

Spirit Release Forum

Spirit Influence on Mental Health: *Is 'spirit' intrusion an important overlooked factor in hallucinatory disorders?*

Conference Report by Dr Fiona Bowie (King's College London)

"Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside dreams; who looks inside awakes." Carl Jung

Conference Theme:

In past times mental illness was considered to be caused by spirit entanglement or possession and treated as such. In rejecting the possibility of the continuation of consciousness beyond death modern science, in its outreach through psychiatry, has denied the possibility of spirit influence in mental health conditions including schizophrenia, auditory and perceptual hallucinations, and identity disorders. Has science thrown the baby out with the bath water by rigidly affirming this stance and thereby creating barriers to dealing holistically with a wide range of mental health conditions? This conference, bringing together a number of experts, will consider the impact of spirit influence in mental health, suggesting alternative yet complementary ways to heal the mind. It will be of value to all those dealing with mental health issues, including psychiatrists, GPs, therapists, mental health nurses as well as those who feel that they are, or might be, suffering from some form of spirit interference.

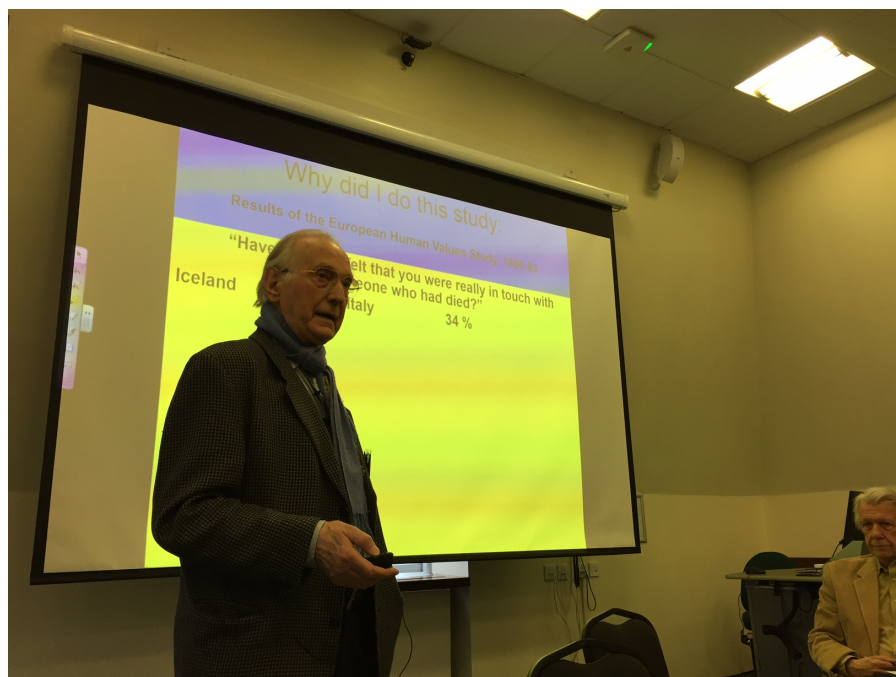
Speakers:

Dr Erlendur Haraldsson, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Iceland and author of *The Departed Among the Living*; **Dr David McDonald**, consultant psychiatrist and advisor to the Churches Ministry on 'Deliverance', **Dr Terence Palmer**, author of *The Science of Spirit Possession*, **Denise Clark**, an NHS mental health assessor, who has direct experience in dealing with her own possession states, **Mike Williamson**, practising medium and author of *Schizophrenia or Spirit Possession* and **Dr David Furlong**, Transpersonal Counsellor, Director of Spirit Release Forum and author of *Illuminating the Shadow*.

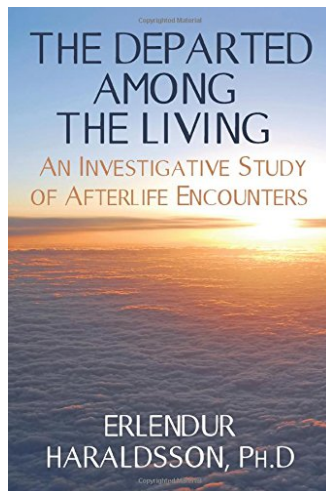
This was the subject and line up of the [Spirit Release Forum](#) Day [Conference](#) held at Regent's University in London on Saturday 4th February 2017. It attracted

around ninety participants, many of whom identified themselves as practising healers. While a few were working within the National Health Service, the majority seemed to be in private practice where they are able to offer a wider range of complementary therapies, including those based on theories of spirit attachment. A few participants were there because family members with mental health issues are being treated by one or more of the speakers. It is possible that others came because they are seeking help and have found conventional therapies wanting, or simply because they are on the Spirit Release Forum (SRF) mailing list. The atmosphere throughout the day was remarkably collegial. Speakers were un-defensive, and questions open, curious and questioning – which was appropriate given the controversial nature of some of the ideas, case studies, experiences and practices under discussion. It appeared to be a safe space in which notions of spirit influence and possession could be explored, as well as being a fascinating insight into an area of human experience familiar to anthropologists working cross-culturally, but generally concealed within Western cultures. A sub-theme running through the day was the hostility encountered by those with mental health problems and their families, and by holistic healers, within the NHS. It was apparent listening to people's stories that conventional medicine remains hostile to the notion of 'spirit' or spirituality (even prayer) and continues to operate within a reductive materialist paradigm in thrall to 'big pharma'. The holistic healers wanted to see themselves as complementary partners of orthodox medicine rather than a radical alternative, but in practice they are obliged to operate in a parallel world that remains largely invisible.¹

Professor Erlendur Haraldsson, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at the University of Iceland, opened the conference with a talk entitled *Departed among the living: evidence for the continuation of consciousness after death*.



