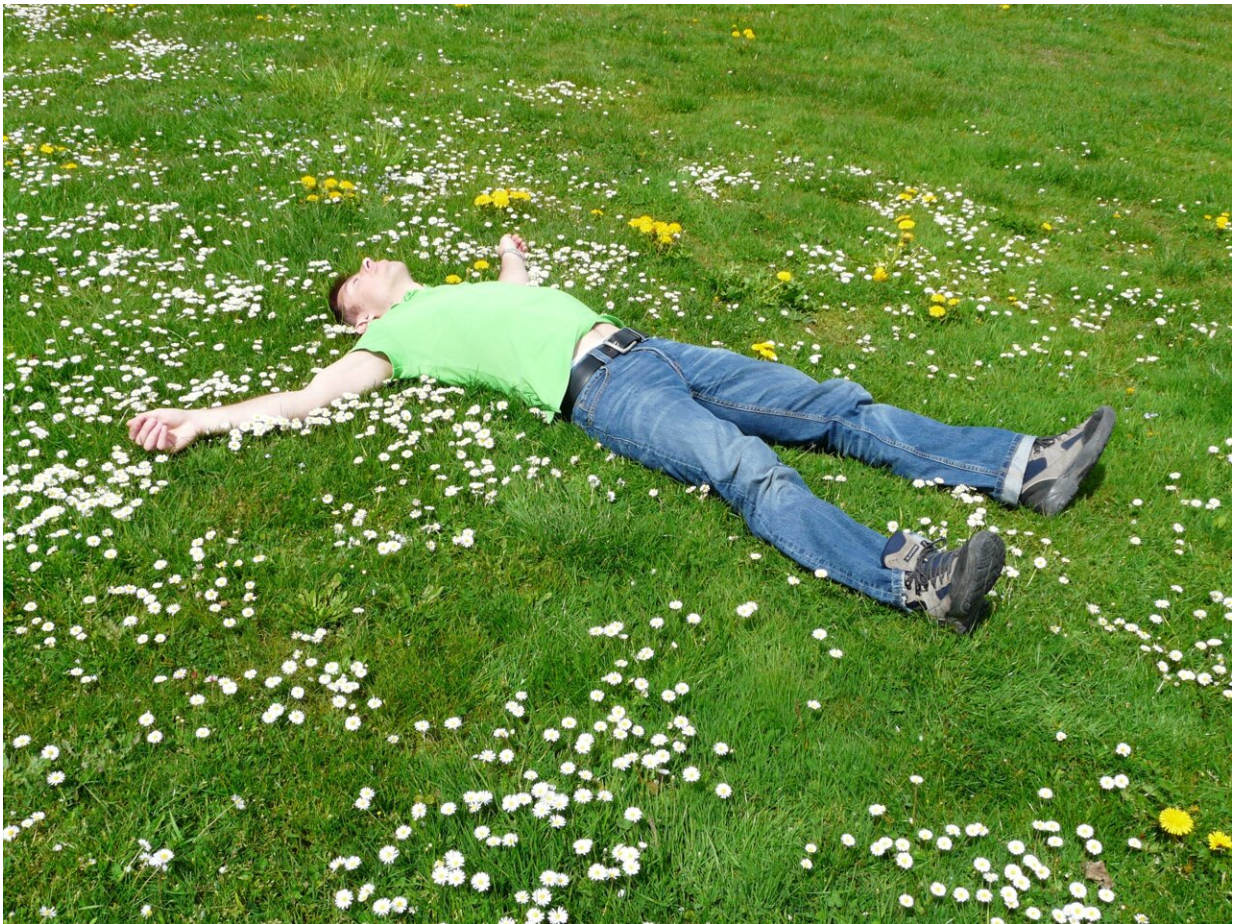


Why some people believe they can hear the dead

January 27 2021, by Adam J. Powell and Peter Moseley



Credit: Pixabay from Pexels

It's a blustery October night in 1841, and though Liverpool is sleeping,

Mrs Bates is very much awake. Before her, shining brightly at the foot of her bed, is an "open vision" of her friend Elizabeth Morgan, "[standing in full view before her, clothed in robes beautiful and white](#)". The shimmering vision lingers for "some considerable length of time" before fading away. When dawn arrives, and after a fitful sleep, Mrs Bates is informed by a messenger that Elizabeth Morgan is dead.

