

# New survey is launched into the afterlife

A new book being published by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) is to feature a chapter on whether Spiritualist mediumship has proven life after death.

To find out the answer, Walter Meyer zu Erpen is conducting an online survey and will publish his findings in the book.

Walter works as a self-employed archives consultant in Victoria, Canada, following a twenty-year career with the BC Archives. He graduated from the University of British Columbia with an arts degree in history, then with a Master of Archival Studies.

Walter, 62, began his inquiry into the possibility of survival, mediumship and spirit communication in the 1970s through a Spiritualist church in his home town.

From the 1980s, he visited and communicated with Spiritualist churches across Canada. Those contacts culminated in the "Directory of Spiritualist Organizations in Canada," which saw six print editions and is now available online.

Walter's detailed historical study of the Thomas Glendenning Hamilton psychical research experiments in Winnipeg, Manitoba, began in 1991.

His research in the field includes a decade of observation of psychokinetic table movements in a Spiritualist home circle. He has lectured and written extensively about the Hamilton research and other significant Canadian cases, and is the Parapsychology Foundation's Canadian representative.

Inspired by the Survival Research Foundation, in 1991 Walter and a group of colleagues founded the Survival Research Institute of Canada. Walter has worked for 30 years to preserve the records of Spiritualism and psychical research.

Here, Walter answers questions about the book. The first point put to him was, "Can you tell readers something about it?"

DR LEO RUICKBIE and Robert McLuhan are the editors of the SPR's forthcoming book, which is entitled *Is There Life After Death? Arguments, Theories, Evidence*.

The call for chapters was widely circulated beginning in May and resulted in an incredible response – over 90 proposals in less than two months, of which 26 were selected for inclusion.

The book is intended to provide an accessible and multi-disciplinary discussion of the issues relevant to the question of life after death.

My contribution will focus on the evidence for survival provided through Spiritualist mediumship and whether that constitutes proof of life after death.

Other authors, including philosophers, physicists, psychologists, sociologists and religious studies scholars, will focus on the approaches that the fields of psychical research, parapsychology and survival research have brought to bear on the question.

The phenomena of after-death communications, deathbed visions, near-death experiences, hauntings and poltergeists, electronic voice phenomena



WALTER MEYER ZU ERPEN: "My grandfather transfigured the face of British medium Irene Griffey in circumstances that precluded fraud."

and reincarnation will be explored, as well as a broader discussion of mental mediumship.

The issues of suicide, the possible nature of the afterlife and what it is that might survive death will be examined.

The publication date has not yet been determined, but the SPR will issue a press release when the book is closer to completion.

The purpose of my survey, which does not take long to complete, is to obtain the

opinion of as broad a range of Spiritualists as possible. There is nothing in the least complicated about the questions. Here are just a few of them:

- How long have you investigated Spiritualism, either through self-study, attendance at Spiritualist church services or sitting in a development circle?
- Has survival evidence received through Spiritualist mediumship influenced your beliefs?
- If you are not yourself a medium, do you recall any instance when you received what could be personal communication from a surviving spirit?
- How convinced are you that Spiritualist mediumship has proven life after death?

**In your view, what constitutes good survival evidence via a medium?**

Good evidence can result when a clairvoyant or clairaudient medium goes directly to the intended recipient, and without fishing delivers specifics about the spirit communicator's identity and personality, including sometimes personal and place names and/or shared memories.

**Hopefully, people from countries in different continents will take part in the survey. Are you expecting any differences in their beliefs?**

There is no point in speculating. I would rather wait to see the results, but if lots of PN readers respond, the data could reveal more things of interest. Please complete the survey and answer as many questions as you like.

**What first drew your attention to mediumship, Spiritualism and the paranormal, and in which year?**

My curiosity about life after death was heightened by the deaths of my maternal grandfather and great-grandparents.

My first attendance at a Spiritualist church service was with my mother, in my home town of Nanaimo on Vancouver Island, British Columbia, about 1975.

During the clairvoyance, the church pastor, the Rev Nelle Beresford, saw a man standing between Mom and me, indicating that he was her father (my grandfather) and providing his first name.