Erlendur Haraldsson is a highly respected scholar of the paranormal who has conducted research into children's accounts of past lives, mediumship (Indridi Indrdason), miracles (Sai Baba), death-bed visions, and encounters with the dead. The talk was largely based on data from his recent book *The Departed Among the Living*, although also drew on his earlier work. Haraldsson was the only speaker who is primarily an academic rather than a practitioner, but in providing a solid body of evidence highly suggestive of the continuation of consciousness beyond physical death, set the stage nicely for the presentations that followed. His approach is cautious, statistical and measured, necessary perhaps when dealing with phenomena that are dismissed out of hand by many academic psychologists.



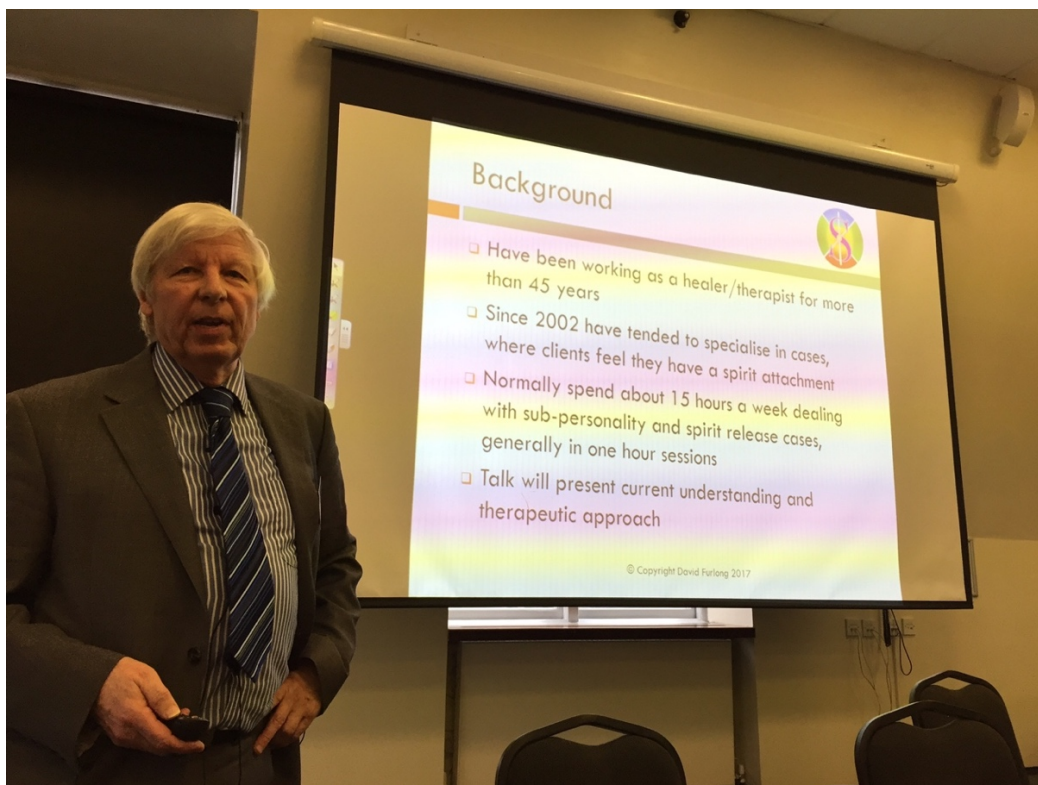
The European Human Values Survey (1980-83) asked people "Have you ever felt you were really in touch with someone who died?" The affirmative responses varied from a high point of up to forty four percent of Icelanders to a low of nine percent in Norway. Italy had a high response rate with thirty four percent of those questioned believing that they had *really been contacted by a deceased person*. The UK was somewhere in the middle with twenty six percent. The question has been repeated in various surveys with very similar results. I suspect that the experience of encountering someone who has died, whether visually, hearing a voice, sensing a presence, or by some other means (dreams were excluded) occurs with a similar frequency everywhere and it is the *interpretation* of the experience that varies. Some cultures are more open to the reality of spirits or the continuation of life after the death than others. The key part of the question may be the word 'really' as there is plenty of evidence that experiences that don't fit into our understanding of what is possible are likely to be dismissed, forgotten, or regarded as a product of the imagination (See, for example, Bowie (2014), ['Believing Impossible Things: Scepticism and Ethnographic Enquiry'](#)).

It is perhaps not surprising that the majority of those who claim to have encountered someone who has died are female, given that emotional bonds are often a key factor in such encounters and women live longer. A widow is more likely to have contact with her departed husband than vice versa. What is perhaps more surprising is the number of people who reported contact with strangers (109 or 26% in Haraldsson's study of around 450 Icelanders). In some cases the dead returned to familiar surroundings such as their former home, or became 'lost' when they left their physical bodies and tried to communicate with whoever was around them. As in children's spontaneous reincarnation memories, younger people who suffered a sudden or violent death feature in a much higher proportion than one would expect from the general population. In Haraldsson's words, these spirits often 'thrust themselves' on strangers, a phrase that resonates when we look at spirit attachments. The first-hand accounts of these encounters recorded by Haraldsson and his co-workers were checked with witnesses where possible, and with death registers, enabling most of the deceased who reportedly contacted the living to be identified and the manner of their death verified.

