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Reframing death: life-affirming messages from the dead through the lens of Spiritualism and tarot

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ABSTRACT

Death in Western modernity is predominantly experienced as challenging and destabilising, bringing uncertainty, loss, and pain. However, from some contemporary spiritual perspectives, death represents not just an ending, but also facilitates new ways of experiencing our embodied being. Based on participatory fieldwork in the UK, this paper explores constructions and encounters with death through the formal religious lens of Spiritualism and the more informal and personalised practices of tarot. Reflecting practitioners' belief in the agency of spirit in earthly lived experience I resist simple dichotomies of life and death by taking seriously a place for spirit. Using three empirical examples I explore how such a lens allows alternative geographies and therapeutic relationships to emerge, framing experiences of death as both endings and new beginnings, opening up new possibilities in the space left behind. Drawing on this potential, the paper encourages creative exploration of alternative narratives around death, spirit, and place.

KEYWORDS

Continuing bonds;
Spiritualism; Tarot;
Therapeutic geographies;
Death; Spirit

Introduction

The recognition of the existence of continuing relationships between the bereaved and the deceased is nothing new. However, they have been 'marginalised by the discourses and practices of modernity' (Howarth, 2000, p. 127). As a result, death in Western society remains predominantly framed by narratives of loss and pain, and a stubborn social anxiety persists around discussing the theme of relationships with the dead. To counter this, the continuing bonds model emerged in the bereavement literature and is now a well-established theoretical and practical framing (Klass et al., 1996). Centred around acknowledging an ongoing relationship between the living and the deceased, this continuing bonds framework has become an increasingly accepted part of grief counselling (Beischel et al., 2014). Situated within this mixed picture of a general social reluctance to engage with the topic sitting alongside an increasingly sensitive and open approach to our relationships with the dead, this paper explores everyday mundane – yet inherently otherworldly – encounters. Such encounters are widespread, yet not commonly

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acknowledged, and I suggest they provide valuable insight into how people might make space for inherently therapeutic relationships with the dead.

Over recent years, much research has been conducted on the variety of ways in which people might experience, conceptualise, and enact continuing bonds following bereavement (Hewson et al., 2023). This reveals that meaningful interpersonal relationships persist despite the physical absence of the deceased. Continuing bonds are complex, multifaceted, and highly individual; but at their core they reflect 'an ongoing inner relationship with the deceased person by the bereaved individual' (Stroebe & Schut, 2005, p. 477). They vary from straightforward keeping of artefacts, photographs, or memorials to honour the dead, to more direct interactive experiences such as dreaming about, sensing the presence of, talking to, or even seeing the dead (Root & Exline, 2014). Until recently, the dominant Western clinical or psychological view, was that the latter category indicated problematic and complex grief (Kamp et al., 2022). However, there is now a growing openness to the beneficial and therapeutic aspects of such enduring interactive connections, even where they contain elements which some might perceive as 'not real' or 'paranormal'.

Geography as a discipline has also taken a 'spectral turn' of late (Holloway & Kneale, 2008) and is no stranger to absent presences in the landscapes we study (see, for example, Edensor, 2013; Ginn, 2014; Wylie, 2009). A growing body of 'spectro-geographies' (Maddern & Adey, 2008) has mapped the ghosts and memories which linger and disturb our perceptions and experiences of everyday space in multiple ways: from physical memorials and graveyards (Maddrell, 2013) to eerie hauntings (Matless, 2008) and echoes from history (Edensor, 2008). Whilst much of the literature explores the way in which we cling onto the deceased by imprinting memories on the physical landscape, some are exploring how interventions from 'the other side' - ethereal worlds of spirits and magic - also shape everyday spaces and place. This led to Laws (2017, p. 13) encouraging us to engage with experimental ontologies which will allow the capture of those 'interruptions from a magical world' that shape people's lives, yet routinely lie beyond the lens of social science research. In this sense, Laws is building methodologically on a history of geographers acknowledging that to be alert to such interruptions 'requires a particular kind of seeing' (Pile, 2005, p. 139). Laws' 'magical manifesto' is rooted in research with mental health service users and survivors, and Pile's work explores the phantasmagorias of city life, but I also see a value in alternative ways of seeing in relation to everyday encounters with the dead.

