

I Prefer the Praying Mantis

Heather Rounds

“You are an aperture through which the universe is looking at and exploring itself.”

— Alan Watts

My mother and I have come here to bend spoons. We're sitting in a circle with thirteen other women on the floor of Reverend B. Anne Gehman's tiny pink Victorian in the Spiritualist village of Lily Dale, New York. It's the Reverend's Friday night spoon bending party.

"Tonight you are capable," Reverend Anne says in a robust Virginia accent, opening up the night.

She pats her loud red hair, makes a place for herself in the circle on her floral printed rug, and begins telling us about her past jobs—locating oil in Texas fields for big companies, helping the FBI and police departments around the country find missing women and children.

In the Texas oil fields, Reverend Anne made a lot of money. She didn't need any machines to find all that oil, just the energy of her hands and the power of Spirit. She would stretch her arms out, fingers extended and eyes closed, welcoming the earth until eventually the oil spurt up and slicked her palms.

The pentagon once asked her to bring down a plane with her mind. It was Vietnam and she was 35. Though she declined the assignment, she's confident she could have succeeded at taking down the plane. But she never would use Spirit that way. That's when she moved to Florida, where she took up real estate.

Reverend Anne pauses and rests her hands in her lap.

"You are capable. I share these stories not to brag, but rather to indicate what a human is capable of, what mysterious abilities live inside us—if we just learn how to tap into them."

The circle nods and hums in agreement.

"In order to bend metal in your hands like this—in order to do many things in life, actually—you must go inward and locate your child. Believe in it as a child would. Believe in it as you should. That child is still in you."

I nod along too, despite my skepticism over everything Reverend Anne has to say.

She places a shoe box in the middle of the circle, opens the lid, and takes out some spoons—examples of what we are capable of. The mouths of them flattened, handles contorted. We pass them around, quietly expressing our awe, handling them as though they might break.

There's a photographer, Shannon, spending her summer in Lily Dale and documenting the Modern Spiritualist movement. Shannon announces to the circle her intention to take photographs of the session and if we care to give her our addresses, she promises to send us pictures of whatever we might bend.

Reverend Anne reaches behind her and picks up another shoebox, dumps a pile of unbent spoons in the middle of the circle.

“Pick up the piece that speaks to you. Hold the spoon tightly and take command. Go inward to locate the light. Go inward to locate Spirit.” Reverend Anne's words are near whisper. She leans back, closes her eyes.

“Focus and believe and the spoon will naturally follow your lead.”

My mother, sitting opposite me in the circle, is the last to take a spoon. She lets the utensil get lost in the folds of her purple denim dress for a few moments before picking it back up and placing it in her palm. Her chin sits back in her neck and her eyes narrow, as she looks down at the spoon. She doesn't hold it with the command that Reverend Anne instructs us to hold it with and I anticipate an unbearable embarrassment—an uneasiness wrapping its way around us both.

“Close your eyes and feel the spoon. See it bending in your head. See a ball of white light. And see that light moving from your arms to the spoon.”

Reverend Anne instructs us to chant.

“Say it softly with focus. Bend, bend, bend.”

I don't choose a spoon that speaks to me. I take the first one that my hand touches. But I do close my eyes and I do chant and so maybe that's enough to explain the tingle in my fingers and the heat of the metal. I can't say I find the ball of white light and the child but I do gently work the handle of that spoon back and forth until it begins to soften and curl downward, twisting into a tight screw.

Reverend Anne shrieks, breaking the chants. We open our eyes to see her dangling a crooked spoon between two fingers and the circle breaks into applause. Reverend Anne wrinkles up her face, shrieks again. Then the whole circle shrieks.

My mother's spoon arches slightly to the right. She smiles at nothing and nobody in particular, just a point on the floor. Her face softens, a little less pressed into itself.

Reverend Anne settles back into place and begins talking about energy. We have warmed the spoon with energy from our body and this has allowed the metal to soften, she explains. I appreciate the anchoring of the occasion with a nod to science.