In the question and answer session following this talk one participant pointed out that both Iceland and Italy with high levels of apparent after death contact were also affected by volcanic activity. While the relationship between physical phenomena and psychic awareness was not something that Haraldsson's study addressed, it is certainly an area worthy of consideration. Folk traditions consistently talk of certain places being 'thin' or portals to other worlds, and in his study of Brazilian medium Amyr Amiden, psychologist [Stanley Krippner](#) did find correlations between atmospheric conditions and Amiden's psychic and mediumistic abilities (particularly when it came to producing apports, objects that appear out of nowhere in the physical world).

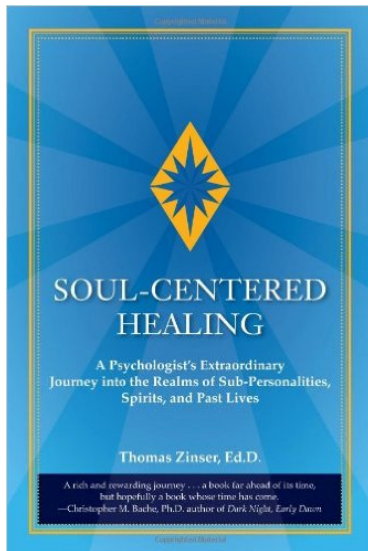
The relevance of Haraldsson's study for the presentations that followed is that it provided a comprehensive body of evidence that some spirits appear to remain in or close to the material earth after death and intentionally or unintentionally seek out or otherwise make themselves known to the living. We can begin to imagine a plane of existence at the limits of our perception - and at the boundaries of our energy fields - inhabited by conscious entities. It is this realm that the speakers with mediumistic abilities begin to explore and seek to understand when dealing with spirit intrusions that manifest as hallucinatory disorders. As Haraldsson put it, there are 'indications' that death may be a gate to another form of existence and that we live in a *multiversum* as opposed to a *universum*.

Dr David Furlong, a transpersonal counsellor, writer and director of the Spirit Release Forum, gave the second talk, entitled, *A psycho-spiritual blueprint for mental health: case studies involving spirit attachments and their release*.



The view of the Self and psyche that comes out of Furlong's work, illustrated by his case studies, is of a complex, fascinating and sometimes baffling inner world. With humorous and simple illustrations, Furlong explained that his work with clients involves first of all helping them to connect to their 'higher self' – envisaged as an overarching Self that is present in a non-material domain, but which is aware of and can act as a source of light for the incarnated soul or self. The embodied self has free will and may be more or less aware of its higher self (HS), as well as of disembodied guides and helpers. In Western psychology we tend to think of the self, ideally at least, as a unified discrete entity. Where it 'splits' through trauma or dissociation this is regarded as pathological and the goal of therapy, particularly from a psychoanalytic perspective, lies in reintegrating the split or lost parts of the psyche. In extreme cases the self seems to take on different personae, as in classic cases of multiple personality disorder, more commonly referred to as dissociative identity disorder or, in less severe cases, borderline personality disorder. Whatever the labels, the individual concerned appears to have different identities and can switch between them. They may or may not be aware of each other and the central self or ego may be amnesic concerning the activities of the sub personae.

Furlong asserted that we all have a number of different identities. We will present ourselves differently in a professional situation, at home with our families, out with friends, and so on. In a balanced healthy individual the ego is in control of these personae and can be self-reflexive concerning them. In cases of trauma or shock a portion of the personality or soul energy can become split off and will attempt to contain the trauma in order to protect the self from its effects. This can happen a number of times and a sub-personality can potentially split into further parts. Furlong likened these sub-personalities to children in relation to the central self or ego, depicted as an adult householder. These 'children' may be aware of each other or may remain isolated or even in hiding ('in an under-stairs cupboard'). They may attract possessing spirits, either earthbound souls – people who died and got lost on their way to the light, or more negative entities. To complicate the picture even further some sub-personalities from past lives, also with their nested possessing entities, might reincarnate with an individual, perhaps still looking for healing and understanding carried over from unresolved historical traumas. Each of these parts has its own consciousness and free will, and in a therapeutic situation needs to be identified and released, either into the light of the higher self or into a safe space where it can reintegrate or at least become more aware of the central ego self.



This complex notion of the self and its constituent parts is similar to that described by the American psychologist **Thomas Zinser**, who describes his explorations of the inner mind stemming from his own clinical practice, as described in his book *Soul-Centered Healing* (2010) and in subsequent works. There are some minor differences between Zinser's model and Furlong's. Where Zinser talks of the soul as the over-arching self, Furlong prefers to use the term spirit and Higher Self. Zinser uses hypnosis and idiomatic finger signals to communicate with clients, whereas Furlong asks direct questions of a client, whether in hypnosis so as to communicate with their Higher Self, using spirit guides for direction. This is partly due to the fact that Furlong is himself

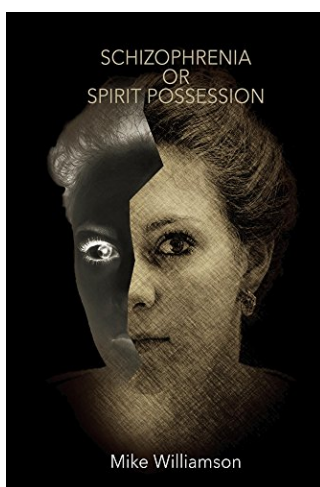
mediumistic whereas Zinser is not, and relied for some years on a spirit healer identified as Gerod, channelled by a colleague, to whom he could bring his hard cases and discuss notions of the soul and psyche.