People have reported spooky, spiritual and extraordinary experiences for centuries. Like Mrs Bates, those who claim to have communed with the dead have found themselves ridiculed as well as revered. [Our recent research](#) has revealed that mediums, mystics and psychics are more prone to certain hallucinatory traits than the general population—which leads them to believe that they do indeed communicate with the dead.

The experience of hearing voices is far more common than you might expect. [Some studies](#) have estimated that as many as 50% of people hear the [voice](#) of their deceased loved one during periods of grieving. Elsewhere, [research from our team](#) has shown that some Christians occasionally hear God as a literal auditory voice with which they can commune.

Claiming to be able to speak with the dead is often found to coexist with the beliefs of what's called "spiritualism"—a quasi-religious movement based on the idea that individuals continue to exist after the death of their physical bodies. Their "spirits" may appear to or communicate with living persons, often called "mediums."

Spiritualism can be traced back to the [Fox sisters](#), Maggie and Kate, who in 1848 claimed to hear a [spirit](#) knocking on the walls of their home in New York. Mediums that "hear" the spirits, as the Fox sisters did, are said to be "clairaudient" while those who can "see" the spirits are considered "clairvoyant."

From Arthur Conan Doyle to the [Kardashians](#), the possibility of spiritual mediumship has endured and captivated many. In fact, the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU), one of several contemporary spiritualist organizations in Britain, boasts a membership of at least 11,000.

What's more, interest in channeling spirits, psychic predictions, and life after death seems to have been growing in both the [UK](#) and the [US](#) in recent years. But what's actually going on when people claim to hear voices they take to be the spirits of the dead?

"I hear dead people"

[Our new study](#) of the clairaudient experiences of contemporary mediums is beginning to clarify why some people report hearing spiritual voices. We found that people who were more likely to experience "absorption"—a tendency to get lost in mental imagery or altered states of consciousness—were also more likely to experience clairaudience.

This finding suggests these people actually experience unusual sounds they believe to be clairaudient. But it doesn't explain why they identify these hallucinated voices with the spirits of the dead, which is the core tenet of spiritualism.

Significantly, nearly 75% of those we surveyed said they didn't know about spiritualism or its set of beliefs prior to their earliest clairaudient experiences. This suggests that, for many, the sensation of speaking with spirits preceded knowledge of clairaudience as a phenomenon.

[Some scholars](#) argue that mediums later tag their voice-hearing to spiritualism as a way of explaining their auditory hallucinations. This "attributional theory" may explain why there are a large number of spiritualist mediums.

Grave concerns

[Historical research](#) suggests that emotional desires play a key role in conjuring such phenomena. In the past, this research tells us, when an individual felt melancholic and desperate for a manifestation of the supernatural, they would often record a spiritual experience shortly thereafter.

Guidance from a faith leader also seems important for conjuring the metaphysical. [The work](#) of Stanford University anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann, for instance, highlights how one's desire must be met with direction, noting the importance of training and instruction for the faithful who hope to have vivid encounters with the divine through prayer.

However, [further research has shown](#) that spiritual practice does not necessarily make perfect—at least not without a pre-existing tendency towards immersive mental activities. For mediums, this means that "yearning and learning" is not enough. Clairaudience may require a unique proclivity for voice-hearing.

Healthy hearing

Spiritualist beliefs appear to be relatively harmless, though researchers are increasingly interested in the similarities and differences between clairaudience and several other forms of voice-hearing, like those experienced by people living with mental illness.

For example, individuals with psychosis also frequently hear voices. [By comparing such voices](#) to the clairaudience reported by mediums, researchers have already begun to identify important differences that distinguish clairaudience from the experiences of people living with

psychosis. For example, [mediums tend to exert more control](#) over their voices—and they report very little distress accompanying the experience.

Back in Liverpool in 1841, Mrs. Bates "rejoiced in the vision" of her friend at the end of her bed, while Elizabeth Morgan's husband is said to have received "consolation in the valley of grief" when he learned of the vision. Hearing the dead is not necessarily a sign of mental distress—or supernatural possession. For mediums, it may be a source of comfort, a simple quality of the way that they experience reality.

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