Then she loops it back to Spiritualism. “Everything in the world is made up of energy. Energy vibrating at various frequencies. While the spoon might be more solid than we are, we are capable of softening it. And while the Spirit world is less solid than we are, we can raise the frequency of our vibrations to feel them and communicate. It is all the same energy. We are all connected.”

The circle applauds again.

It's 2004. The year my mother begins to do new things. She's found the Light Center Spiritual Church, advertised in the *Penny Saver*. This is the year she begins to meditate on an old velvet pillow in a corner of her spare bedroom, the year she's decided to read auras, the year my father thinks he will lose his wife after nearly 30 years, due to what he considers to be toxic distractions, imposed by her newfound passions.

This is the year she forgets my 29th birthday, which I believe to be the reason she's invited me to join her and the rest of the Light Center Spiritualist Church congregation on their long-weekend retreat to Lily Dale. This is when, while holding spoons with my mother, sitting in a circle with thirteen others, I realize I have no idea who she really is, and never really have. What I do know, though, is that my mother, who never really invites anyone anywhere, has invited me to do something with her. This is a bloom of time where she has let me in, with little advance notice, with little explanation. And even though we only live 20 minutes apart, this long-weekend is and will remain the most concentrated time we will ever spend together. And while I don't feel equipped to totally make sense of her, or this time, I am here.

Walking back to the Maplewood Hotel, chattier than usual—the spoon bending having rustled something in her—my mother begins discussing the time I’d told her a ghost had visited me. Something from when I was eight that I haven’t thought of in years.

“Remind me how the story goes,” I say.

“You rolled over in your bunk bed and saw the fuzzy shape of a dark-haired woman in a red dress. Then she dissolved, right there.”

“I guess it could have been a dream, or maybe even you?”

“Well, children see spirits more than adults do.”

“And why do you think that is?” I ask.

She laughs. “The dead are trying to get back to us and to get back they need open channels. And children are open. Life hasn’t caught up to them yet.”

The Spiritualist Village of Lily Dale New York, where my mother will make multiple visits to during her time with the Light Center Spiritualist Church, possibly wouldn't exist without two precocious sisters, who were born on a farm across the state in Hydesville.

American Spiritualism begins in 1848 when Kate and Maggie Fox hear a rapping coming from the walls of their family home. Theory is, it's the spirit of a murdered peddler, Charles B. Rosna, rumored to be buried under the foundation of the house. Very quickly, the Fox Sisters learn to determine the patterns of the raps, equating them to the letters of the alphabet—a precursor to the Ouija board. Neighbors visit daily to witness the Fox Sisters decode the words of Charles the murdered peddler. And eventually, other spirits begin to visit the house. Spirits of dead neighbors come back to rap and thump out messages for their living loved ones. And this attracts even more visitors to the Fox house, in search of raps and thumps that might be addressed to them. And then even more come, and even more come, from further and further away.

The National Spiritualist Association defines Spiritualism as “the Science, Philosophy, and Religion of continuous life, based upon the demonstrated fact of communication, by means of mediumship, with those who live in the Spirit World.” A Medium is described as “one whose organism is sensitive to vibrations from the spirit world and through whose instrumentality, intelligences in that world are able to convey messages and produce the phenomena of Spiritualism.”

At the crux of Spiritualism are messages from the dead—messages we can receive if we are open and sensitive enough to receive them. Anyone and everyone has this ability inside of them, as long as they put in the work to learn how. And so, a Spiritualist is more than a church-goer. They are students, learning to cultivate their sensitivity to vibrations, sharpening their abilities to practice mediumship.

But it’s not just that. The Association’s official website lists a whole slew of phenomenon that first took root during the mid 1800s: “Prophecy, Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, Gift of Tongues, Laying on of Hands, Healing, Visions, Trance, Apports, Levitation, Raps, Automatic and Independent Writings and Paintings, Voice, Materialization, Photography, Psychometry and any other manifestation proving the continuity of life as demonstrated through the Physical and Spiritual senses and faculties of man.”