To many people, including the majority of clinical mental health professionals, any talk of spirits and possession will be an anathema. Furlong was less concerned with justifying his model of the self than with the effectiveness of treatments based on these theories. Some case studies were used to illustrate what does and does not work. At its simplest, a single short session with a client can clear a number of sometimes long-standing and apparently intractable problems (a spirit release therapist is generally a last resort for desperate people). In other instances the complexity and number of sub-personalities and attached entities, all of whom need to be identified and persuaded to release any negative energies through the exercise of their free will, can take many sessions and perhaps several years. A long-standing persistent problem may require in addition much conventional work concerned with stabilising the client's life-style, strengthening their will power and creating new habits of thought if the problems are not to return. The New Testament parable of the house (self) swept clean (of unclean spirits), only to find that seven more come to occupy it, was a concept very familiar to all those who engage with this kind of work (see Luke 11:16-36, Matthew 12:28-45).

It is not possible to do justice to Furlong's presentation and discussions here, but there were many themes that echo throughout Western literature and popular culture, as well in ethnographic accounts, such as 'contracts' between dark force entities and parts of the self, and how to disentangle and release the soul or ego parts from these contracts. Throughout the day I, as an anthropologist, was struck by the sense that here one did indeed find the 'familiar made strange' – we were entering a world of spirits and forces that one might expect to encounter while undertaking fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa or the forests of Papua New Guinea, but not among seemingly ordinary, educated men and women in suits in central London. Furlong summarised his talk in four points, that I will quote here (taken from his last slide, copyright David Furlong 2017):

- It is clear from my work with many clients that forms of 'spirit' entanglement can give rise to forms of mental, psychological and hallucinatory disturbance
- If 'spirits' are just 'lost' they can easily be removed but if 'malign' or 'dark' they can be much more difficult to extract
- Our 'inner world' is a complex place and the 'sub-personality' parts of us also need a lot of healing and balancing
- Our 'H-S' [Higher Self] is the single most important part of this process

Mike Williamson, the third speaker, is a Spiritualist and practising medium, who addressed the theme of *Schizophrenia or spirit possession: a medium's perspective, drawing on case studies of spirit release*. The talk drew on material in his recent book [*Schizophrenia or Spirit Possession?*](#)



Williamson spoke simply and effectively, using his own extensive experience of working in the world of spirits and healing. He explained that he started the work in his thirties after finding that his house was haunted, and looking for help. In the process he discovered his own mediumistic abilities, and for some time specialised in house clearing for people troubled by unwanted spirit occupants. As far as the theme of this conference goes, Williamson started by making the point that schizophrenia, unlike progressive conditions such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis or Alzheimer's, has no identified pathology or location in the brain. In fact the DSM 5² gives such a wide range of diagnostic symptoms and possible

causes that schizophrenia appears as something of a 'catch all' term for a range of conditions characterised by hearing voices and paranoia. Unlike the degenerative diseases mentioned above, people can and do recover spontaneously from schizophrenia with or without the help of drugs. For Williamson this indicates that treating schizophrenia with drugs is at best looking at the symptoms but not the cause, treating the brain when the problem is in the mind. Having made the case for looking for alternative causes for schizophrenia, Williamson gave examples of his work with clients who were, or thought that they were, troubled by spirits. Williamson sounded a cautionary note, that not



every unexplained event is the result of spirit intrusion. In one instance a client was losing his hair and felt that his eyebrows were being plucked out. The source of his ills turned out to be spores from a fish tank with a splashy overactive pump. Where spirits do attach themselves to someone and cause problems for them, Williamson emphasised the importance of gaining discipline over the mind, and of learning to distinguish one's own thoughts from those of spirits who might be intruding. When someone has had attached or possessing spirits removed they can feel the difference and learn to identify spirit intrusion if it recurs. Williamson generally works together with another medium, and like Furlong tries to identify and speak to any attached spirits and to take, rather than send them to the light. Where the free will of the client conflicts with the free will of an attached spirit who doesn't want to leave the free will of the client asking for help always takes priority. An unwilling spirit can be removed with the help of the client's guides, and can be contained if he or she does not wish to go to the light. Unlike Furlong (and Zinser), Williamson's view of the interior life is more conventionally Spiritualist. He sees the soul as a unity and does not work with the notion of sub-personalities, or with past lives as claimed not to have encountered them in his practice.

During the questions that followed his talk the importance of treating the dead as well as the living client was raised – unlike conventional Christian exorcism that is more concerned with expelling or banishing 'demons' than with healing the dead. As Williamson put it, if the dead are not also treated and you can't resolve their problems they won't move on. The reasons for becoming attached to someone in the first place are varied. Some spirits do not realise that they have died, or fear that they will be banished to hell if they go towards the light. Several of the spirit release therapists who spoke had come across people who had been killed in a blast and when they passed over saw the light, but were unable to distinguish it from the explosion that killed them. In each instance resolving the issue that his keeping a spirit earthbound is necessary if they are not to continue to plague others. It is not uncommon for spirits to apologise for the harm they have caused when they realise that the person suffering from hearing voices is being harmed by their intrusions.

