, like he’s just finished taking a shower. Then we start having conversation. I was awake; I wasn’t asleep or dreaming, or projecting.”

-Lily, Taiwan, 31, dentist, brother in Spirit, not practicing

“I found out [he died] then I fell asleep very peacefully; it was so weird. Then in the morning when I woke up was when I started to hear him... There also a clairvoyance to it. And clairsentience. It felt heavy. I think that’s because I wasn’t aware of what this energy was. I was afraid of it. It brought a fear to me almost. It brought me down to my knees until I accepted it, I guess. I felt it all over; in my chest, my shoulders, my back. My body felt heavy; it was a lot. I cried a lot. I’d never experienced anything like that sense, and I’m all the sudden aware of these abilities.”

-Kristina, 34, hairdresser and professional medium, fiancé in Spirit<sup>8</sup>



# Results: Types of Communications (3)

---

“Bolts just come and resolve something, one way or another. It’s as if I’m asking her a question but I’m not conscious I’m asking it to her and that’s what she replies to.”

-Sam, 63, US, laboratory manager, wife in Spirit, not practicing

“It first started with [being] inundated with the most uncanny signs you can imagine. It started with an incredible sign that I asked for and got. It was like there’s an energy on the other side trying to chip away at a wall in my head. It’s like I had this block and slowly, piece by piece, they would introduce little things into my experience.”

-Ivy, 38, US, university professor, screenwriter, professional medium, husband in Spirit

# Results: Types of Communications (4)

---

“I was just *weird* in the weeks before he died...Then within the two weeks before my son passed, I had a dream that he died. Then the night that he was missing and we were looking for him in real life, I knew he was dead before anyone else knew. I just knew. We do the wake at home here. So, when he came home to me in the coffin, I came into the sitting room. I started giggling because he was *right* next to me. Like, *right here* [gestures to side of face]. And he’s like, joking, ‘oh, you already did this two weeks ago, mummy! Not so hard!’ His hair was brushed straight, but he usually had this big mop of beautiful blonde hair. He’s like, ‘fix my hair!’ He told me that I’d already done this two weeks ago. I can’t say that it wasn’t so bad, but I had somehow been there already.

After he passed, he came to me in every meditation, like guided meditations. It’s like his spirit came.”

-Saoirse, 37, Ireland, youth community worker, son in Spirit, not practicing

# Results: Types of Communications (5)

---

“I definitely do have intentional time where I sit in the power [meditation practice common in mediumship development]. I’ll go into a meditation and I call him in. I’ll get full visions of his body. I know in the past he’s given me almost a zoomed-in experience, where you see every freckle and feature of his face. Almost like I’m getting like a full body scan of him to remind me what looks like. Not that I will forget.”

-Alyse, 32, US, business administration, energy healer, professional medium, fiancé in Spirit

# Results

---

“It’s chaos and it’s peace.”

-Kristina, 34, hairdresser for hospice patients and professional medium, fiancé in Spirit

# Results: “It’s Chaos and It’s Peace”

---

## **Theme 1: Chaos**

Sub-theme 1: Uncertainty and self-doubt

Sub-theme 2: Mental health concerns

Sub-theme 3: Isolation

Sub-theme 4: An obliterated worldview and sense of self

## **Theme 2: Peace**

Sub-theme 1: Healing through the pain of grief

Sub-theme 2: Moving forward by way of the connection

Sub-theme 3: Newfound meaning and life orientation

Sub-theme 4: The importance of community and support

# Uncertainty and Self-Doubt (1)

---

“Initially, I was trying to convince myself that the voice I heard wasn’t her. I’ve just been in such a logical, cause-and-effect world that this just didn’t enter into my concept of, ‘this could happen.’ I’m not saying that I don’t have a belief in an afterlife or a continuing of a soul. But I didn’t understand this and didn’t think that communication with her was possible.”

-Sam, 63, US, laboratory manager, wife in Spirit, not practicing

“I haven’t [pursued formal development] because I think I’ve struggled to find who I would want to learn from. I’ve also struggled to validate that I am worth teaching or that this is worth investing in. These are things that were complicated while I was processing grief and dealing with all of the insecurities of secondary losses.”