The website’s FAQ says that yes, a Spiritualist can believe in Jesus and follow the Bible but “Spiritualism is not a branch of Christianity or other major religion. Spiritualism has been recognized by the US Congress as a separate and distinct religion.”

So, it’s a bit about Jesus, but it’s a lot about Spirits—of which there are three defined types:

Type 1: “Those who are so bound to earth conditions that they will try to come in contact and communicate with it through any avenue they find available.”

Type 2: “Those who are naturally attracted to us by the ties of relationship and the laws of love.”

Type 3: “Those advanced and developed Spirits who return from the higher spheres of life in the Spirit world, filled with a Holy Love for Humanity, for the purpose of guiding and leading mankind into higher knowledge and further light.”

Also important to the Spiritualist Church’s definition of Spirit:

“There is no indication of a spirit that was not at one time a living human.”

“There is no such thing as an evil spirit, only poor, ignorant, and unenlightened souls who have also lived on the earth plane. They are, however, no worse than mankind has sent them into the Spirit World, and they are still our Brothers and Sisters.”

What my mother teaches me.

1. *Psychic* is the wrong word— the worst word for describing the work of a Spiritualist.
People who communicate with the dead are *mediums*.
2. We all have the ability to be *mediums* not *psychics*.

Baltimore

Cancer finally gets my father, my mother's husband of 46 years, after a long, long dying (September 19, 2020, downstairs in the 'man cave' on a hospice bed, an old western rambling over the oxygen hiss). One of my distractions from the many kinds of grieving that this year is shelling out includes reading physics books. I fail to understand them for the most part, the content too dense, the words mostly impenetrable. But I like how small it makes me feel. I don't mind how unsurmountable the sentences are. It reminds me of wandering museums—glass cases of ancient objects, oxidizing pendants, coins, mummies, artifacts looming. My irrelevance in these spaces is a comfortable blanket.

I've also started writing again, for the first time since the birth of Wyatt. I'm finally moving past the whiplash that comes with new parenting, just past the phase of grappling with the losses that mothering brings and arriving at that place where what got cast off, what remains of it at least, can be picked up and dusted off. That repossession of first, body, and then language and customs.

I don't write in a ferocious way, but it's something. I'm doing it despite the pile of griefs, my anxious partner's pacing of the house, and the crushing task of parenting a toddler whose preschool has shuttered, in the middle of his language explosion, in the middle of pottie training. The act is a shining blip. Something to do with the time, as terrible as the time may be.

You are capable.

Bend bend bend.

Go inward and locate the light.

Write. Get over it.

Bend bend bend.

What's sticking of the physics books. Not much other than: we are just particles and light. I've always liked that thing about us being stars, but I like it most now—in light of loss. I like anything that, though it may hide and though it may not be grasped, points at what's constant and unwavering within us.

Lily Dale

The village of Spiritualists where my mother's church will take an annual pilgrimage (like Spiritualist churches across America), is incorporated in 1879 as Cassadaga Lake Free Association. Eventually it will be known as Lily Dale. Originally Seneca land, deep in a virgin forest of hemlocks, along Cassadaga Lake, white settlers claim it as a haven for free thinkers, when America is raw from the Civil War, from cholera, from mothers and babies dying in childbirth.

The formal narrative says that Spiritualism makes sense for the time. There is death but there are scientific advancements, too, like the invention of the telegram, shrinking the world and making everything quicker. Both life and death escalate—leaving so much to explore and to lose.

Lily Dale is the hub of it all. Those three types of spirits, all the Clairvoyance, Clairaudience, and Gift of Tongues. A hamlet of slate-writing mediums and materializing mediums and trumpet mediums. But also, a last stop before Canada on the underground railroad. A regular spot for Susan B. Anthony, who, while not a convert herself, establishes herself as an ally of Spiritualists who help fund the suffragist movement. Mae West spends time at Lily Dale, too. And Buddhists. But mostly it's a village of mediums. Mediums delivering messages from the dead through slim silver trumpets, mediums writing messages in chalk on slates or on the street itself, mediums delivering inspirational messages at the inspirational stump—the remnants of a massive fallen pine—to those who come from all over to receive the words of their dead. They come for messages, but also for the Laying on of Hands, Healing, Visions, Trance, any number of balms to help mend the wounds of grief.