These and other first-hand examples of spirit release are remarkably consistent with those recorded by Western psychiatrists and healers who have delved into the world of spirits when confronted by patients diagnosed with certain forms of mental illness characterised by hearing voices, sudden changes of personality and hallucinations. From the examples recorded by **Dr Carl Wickland** in his classic [*30 Years Among the Dead*](#) (1924) at the beginning of the Twentieth Century to the present, the techniques of engaging the spirits in conversation, persuading them to leave the patient and to move to where they are supposed to go remains the same. Some of these continuities are discussed in my paper '[Self, Personhood and Possession](#)' (Bowie, 2013). In a question and answer panel session the question of contracts between spirits and those with mental health problems arose again. Dark beings, sometimes referred to as dark force entities (DFEs), who may or may not have lived a human life, can work by making contracts with a soul (or a sub-personality). This may be unconscious on the part of the soul or ego fragment, and the conscious self remains unaware that a part of

them accepted an offer of protection, for example, in return for an element of control by a DFE over their lives. The DFEs often work in groups as they are generally not powerful enough to control someone's will on their own, and will use coercion and threats to convince the host that something terrible will befall them if they break the contract. Furlong emphasised that these contracts are a lie, and that the only valid contract is to the higher self, to the truth and light within us. All such contracts can be dissolved. A member of the audience contributed that these dark spirits also work within a hierarchy, with some spirits working for others. The lower level spirits may also believe that they are forced to honour contracts with those higher up the hierarchy and to do their bidding. The work of these dark force entities can be identified, according to Furlong, by their trademarks of fear, the inhibition of someone's free will and inflation of their ego.

The theme of dark forces that can attack a person was encapsulated in a very personal testimony in the fourth session. **Denise Clark**, who works for the National Health Service in the UK. Clark shared her story of being tormented by a particular individual over many lives, and of her struggle to free herself from his curses, in a talk entitled, *Facing my own personal demons whilst working as a mental health assessor*. The demons may have been personal, but they were certainly not regarded as metaphorical. This was no figure of speech.

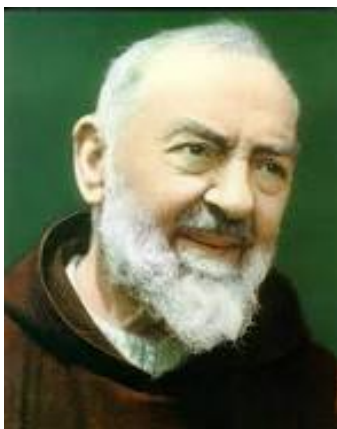
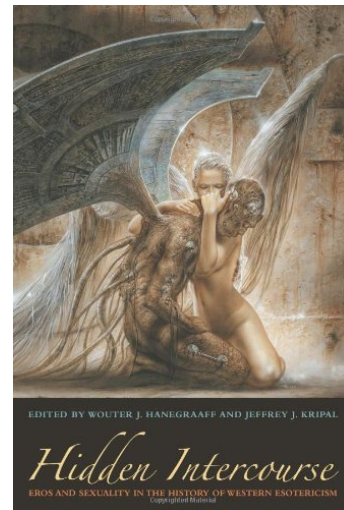


This is the most difficult of the talks to write about as it was deeply personal and rather harrowing, but also because I was aware that it asked the audience to enter a world very far removed from the material universe of post-Enlightenment rationality that we as Westerners have grown up in. I was sitting in the front row and could not but help being struck by Denise Clark's extraordinary brown eyes, that seemed to reflect the years of terror and suffering that she had endured, as well as her extraordinary courage in confronting the forces she encountered. The conference talks were all recorded so will presumably be available in some form on the Spirit Release Forum website, so I won't attempt to recount her experience in full here. Clark started by saying that she would read her presentation as 'thought-blocking' was one of the tools her aggressor or aggressors used.

The story started with Clark experiencing an earthbound spirit and kinetic poltergeist activity. A medium identified the spirit as her dead father who was

trying to attract her attention. She could not think why he would continue to visit her in this manner and to disturb her sleep, and woke up one night convinced not only that it was not her father who was visiting, but that whatever it was could only be described as evil. This realisation began a chain reaction and for some years Clark was terrorised by multiple entities at night. She understood them to be hierarchically related, their superior being an *incubus* who attacked her sexually and prevented from sleeping.

A discussion of *succubi* (female spirits) and *incubi* (male spirits) who have sex with their victims was the subject of a recent case recorded by Terence Palmer and Andrew Porter, and Andrew's guide Chen, which was [posted on Dr Palmer's website](#). Many people no doubt think of such ideas fading during the course of the Eighteenth Century with the decline of witchcraft, or existing only in 'primitive' cultures or backward cultures on the fringes of modernity. It seems, however, that they never really went away, only underground. Ethnographic examples analogous to the experiences of Clark and other Westerners who seek out spirit release therapists can be found in the works of scholars like **David Hufford**, with his descriptions of the 'Old Hag' traditions in Newfoundland, described in his book [The Terror that Comes in the Night: An Experience-Centered Study of Supernatural Assault Traditions](#) (1982). Religious Studies scholar **Jeffrey Kripal** has also written extensively on the hidden and darker side of Western sexuality, most recently in the book he co-authored with the scholar of Western esotericism, **Wouter Hanegraaff**, *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (2010).