-Sam, 30, Canada, social services worker, partner in Spirit, not practicing

# Uncertainty and Self-Doubt (2)

---

“Unfortunately, my science/skeptic side makes me question it, and I doubt myself a lot. I hear him clear as day. I’ll ask him a question and it’ll be an immediate response and very detailed. It’s like he’s in the room having the conversation with me, but I can only hear and see him up here [points to head]. But I still doubt it. How do I know I’m not making it up? I wonder if I want to think it’s him, and it’s not.”

-Dana, 40, US, Dr. of Nursing/nurse practitioner, brother in Spirit, in training

“I’m so scared of leaning into the spirituality part of it. I don’t know why; I guess maybe it’s that I like the pragmatic and human stuff. It is like my big blockage. I just don't even know how to like start talking about it.”

-Sage, 37, US, life coach, son in Spirit, not practicing

# Mental Health Concerns

---

“I’d have this sensation and then after I’d think, ‘oh you just imagined it; this is not real. It’s just crazy.’ You feel down. There’s elation that we feel in the moment of connection, then it’s telling yourself you’re crazy. And then it feels really sad.”

-Carrie, 59, Scotland, language teacher, husband in spirit, not practicing

“The day he died, I don’t think I could have even acknowledged they [mediumistic communications] weren’t just my thoughts...I actually just thought I was having a mental breakdown from grief. I just thought I was mentally ill. My husband was a psychiatrist, and a lot of his friends were therapists. So, I had them as a resource of people to talk to and help me out. I also had my own grief therapist to go to. But I was not really comfortable telling the therapist at that time about this experience.”

-Ivy, 38, US, university professor, screenwriter, and professional medium, husband in Spirit



# Isolation

---

“It becomes a question of, let me go dabble in this [her mediumship]. Let me go see what’s going on. But you have this trauma attached to it. So, you’re afraid to talk about it. You feel very isolated.”

-Heather, 45, US, finance executive, grandfather in Spirit, in development

“The secret part of it is very hard. A few people know. I have very few people who I can talk to about it. I know that if I did talk to other people, they would indeed say, ‘oh, we need to get some help. Your grief is taking over.’ And that’s really hard for me. I’m a very logical, responsible, normal human being. And I have things happen that I can’t explain.”

-Jill, 43, US, teacher, father in spirit, in development

# Obliterated Worldview and Sense of Self

---

“Now in retrospect I feel silly that I was as skeptical as I was. But it just was so far outside my worldview that was like, there's no way; it seems like a fantasy. And also one that I didn't want to have. Some people are like, maybe you're just like tricking yourself with this as a way to cope with grief. People have said that to me a lot. I'm like, well it [mediumistic connection] wasn't comforting for a very long time. Before it became comforting it actually was like the dismantling of my worldview. I felt like not only did I have to grieve my partner, but I had to grieve another part of my identity that I really like took a lot of stock in.”

-Ivy, 38, US, university professor, screenwriter, and professional medium, husband in Spirit

# Healing through the Pain of Grief (1)

---

“The grief is so heavy, but it’s like I’m on a different level to everyone else, because I knew and I know that he’s still with me...I don’t think I would have survived without this.”

-Saoirse, 37, Ireland, youth community worker, son in Spirit, not practicing

“It’s a double-edged sword. The mediumship opening brings the pain up and my mind and body want to turn it off, because I don’t want to feel that part again. But I do want the awakening. But you can’t have it both ways. So, slowly, I’m opening up to it all a bit more, allowing myself to feel the pain. When I ignore the pain and don’t let myself feel the grief, it shuts the abilities all down. It’s like I get to feel the love and I have to feel the pain, too. As crazy as it sounds, I feel like I haven’t fully processed his death yet [2.5 years prior]. Until I allow myself to do that, I feel I’m not going to fully open. There’s so much more he wants to show me of the love and joy and intricacies of life, but I have to also work through the shock and questions of losing him.”

-Dana, 40, US, Dr. of Nursing/nurse practitioner, brother in Spirit, in training

# Healing through the Pain of Grief (2)

---

“She showed me a vision: We’re like a shoestring; you’re on one end and they’re on the other. Even if you tie it in a nice little bow and untie it, you’re still connected. Sometimes they’re close and sometimes they’re little further away. Maybe you don’t always need them right there. They’re definitely going to give you your space when you do need it, so they’re not smothering you. But they’re always observing, rooting you on.

I’m grateful for what I have as a relationship. I can’t imagine not having it. If I could pass on one thing, it’s if you’re open to it, the connection will find a way.”

