



THE MEDIUMS ARE THE MESSAGE

A skeptical **Anne Bokma** visits the spiritualist haven of Lily Dale, N.Y., where communing with the dead is the town's claim to fame

PHOTOS BY DEREK SHAPTON

My friend Aukje and I are racing to be on time for the 1 p.m. “message service” at Inspiration Stump, located at the end of a quiet forest trail. Outdoor pews set in a semicircle face a metre-high hemlock stump with a cement seat as wide as a table. Roped off like a sacred altar in the shade of a grove of ancient redwoods, this seat is considered the holiest hearth in all of Lily Dale, North America’s oldest spiritualist community, located an hour outside Buffalo on Cassadaga Lake in western New York. Since 1879, people have been coming to this exact same spot (some call it an “energy vortex”) to listen to mediums deliver messages from the dead. The visitors push back their doubts in exchange for a few precious moments of being in the presence of someone they’ve loved and lost.

A group of about 80 people watches as a parade of six mediums — mostly women in flowing floral dresses — take to the outdoor stage one after another, selecting a lucky few whose pushy dead relatives clamour to make themselves known.

“I see a Henry or a Hank, an older man in a blue uniform,” says one medium, moving to the bank of pews on the left.

A middle-aged woman in a red jacket tentatively raises her hand. “That could be my grandfather. His name was Henry and he fought in the war.”

“I see a lot of water. I see a big ship. Your grandfather was in the navy — or he travelled here from another country by boat. Does that make sense?”

“Yes. He came here from England,” says the woman.

The medium cocks her head a little as if someone is whispering in her ear.

“He wants you to know, dear, that he has been there with you in times of great difficulty in your life and is watching over you. He wants you to know you are never alone.”

“Thank you,” the woman manages, before dissolving into tears.

Aukje and I look at each other and roll our eyes.

For the next hour it’s much the same. The mediums identify spirits by their names (always anglicized; there’s not a Mohammed or a Mingzhu in the bunch). They give general descriptions — lots of men in uniform and older women in aprons who could stand in for anyone’s grandfather or grandmother. They offer up vague clues about how they died (“I see issues in the heart area”). The messages are not that compelling or specific — no urgings to quit a job, dump a husband or kick the kids out of

the house. Instead they are saccharine platitudes: “Your grandmother wants you to know she is at peace”; “Your father says now he understands and asks for your forgiveness”; “Your mother is urging you to take more time for yourself.” From beyond the grave, our forebears are nicer people, full of unconditional love and without a whit of parental disapproval for the mess we may have made of our lives.

It’s easy to make fun of Lily Dale, where earnest seekers come to make contact with the dead. Some 60 registered mediums are among the town’s 300 year-round residents, all of whom must be spiritualists to live here (the population swells to 20,000 visitors in July and August when the town opens its gates to the public, charging a daily \$10 admission fee). At Lily Dale, mediumship is believed to be a learnable skill, and so the town offers more than 100 educational workshops and lectures on topics ranging from numerology and reiki to crystal healing, telepathic communication with pets, quantum touch and, yes, astral travel.

While your average mainstream Protestant would probably consider communing with the dead to be silly, occult or even evil, I have to wonder: Is it really outside the faith? If one proclaims that death is not final, that the soul continues in some form beyond the grave, is it such a stretch to imagine a spiritual dimension where those souls exist — and want to communicate with us?

In my own lifetime, I’ve navigated the Dutch Reformed Church, the United Church and, currently, the Unitarian Church. Questioning belief systems is central to my faith journey. And so, I’ve come to Lily Dale on a lark with a bag packed full of skepticism. Still, there’s a little part of me that figures 20,000 people might be on to something.