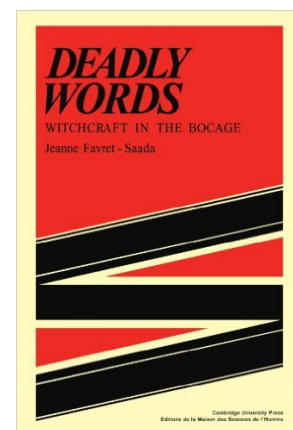
As well as the sexual attack, Clark was physically beaten by the nocturnal spirits and would sometimes find herself unconscious on the floor of her bedroom with no memory of how she got there. I could not but be reminded of the nightly battles the Italian Franciscan stigmatic known as **Padre Pio** (1887-1968) is said to have had with the demons who visited him in his cell in San Giovanni Rotondo in Italy. Perhaps the surprise therefore is not so much that people experience such things, or think they do, but that they can affect apparently 'ordinary' people who are neither saints nor mentally ill. It would be very difficult to judge how common the experience of sexual and physical assault might be among the general population as we have no cultural space for such experiences and one can assume that if they occur they are seldom spoken of. Clark recounted one instance from her own professional work in which a patient being assessed complained of supernatural sexual assault, only to be met by ridicule and bawdy humour. The professionals involved simply did not have a language or a framework to deal with such claims, which was no help to the individual involved.

Denise Clark went on to describe some of her journey to recovery. She leaned to put herself into a deep trance, and to use a pendulum to ask questions regarding the issues facing her. She also had contact with David Furlong and the Spirit Release Forum and was helped to strengthen the connection with her higher self. The story that emerged was of remembered past lives in which a particularly abusive individual, with whom she had a brief relationship with in her current life, recurred and played a similarly negative role. He was possessive and jealous, putting curses on her if she tried to leave him. A deep curse put on Clark in the Sixth Century by this man was that if he couldn't have her no one else would, and that she would remain isolated and alone, hence the incubus attacks and terrible isolation from family and friends over many lives. When in desperation Clark had on two occasions asked for help at work she had instead been disciplined and told that she must not speak about spirits. This in itself was the cause of further trauma. There followed quite a bit of discussion about the nature of curses, and how they could be broken. Clark maintained that it was necessary to identify the words used in order to break or unravel a curse. To make things more complicated, Clark identified hundreds of fragmented personality parts as a result of trauma over this life and previous lives, which needed to be individually healed. She saw this as a work in progress rather than a completed task. The 'gentleman' who had tormented her had, she told us, sent more curses recently but as she was now better protected they had rebounded on him. As he could not remember the actual words used in each curse he was unable to deflect or undo them, and was suffering physically as a result.



This apotropaic form of protection is a common and possibly universal phenomenon, in which the spell or curse rebounds on the sender. The amulets of blue glass or hands with eyes in the palm found in Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, for example, are intended to ward off the Evil Eye,

forming a protective barrier to deflect harm. Those familiar with the work of French anthropologist **Jeanne Favret-Saada** in Normandy will also recognise the idea of spells being deflected back on the sender in such a way that the boundary between those who are victims of witchcraft and those who are witches suffering the rebounding effects of their curses or spells, or 'de-witchers' who have intercepted the spells, taking the hit themselves, become blurred. In the work that formed her doctoral thesis, and in many subsequent books and articles, Favret-Saada has demonstrated the tenacity of witchcraft beliefs in supposedly modern European contexts, as well as their economic and social correlates. Favret-Saada concludes that witchcraft exists but witches do not. She does not enter the realm of the paranormal in seeking explanations of witchcraft, or at least not in print. Another Western



source of curses, as well as blessings, are the collected works of the Scottish tax collector **Alexander Carmichael**, who toured the Highlands and Hebridean Islands of Scotland in the late Nineteenth Century, collecting Gaelic oral literature. The published works, known as the *Carmina Gadelica* (1900) are now available online, and contain many examples of apotropaic prayers and curses. The Holy Trinity, God the Father, Christ, Mary, St Michael and Saint Bride or Bridget, among others, are invoked as protection from all supernatural and natural harm.

Whoso made to thee the eye,
May it lie upon himself,
May it lie upon his house,
May it lie upon his flocks,
May it lie upon his substance,
May it lie upon his fatness,
May it lie upon his means,
May it lie upon his children,
May it lie upon his wife,
May it lie upon his descendants.

Incantations are often accompanied by rituals, as with the Normandy peasant farmers described by Favret-Saada, and once again particular linguistic formulae as well as protective ritual acts are carefully prescribed. In both Scotland and Northern France it is the whole farming family unit– a man, his wife, children and livestock, that come under attack. In this example, part of a *Spell for the Evil Eye* (Vol.2) Mary is invoked as protection against spells, which are deflected on sender and his domain.

Extraordinary, perhaps incredible, as Denise Clark's story may seem, its parallels and antecedents in Western and non-Western cultures raise questions of cultural continuity and the role of individual experience in the recurrence of spirit-related phenomena. One reason that we consign stories of curses and an emphasis on knowing the right words to other cultures, but find them difficult to relate to in the West, is that we no longer emphasise the material nature of the sign. Within Vedic Hinduism the sacred syllable 'OM' when chanted links the devotee directly to the divine source of being. Tibetan Buddhists will turn prayer wheels, the physical carrier of the words itself helping to transmit the words written on



it and their intentions. Sikhs make their devotions to their holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, and Muslims regard the physical Qur'an with great respect, and hold that the actual words in Arabic have sacred power. The practice in Christian countries of swearing on the Bible when taking an oath also points to the material nature of language and its power.

Within a scientific world view, however, the power of words as words of power, and as material signs that can actually have an effect on and in the world, has largely been lost. Theosophical teachings that reached Europe and America from India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries went some way to reintroducing the idea of words and thoughts are material and have a physical effect in the world. However widespread such ideas are in the West they remain largely confined to religious spheres and on the fringes of public consciousness. To many people words are immaterial transient entities that have a limited life and effect. If one holds this view a curse is only effective if it unsettles someone, not because of its intrinsic power.