-Sheila, 58, US, purchasing manager, daughter in Spirit, in training

# Healing through the Pain of Grief (3)

---

“I survived the early days of my grief thanks to the very physical presence of [partner] and how he eased me forward into the further degrees of separation. When I think about the first weeks and months, I definitely needed multiple pillars to lean on. He had this really physical energy in that space [home]. And then when that dissipated, I had my mental health knowledge and my own spiritual things that are external to the experience [partner’s passing]. Having that physical presence and then it slowly dissipating, as opposed to just being gone the moment he died, really helped me with doing my mental health work effectively, and allowed me to continue working at my job.”

-Sam, 30, Canada, social services worker, partner in Spirit, not practicing

# Moving Forward by Way of Connection (1)

---

“I was 23 [when her mother passed after prolonged caretaking]. When that happens, your youth is essentially robbed. You can go to one extreme or the other. I feel like you can start binge drinking and doing drugs. I knew my mom would not have wanted that for me. I feel like she knew I needed that [their mediumistic connection] in order to cope healthy and properly. That night, if that door didn’t open [first mediumistic connection to her mother], I don't think I would have been able to cope. That door opening, she gave me her way of preventing me from going down what could have been a really bad path at 23 years old.”

-Samantha, 29, US, receptionist, mother in Spirit, informally reads for loved ones

“The study of mediumship and the practice of doing it for other people has strengthened my relationship with [partner] and it strengthened my relationship with myself.”

-Russell, 55, US, college math teacher and professional medium, husband in Spirit

# Moving Forward by Way of Connection (2)

---

Already aware of her mediumship from her grandfather's passing years before, "I was trying to repair my relationship with my dad, then I got a call that he had passed away. Now in communicating with him, he is able to put me in his shoes and have me see our relationship from his lens. Not everybody is going to be in a position of wanting to say, I want to resolve my issues with my dead father because he and I were in an estranged relationship. But I think there's a lot of healing that comes from knowing that you have a connection to a family member or somebody that you had an otherwise strenuous relationship with, and are working on your healing with that person in spirit."

- Heather, 45, US, finance executive, grandfather in Spirit, in development

# Newfound Meaning and Life Orientation

---

“I’m a hairdresser and I was looking for...somewhere with consistent work. He [fiancé in Spirit] was like, ‘Don’t look for it. Let it find you.’ I’m waiting and I’m waiting. Then I get a call from a nursing facility. They asked if they could hire me as the independent hairdresser [for hospice].

I channel for people that are coming in my chair. Some people say I’m the ‘medium hairdresser.’ But I know I’m supposed to be there in the hospital [hospice]. Many people I see are close to transitioning. Their loved ones come through. I see their guides; family members. I see their people who are expecting them. I worked with one woman who was about 90, who was saying she missed her mother. Her mother came in and I was able to channel for her things from when she was a little girl. Obviously, I wasn't even alive then! How else would I know? Her eyes changed, her coloring changed, her physical appearance changed, everything changed. The words brought some healing... I never thought I’d be working in this! It [connection with fiancé in Spirit] brought me to my purpose.”

-Kristina, 34, hairdresser and professional medium, fiancé in Spirit



# Importance of Community and Support (1)

---

“With the help of mediumship training and my mentor, I have additional support around me to translate what I’m sensing and feeling from my dad. Once I started to figure out his ‘calling card,’ I was having more conversations with him.”

- Heather, 45, US, finance executive, grandfather in Spirit, in development

# Importance of Community and Support (2)

---

“I was trying to convince myself this was nothing but grief I didn’t really believe that. I thought that probably I was going a little crazy and that grief was the whole point. So I got myself into grief counseling. That didn’t go well because I had very traditional grief counseling coming in one ear, and I had [partner] and all these [spirit] people I didn’t know coming in the other. Finally, the therapist believed that I was disassociated. So I thought, ‘you know what? If this is disassociating, then bring it on. Because I’m probably happier than I’ve ever been. This continuation of our relationship wasn’t the same, but it was very similar and and there have been absolutely unreal experiences during this. So, I stopped going to counseling and I just started sitting in the power and used the spirit world as my council. Pretty soon I realized I couldn’t keep doing this by myself. I needed some some physical world intervention. So I started taking classes and working with teachers and have been for 4.5 years.”