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I have booked appointments with a couple of mediums and plan to take in everything Lily Dale has to offer: a service at the Healing Temple, where specially trained spiritual healers promise to channel positive energy through my body; the weekly “thought exchange” on spiritualism and mediumship at the historic Maplewood Hotel, where seances were once held; the Marion Skidmore Library, with its thousands of books on spiritualism; and the Lily Dale Museum,

which showcases 3,000 artifacts from the early days of spiritualism. I'll finish up my getaway by meandering down the mossy Fairy Trail, strewn with "gifts" for the fairy folk: tiny homemade birchbark houses, stuffed animals, fabric butterflies and beaded necklaces strung in the trees. By the time I leave this curious little village three days later, I still won't be a true believer, but the place will have touched me in unexpected ways.

Spiritualism is considered the most comforting of all religions since its practitioners believe we never die, that communication between mortals and spirits is possible and hell is hogwash. It had millions of followers in the mid- to late-1800s, when thousands came for meetings at Lily Dale, a summer colony that attracted celebrities such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mae West and Harry Houdini. Spiritualists were at the forefront of social movements — prison and welfare reform, women's rights and the abolition of slavery, for example — and Lily Dale visitors included progressive freethinkers like Susan B. Anthony, the grande dame of the suffragettes. Legend has it that when a local medium told her the spirit of her dead aunt was trying to communicate with her, Anthony was not impressed. "I didn't like her when she was alive, and I don't want to hear from her now," she's reported to have said. "Why don't you bring some-one interesting like Elizabeth Cady Stanton?"

Except for cars and electricity, not much has changed in Lily Dale over the past century. Some 200 painted Victorian gingerbread cottages line its dozen narrow streets originally designed for horse and carriage. The hotel doesn't have air conditioning or an elevator. Some say the place is a shadow of its former self. Paint is peeling on many of the houses; porches droop; the gardens, though colourful, are unkempt (their keepers undoubtedly have their minds set on more noble tasks than weeding). The village has a kitschy sensibility — you can't walk far without spotting a garden gnome or hearing a wind chime tinkle. Almost everyone who visits or lives here is female, most are middle-aged or older, and many believe in fairies and angels. Perhaps they are drawn to Lily Dale because you can't get to midlife without suffering some kind of loss (even if it's just collagen). Or maybe they just want to have a little fun while flirting with mystery. Like a woman well into her prime,

Lily Dale doesn't seem preoccupied with trying to prove itself. It's aiming for something more soulful and wears its charming shabbiness with pride.

After our visit to Inspiration Stump, Aukje and I check into a comfy bed and breakfast called Jewel of the Lake, run by Teresa Schaeffer, a former tax accountant from Arizona who offers workshops on orbs, circular supernatural creatures that can supposedly be captured in the dark through flash photography. Schaeffer often plays a flute late at night to call forth the orbs. "They love music," she says. "If you have an open heart and mind, they will show up for sure."

She's my host — what can I do except nod and smile? We are introduced to fellow guests, a lively group of three women in their 30s from Pittsburgh. One of them, Stacey, is a medium in training who needs all the practice she can get and is happy to do free readings for us. "I'm a healing whore," she jokes. Her bumper sticker reads, "Don't make me get out my flying monkeys." Late that night while we are all drinking wine on the screened-in porch, Stacey gets a call on



Author Anne Bokma (foreground) receives a reading from medium Elaine Thomas.

her cell — a bunch of women are planning an impromptu gathering at Inspiration Stump to take photos of orbs. Aukje and the others grab their cameras and head off into the night like grown-up Brownies on a giddy mission. I head off to bed. I've got an early morning appointment with my first medium tomorrow.

Janice Dreshman is a former social worker who has been living and working at Lily Dale since 2006. An animal lover, she lets her two black spaniels sit at her feet while she does my reading in a tiny enclosed porch attached to the home. I hand her a cheque for \$75, and she opens with a prayer and then starts scrawling on a yellow legal pad for several minutes, as though she's taking dictation from an unseen source. Call it transcendent transcription. She tells me lots of nice things about myself — for example, I emanate "beautiful colours," which reveal I'm a person who lives in her "heart space." She says I "deserve to be treated like gold" (what woman wouldn't love to hear that?).