Dr David McDonald, the penultimate speaker, is a consultant psychiatrist working within the NHS and an advisor to the Church of England on its healing ministry. He co-chairs the Church's [Ministry of Deliverance Study Group](#) with Dominic Walker, former Bishop of Monmouth in South Wales. The Group advises the Church of England on healing and trains clergy in 'exorcism' and 'deliverance'.



It contains both clergy and professional psychiatrists and treads a delicate line between spiritual and organic explanations of mental illness, as indicated in its [Guidelines for Good Practice](#) (2012). McDonald's talk also attempted to bridge these two worlds, and was entitled *The psychopathology of mental illness: the interface between the psychological and spiritual*. While the Church of England pays lip service to the existence of spirits and leaves open a space for their role in certain forms of mental illness, in practice there is little consensus the reality and role of

spirits. Within the professional sphere of psychiatry there is even less scope for including a spiritual sphere. When an audience member asked McDonald about the possible role of past life influences on mental health, for example, he replied that as a psychiatrist 'you couldn't even go there'.

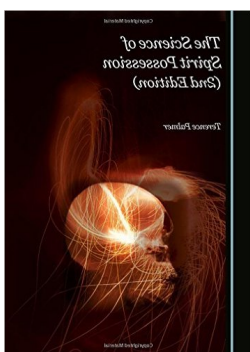
McDonald traced his own career from assessing adult offenders to working with children and families, where early interventions can help prevent some of the later offending behaviours. He presented an accurate account of attachment disorders in children who have been abandoned, abused or traumatised and the ways in which dissociation (Furlong's sub-personalities) can impact on adult behaviour. An intervention programme aimed at vulnerable mothers from pregnancy until the second year of their first child's life proved very successful in preventing anti-social behaviours was pioneered in the USA and rolled out in the UK in 2008, but came to an end with the advent of GP led clinical commissioning groups as it was not seen as priority. As someone who spans the religious and psychiatric worlds, McDonald understands *psychopathology*, literally 'soul' + 'disease', as involving spiritual, biological, behavioural and psychological elements. While he presented a more conventionally psychological explanation of mental illness, particularly in attachment disorders, than the mediumistic speakers, there were many points of comparison. Children with a disordered attachment, for example, were described as possessed by diabolical thoughts and feelings. Etymologically their worlds are 'torn apart' ('disordered') rather than 'drawn together' or symbolic (Greek *symbollein*, to 'throw together'). Children (and adults) with reactive attachment disorders cannot handle symbolic thinking.

The prison population is full of such people who without early interventions may need containment for life. The solutions lie in opportunities to develop healthy relationships. As McDonald put it, it is what happens between people that matters. A non-judgmental listening therapist can enable patients to exercise free will and to make better choices in life. Helping damaged people build healthy relationships draws on spiritual as well as human resources – McDonald prefaced his talk with **William Blake's** painting of 'The Good and Evil Angels' battling over an infant in order to illustrate the cosmic element of psychoanalysis. The death instinct was described as an absence of a life instinct. Young people who want to die often don't know how to live and suicide can be a desire to return to a child-like innocence, a search for forgiveness. Coming to terms with what they have done or become can seem much more challenging than dying to offenders who attempt or succeed in committing suicide. It may seem impossible to contemplate forgiveness without an understanding of redemption. A religious world view of an eternally loving, accepting deity can help people come to terms with their past and to rebuild their lives.



While remaining grounded in the medial language of psychiatry, McDonald had also had sufficient evidence from his practice that he was not just dealing with brain chemistry when treating patients. On a couple of occasions he met new clients who would not have known he was coming, who claimed to have been told by spirits that Dr McDonald would see them and help them. He claimed that there was not natural means by which they could have obtained that information. As someone who has supported the Spirit Release Forum for a number of years,

McDonald continues to tread the difficult path of admitting to the possibility and efficacy of spirit release therapy, while maintaining a professional position within mainstream medicine.



The last speaker of the day was **Dr Terence Palmer**, a spirit release therapist who wrote his doctoral dissertation on one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, Frederic W.H. Myers (1843-1901), published as *The Science of Spirit Possession*. Dr Palmer's talk, *Medical science and spirit influence: The need for research*, described some current projects aimed as documenting the process of spirit release and of assessing its efficacy. Palmer also called for further controlled scientific work in on spirit release therapy. While clinical controlled trials or university-led research projects might be seen as the gold standard for evaluating SRT, it is also clear that the dominance of a materialist paradigm within the public domain presents a formidable barrier to such research.³ It is for this reason that some new projects conducted by those already practising SRT are of particular interest.

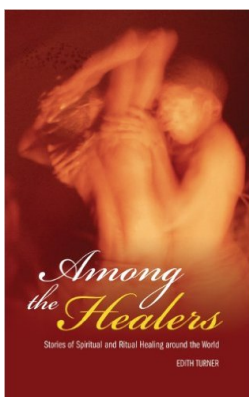


The first project described by Palmer is termed 'The Ross Project', after the Herefordshire town Ross-on-Wye where it started in November 2016. A group of spirit release therapists, including some of those who were present at the conference, met together with three families who had family members suffering from schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder or hearing voices (all of

whom were also present). The idea was, first of all, to bring relief through remote spirit work to the three clients, and secondly to record the interventions used and any results. These were cases involving conditions that appeared intractable and which had persisted over a number of years. SRT was seen as something that could be practiced alongside, rather than as an alternative to, drug-based and psychological therapies. Palmer has been working on a protocol that can provide some consistency for the different practitioners, and another member of the group has volunteered to coordinate any interventions and their effects. I have been involved in this project from the start and have found it fascinating as an exercise and as a method of working. The client-based focus and generous use of time and resources by the mediums and therapists involved have enabled practices to be tested and discussed in a way that is not generally possible in a field dominated by individual practitioners.