-Russell, 55, US, college math teacher and professional medium, husband in Spirit

# Importance of Community and Support (3)

---

“What was most challenging for me were the many layers of trauma and grief that I had to work through in this opening. The [mediumship development] programs I looked into felt too quickly paced and like I would be drinking from a firehose. I needed gentle, slow, ease. I was carrying such a tremendous amount of pain and investing so much of my energy into healing that devoting the kind of energy that I felt those programs demanded was out of reach for me at the time. I felt like they were forcing my opening. I’m sure they work fantastic for many people. For me, in the state of mental health I was in, it was just too much.”

-Dana, US, 48, grief coach, son in Spirit, not practicing

“I’m telling myself, ‘I’m making this up.’ There were a lot of iterations of doubt and telling myself, ‘this isn’t real, this isn’t real.’ That’s why that first medium reading was so important because it validated everything I had experienced.”

-Alyse, 32, US, business administration, energy healer, professional medium, fiancé in Spirit

# Discussion and Implications

---

- Connection with our loved ones is good for us!
  - It's not about “moving on;” it's about leaning into it.
  - They're here, in real-time – but also, they're not.
  - This is a completely different view of grief than the clinical mental health world promotes.
- Counselors/therapists, mainstream grief communities and forums, are a primary point of contact.
  - There is a need to normalize mediumistic connections and provide education on them.
- Partnerships between the mental health and grief practice worlds, and the mediumship, intuitive development, and spirituality communities, are one avenue forward.

# Discussion and Implications

---

- The study expands the mediumship discourse, helping to make it more inclusive and representative of mediumship as it plays out in the everyday world.
- On *mediumship*, the study moves us beyond, “Is it real or not?” to “What does it mean for me, the person experiencing mediumship?”
- On *mediums*, it expands the discourse from focusing on “born” mediums and conceptualizing mediumship solely on extensively-trained professional mediums, to include “lay people” opening up in diverse contexts, and later on in life.
  - Raises questions around who is included; moves mediumship into the individual’s hands, checking “guru culture.”
  - Evidential certification and professionalization still necessary; this research only adds to that.
- On *mediumship development*, suggests that trainees have diverse needs, motivations, and paths.

## REFERENCES

- Andrew, E. M., Gray, N. S., & Snowden, R. J. (2008). The relationship between trauma and beliefs about hearing voices: A study of psychiatric and non-psychiatric voice hearers. *Psychological Medicine*, 38, 1409–1417. doi:10.1017/S003329170700253X
- Cornwall, A. & Jewkes, R. (1995). What is participatory research? *Social Science & Medicine*, 41(12), 1667-1676.
- Daggett, L. M. (2005). Continued encounters: The experience of after-death communication. *Journal of Holistic Nursing*, 23(2), 191-207. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536\(95\)00127-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-9536(95)00127-S)
- Greyson, B. (2021). *After: A Doctor Explores What Near-Death Experiences Reveal About Life and Beyond*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Keen, C., Murray, C. D., & Payne, S. (2013b). A qualitative exploration of sensing the presence of the deceased following bereavement. *Mortality*, 18(4), 339–357. doi:10.1080/13576275.2013.819320
- Kessler, D. (2011). *Visions, Trips, and Crowded Rooms: Who and What You See Before You Die*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Kwilecki, S. (2011). Ghosts, meaning, and faith: After-death communications in bereavement narratives. *Death Studies*, 35(3), 219-243.
- Roxburgh, E., & Roe, C. A. (2013). “Say from whence you owe this strange intelligence”: Investigating explanatory systems of spiritualist mental mediumship using interpretative phenomenological analysis. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 32(1), 27–42. doi:10.24972/ijts.2013.32.1.27
- Smith, J.A. & Osborn, M. (2015). “Interpretative phenomenological analysis as a useful methodology for research on the lived experience of pain.” *British Journal of Pain*, 9(1): 41–42. doi: 10.1177/2049463714541642.
- Vlahos, H. (2023) *The In-Between: Unforgettable Encounters During Life's Final Moments*. New York: Ballantine.
- Wilde, D., Murray, J., Doherty, P., & Murray, C. (2019) Mental health and mediumship: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Mental Health, Religion, & Culture*, 22(3): 261-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2019.1606186>

# Thank you!

---

Dr. Lenore Matthew

[lenore@drlenoremattthew.com](mailto:lenore@drlenoremattthew.com)

[www.drlenoremattthew.com](http://www.drlenoremattthew.com)