The message was that Mom had recently received a shock, which was true (I was the cause of it), and that I would be walking tall in a period of three. The Rev Beresford did not know whether it would be three months or three years.

For a troubled teenager, it was an uplifting message that gave me hope; it turned out to be three years before I got myself sorted during a study year in Europe.

Though I instigated our church attendance, Mom and a friend had attended Spiritualist meetings in Nanaimo in the 1950s.

***Do you believe in survival after death? If so, what's convinced you?***

Yes, I do. A limited number of instances of good survival evidence through mediums were reinforced by a personal experience, which I interpreted as spirit communication.

In 1984, my grandfather transfigured the face of British medium Irene Griffey in circumstances that precluded fraud.

In addition, I was fortunate to meet Irish-born medium David Young, whose messages could be quite detailed when he was in good form.

Sitting with David before his demonstration of mediumship at a dinner theatre in Victoria, he would be a nervous wreck. With a packed house of people enjoying dinner and drinks, he feared that he would not live up to expectations.

Getting to know David as a friend allowed me to see that his gift was genuine; there was no advance research possible in the situations in which I saw him work.

The Reverends Beresford, Griffey and Young were all ministers ordained or recognised by the British Columbia-based International Spiritualist Alliance that had been founded in 1959 by the Reverends John and Doris Horning, and Beatrice Gaulton Bishop.

***The book is being published by the Society for Psychic Research. In his famous psychic messages after passing on, Oscar Wilde said of the SPR:***

***"I have always admired the Society for Psychic Research. They are the most magnificent doubters in the world. They are never happy until they have explained away their spectres.***

***"And one suspects a genuine ghost would make them exquisitely uncomfortable." Would you care to comment?***

Given that the SPR's mission has remained unchanged since 1882, Oscar Wilde, the spirit communicator through automatist Hester Travers Smith's group, would have known the society's purpose, which is "To examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis."

Travers Smith worked closely with Sir William Fletcher Barrett, who was a prominent psychic researcher and one of the SPR's founders.

Her considerable analytical skills are evident in *Voices from the Void* (1919) and *Psychic Messages from Oscar Wilde* (1923). Incidentally, in the early 1950s, both titles were republished by the Psychic Book Club, which was affiliated with *Psychic News*.

Travers Smith leaves it to her readers to decide whether it was the historical Oscar Wilde communicating through her automatic writing.

On all paranormal topics, there is a diverse range of beliefs. Though I believe generally in survival, I am less convinced of our ability to substantiate the identity of "controls" and cautious about alleged spirit communications from well-known personalities.

Often it is difficult to find something unique in such communications that could not have come from the medium's subconscious.

I like to think of myself as a critical Spiritualist, and am also a member of the Society for Psychic Research.

There will be some SPR members who

accept that the spirit communicator Oscar Wilde is who he claimed to be. I am glad that the "SPR holds no corporate belief on the nature or reality of the phenomena studied."

***Is there much interest in Canada in Spiritualism in the media?***

In the past, there were the occasional public interest stories about a specific medium, healer or Spiritualist organisation when a charismatic individual managed to attract attention.

My guess is that today the media fills the public appetite with stories about ghost hunting and paranormal investigation groups, or near-death experiences.

***Do you think that the average Canadian accepts survival after death?***

Since 1975, Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby has done a lot of research into this question, which indicates that a much larger percentage of Canadians believe in life after death than one might think given the largely secular society Canada has become.

***Why do you think that possibly the majority of scientists and academics are sceptical about mediumship?***

The popular images of Spiritualism do not instil confidence: people sitting holding hands in a darkened séance room or the mystical medium – typically female – sitting in a curtained off area at a fair gazing into a crystal ball.

***Would you agree that too many people dismiss Spiritualism and mediumship without even investigating these subjects?***

Yes, but this does not surprise me, as most people are not sufficiently interested to invest the time that it takes. As we know, there is no guarantee of good evidence of survival from a single sitting with any one medium.

■ **To take part in the survey, please visit <https://survivalresearch.ca/spiritualism-survey/> The closing date for submissions is September 30.**