Terence Palmer often works with a medium called Andy, and Andy's spirit guide, Chen. Through an intervention from Chen, Palmer recently started running workshops for people suffering from auditory hallucinations ([Hearing Voices Research](#)) intended to both offer practical help to sufferers and to demonstrate the methods used in SRT. Many examples of spirit release from this project and from Palmer's private practice have been recorded and are available on his YouTube channel, [Healing the Wounded Spirit](#). One of the case studies Palmer recounted from a recent Hearing Voices workshop featured an ex-soldier who said that he had been 'pestered by a gang of voices' for twenty three years. He had tried many conventional interventions, none of which had helped. A single session of spirit release therapy identified the troubled souls who had been with him for all this time and released them to the light. For the first time in nearly three decades the man was free of his troublesome voices, but was left feeling very angry towards a medical profession that had failed to help him for so long. The voices have not recurred.

It was clear that what drives most individual spirit release therapists is that it is often effective, occasionally miraculously so. Their frustration is that a therapy that is technically straightforward, inexpensive and that can bring great relief to patients, is not better known, more widely available, and accepted by the medical profession. Anthropologists have noted the effectiveness of shamanic and other traditional forms of healing in many parts of the world – often but not always attributing their success, when writing their ethnographies, to psychological



factors. For those who come to accept that there might actually be some spirit influence in healing this can come as a revelation, and may result in a transformative change of perspective. This happened to the late Edith Turner (1921-2016), an anthropologist who saw a spirit leaving a sick woman when taking part in a healing ritual in Zambia in the 1980s, an experience described in her book *Experiencing Ritual* (1992). Edie Turner devoted the next couple of decades to a comparative study of healing rituals around the world and to the role of spirits in sickness and healing. Some of this work was published in *Among the Healers* (2005).

The reason for introducing ethnographic accounts from non-Western societies is to make the point that the healing techniques of European or American spirit release therapists sit squarely within a broader human understanding of the relationship between mind, body and spirit that appears to be both universal and ancient. For all the advances and benefits of contemporary medical practice and a post-Enlightenment world view, it is historically anomalous to view healing solely in biological or material terms.

The dialogue in this conference on 'Spirit Influence on Mental Health' was between the medical profession and spirit release practices. It also touched on more conventional religious views through the work of David McDonald. There is a somewhat parallel discussion between biblical scholars and anthropologists, with the former drawing on cross-cultural examples in order to give weight to an ontological basis to biblical examples of spirit possession and exorcism. Craig Keener (2010:235), for example, in his article [*Spirit Possession as a Cross-cultural Experience*](#), concluded that; "In view of the wide range of phenomena attested, some features of early Christian accounts that have appeared suspect to modern western interpreters appear plausible as genuine descriptions of possessed behavior.... Nothing in the early Christian descriptions requires us to assume that they could not depend on genuine eyewitness material". Within anthropology these ideas feed into discussion of the [anthropology of ontology](#) or 'ontological turn'. There is often a tension between the Western-trained anthropologist and the views of those he or she encounters in the field. The extent to which interpretations that are dissonant with a dominant paradigm can be accommodated *in their own terms*, as opposed to simply described phenomenologically or explained according to established Western paradigms, remains problematic. I have attempted to find a way forward by developing a methodology that does not shy away from ontological questions ([Towards a Methodology for the Ethnographic Study of the Afterlife](#)), and through the research carried out and shared by the [Afterlife Research Centre](#). The free online journal [Paranthropology](#) is also an important resource for the discussion and the dissemination of academic studies that take the idea that we live in two, or more, dimensions, seriously.

With thanks to all those who organised, contributed to and participated in the Spirit Influence on Mental Health Day Conference.

Fiona Bowie
9.2.17

[Link to the conference programme and paper abstracts](#)

The talks and discussion were recorded and will in due course be made available via the Spirit Release Forum website.

¹ The SRF is certainly not alone in identifying a frustration with conventional, reductive approaches to mental health. As I was writing this report Jungian psychologist Paul Reynolds uploaded a research paper on his [Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu) site that argues passionately against the ‘criminalisation’ of naturally occurring forms of ‘ontological angst’ – including the visionary and mystic who hears voices, a phenomenon that has been with us as a species for millennia. One can also point to medical anthropologist Natalie Tobert’s ground-breaking books, [*Spiritual Psychiatries: Mental Health Practices in India and UK*](#) (2014) and [*Cultural Perspectives on Mental Wellbeing*](#) (2016), and to her attempts to bridge Western and non-Western medical practices.

² *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), published by the American Psychiatric Association, is the most widely used source of classification for clinicians diagnosing mental illnesses. That such classifications are as much cultural as biological is clear when one looks the history and descriptions of mental disorders as they change over time.

³ Dr Alan Sanderson, founder of the [Spirit Release Foundation](#), who was present at the conference, was forced to leave his work as an NHS consultant psychiatrist when he started to introduce the notion of spirit influence on his patients.