Then she gets a bunch of stuff wrong: She says I have three kids (I have two). I'm planning a move from my home (I have no such plans). I've lost a pet recently (our

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dog died four years ago). There's an Andy or an Andrew who is significant in my life (I know no such person). But then she mentions a "Jeff or a Jeffrey," and I suck in my breath. That's my husband's name. Suddenly everything she has to say — how my grandfather is watching out for me, how there's an exciting new project coming up — carries more weight. At the end of the session, we hug and Dreshman hands me back my cheque, saying her policy is not to charge journalists. I look at the cheque — the one that had been on the table beside her throughout our session — and make note of the fact that my husband's first name, Jeffrey, is in the top left-hand corner. I like Dreshman, but I don't believe a single word she's said.

So far I'm not impressed. Not by the mediumship demonstration, nor by my reading. Maybe that's why I feel a little peeved when I settle in for the service at Healing Temple. Twelve women stand behind empty chairs at the front of the sanctuary, ready to perform a "sacred transference of healing energies from the love and power of God and Spirit." Organ music plays

softly, and light streams in from the stained glass windows of this simple building that seats about 100. I am ushered to one of the seats, and the healer, a stout woman in white, asks if she can take off my glasses. She whispers a quiet prayer in my ear and lays her hands on my head in a tender motherly fashion. I can't remember the last time I was touched in such a sweet way. To my surprise, tears spring to my eyes. They flow down my face and onto my neck, and I don't bother wiping them away. I am held captive by this stranger's kind touch as she moves her hands slowly over my shoulders, then along my arms, her hands barely grazing my body. She bends in front of me and moves her hands along my legs and feet, then back up my body again. I cry for the entire 15-minute session and honestly have no idea why. All I know is that when I walk out of the Healing Temple, I feel better than ever.

Maybe that's why I'm in a good frame of mind when I go for my reading with Elaine Thomas, Lily Dale's longest continuously serving medium (she's been here for 35 years). It feels a little like a therapy appointment (there's even a box of tissues within arm's reach), especially since Thomas has an engaging, compassionate manner and addresses what's been in the back of my mind since I arrived at Lily Dale: making some kind of connection with my dead father, a man who left our family when I

was a small child and whom I never saw again before he died when I was in my early 20s.

Thomas wins my confidence immediately because she gets a lot right — she talks about an upheaval in my life when I turned nine (that's when I got a stepfather), describes my dead grandmother as having "a backbone made not of steel but of titanium" (true) and points to challenges in my relationship with my mother (also true). She correctly observes that my father is dead and says he suffered from depression all his life ("his chemistry was never right") and was unpredictable and unstable. This is

also true. Years after my father's death, I discovered he had been diagnosed with manic depression and led a restless life, marrying unsuccessfully several times and dying alone and practically homeless at age 47. Thomas says my father has a message for me. I brace myself and hang on her every word.

"He wants you to know that he simply didn't have the emotional equipment to be the kind of father you needed and if he had stayed things would have been worse, that you were better off

without him," she says. "He wants you to know how much he loves you. He just didn't know how to show it. And he says he's proud of you, because in spite of everything you remained whole. He's telling me he knows he did one thing right in his life because you are on the planet."

I grab a handful of tissues and bury my face in them.

"The true purpose of mediumship," Thomas will tell me later in an interview, "is to console the bereaved by demonstrating the continuity of life after death."

I'm not sure about the afterlife part, but I can't deny feeling consoled. Some accuse mediums like Thomas of exploiting those who have suffered loss. Perhaps I'm naive and vulnerable to trickery, but Thomas seems like a nice woman with good intentions and an uncanny knowledge of intimate details of my life. What harm is caused if people like her provide a bit of comfort to the afflicted?

Lily Dale doesn't promise to provide all the answers to what exists beyond this world, but it offers a glimpse that this life may not be all there is. I have no idea if my father really sent me a message, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit I hope he did. Like belief in any religion, Lily Dale requires a leap of faith. Or maybe just one small step inside its gates.

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Lily Dale's gingerbread cottages are shabby but charming.