In the earliest days of the seasonal camp, admission to the grounds is 10 cents, and 75 cents per day for a room in the Maplewood Hotel. An advert for Lily Dale from 1881 says “Come bring tents, enjoy nature and learn immortality.”

Lily Dale's official newsletter, *The Banner of Light*, describes the place as being full of “magnificent cottages and emerald foliage.”

And they will continue to come through the decades. By 2019 the daily fee will stand at \$15— with about 22,000 visitors annually. The inspirational stump will still be there. And plenty of photos of Anthony and West. By 2021, there will be 272 registered mediums of the National Spiritualism Association of Churches with residences at Lily Dale. To be registered means passing rigorous tests to prove one’s abilities for the Lily Dale Board, just as it has since the 1800s. In 21st century Lily Dale there will be a gift store that sells crystals and dream catchers, a museum, and café. On Sundays, as was always the case, the admission fee will be waived for church services that take place around the inspirational stump. On Sunday the messages of the dead have always come for free.

An August 29th 1891 article in the *Banner of Light* describes Susan B. Anthony's appearance at Lily Dale on Women's Day.

Saturday, August 15th was one of the most glorious days known in the history of Cassadaga. Cottages all over the grounds were embowered in evergreens and flowers and star-spangled banners floated from verandahs and balconies like bebies of bright – winged happy birds and the golden emblems of wisdom, and the oncoming golden era when women as well as man shall place her hand upon the helm of state were twined about the pillars and festooned overarching windows balconies and doorways.

It was estimated that from 5,000 - 6,000 were present. A banner in gold and blue bearing the device "LILY DALE GREETINGS TO POLITICAL EQUALITY."

The song "Wyoming" dedicated to honor Susan B. Anthony, was sung by the large and excellent choir upon the platform. Miss Anthony was introduced and spoke relative to her work.

The Spiritualist who looks me up and down and says I have a wonderful and rich journey ahead.
What does she see? Where can I go to see what she sees?

Leominster

I'm born. It's been barely a year since my mother and father met. My mother, a woman hardly into her twenties, no longer has a profession.

My parents met on an Army base in Hawaii, shortly after serving in Vietnam. My mother worked as a typist and my dad a spy. She quits to stay at home with me, and then has my sister six years later. My father stays in the Army for 20 years. And the family ping-pongs between Massachusetts and Germany and eventually Maryland, making a career for her difficult even if she wants it. I'll be in high school when she gets her first of a string of minimum wage jobs, working at a dry cleaner. As an adult, after having my own child, I'll learn it was my father's decision for her to leave the army, because he didn't want my sister and I "raised by others." I don't know if she ever felt the same about the decision to stay home. I've never asked because I'm not sure I want to know.

The mother at home with the child. It's such a tired idea. My mother has been that in title only, her body present and mind absent. I don't consider until much later in life that maybe she just wasn't built for the exhaustion of the job. That maybe if she'd lived more of her own life, held a title beyond mother or wife, she might have been more present in the time that she was there.

Baltimore

I'm pregnant and discovering certain traits of my mother in myself (as I will, increasingly so, reluctantly so, as the years roll on and accumulate). Much of it shows up in the shape of my face in the morning mirror. I'm aging into something reminiscent of her. But no matter all that, where we fork apart is where we acquire a good part of what defines us as adults—motherhood. My pregnancy is a well measured and premeditated choice. In lead up there were vitamins, period tracking apps and avocados. Expensively co-paid scans of my uterus inspected for any barriers to conception, which led to the detection of a cyst that got swiftly cleared away. I'm 40 and just now deciding I am finally a responsible enough person to parent. I'd given myself until 41 to make it happen. If it did, it did. And if it hadn't, I told myself I'd plot a long trip to Morocco.

No matter how much of my mother I may see in the mirror, I promise myself that we'll never have parenting styles in common.