Building on such research, this paper adds to the continuing bonds literature from a geographical perspective rooted within these aforementioned spectral geographies. I am interested not in material remnants in the physical landscape, but in the socio-spiritual spaces we share with the deceased and a world of 'spirit' more broadly. In order to access this sensitively and sympathetically, I take on Laws' challenge to 'do justice to the rich, marvellous and irreducible experiences of everyday life, which are often excluded from conventional evidence bases' (2017, p. 3). I take my point of departure from contemporary spiritual practitioners in the UK for whom death represents not just an ending, but also an opportunity for new ways of experiencing our embodied being to emerge. As I demonstrate, this opens up alternative geographies and therapeutic relationships which give space for the agency of the dead. Whilst this does not deny death or the

trauma it brings, it offers a distinct perspective which is worthy of exploration as part of the continuing bonds narrative. Approaching this with an ontological openness prompts reflection on how we might manage our wellbeing more broadly in everyday spaces to allow death more openly into conversations and practices.

The paper combines insights from two ongoing research strands: one exploring personalised spiritual approaches which exist outside any particular religious frameworks (Bartolini et al., 2016; MacKian, 2012), and the second exploring contemporary Spiritualism in the UK (Bartolini et al., 2017; MacKian, 2024). Uniting practitioners from both is a belief in the agency of spirit in our lived experience. This 'spirit' can encompass a range of players from recently departed loved ones and historical ancestors, to divine beings and a universal energy. Drawing on participatory fieldwork rooted in qualitative inquiry with these two sets of spiritual practitioners (see, for example, MacKian, 2011), this paper offers a reframing of the everyday geographies of death in twenty-first century modernity. Firstly, I offer a reframing from a Spiritualist perspective: a religion rooted in talking with the dead and the acceptance of spirit agency on the earthly plane. Secondly, through the lens of tarot, I suggest a conceptual reframing in terms of how we might comprehend death, the material world, and our mortal existence from such a perspective. I then reflect on how such reframing might contribute to efforts designed to help shift the discourse and 'make death discussable, accessible and tangible on personal, collective and public levels' (Bell, 2021, p. 244). I begin, however, by outlining previous discussions of both Spiritualism and tarot in this journal, situating these in the wider social science literature to provide further context.

Spiritualism, tarot, and mortality

Spiritualism is based on the belief that the spirit continues to live beyond the death of the physical body, and it is possible to communicate with that spirit through mediumship (Spiritualists' National Union, 2014). As any demonstration of mediumship will illustrate, the world of spirit is always close and our departed loved ones 'won't be far away' (Pile et al., 2019, p. 2). Already there are very obvious links with death, continuing bonds, and the scope of this journal. Spiritualism has, therefore, made the occasional appearance within the pages of *Mortality*. Over two decades ago, Walliss (2001) noted a gap in the research on continuing bonds in relation to the consultation of Spiritualist mediums by the recently bereaved. Many people seek out readings with mediums following the death of a loved one (Beischel et al., 2014) and Walliss noted that the offering of advice and support from the deceased were the two main functions of messages arising from such interactions. However, he also observed that a desire for further messages was not a significant factor in people's continued involvement with Spiritualist churches. Rather, it was the relationships they formed with other members of the congregation, and the overall philosophy of Spiritualism which kept them coming regardless of whether further messages were received. This would suggest Spiritualism offers something above and beyond talking with the dead, serving to open up a space where people can be momentarily in a different relation to the busy world around them with likeminded individuals. This is a theme I return to later.

Several years later, Wooffitt & Gilbert advanced the journal's exploration of Spiritualism with their observations of stage demonstrations conducted by a high profile medium:

'Can the dead return, and speak to us?' they asked (Wooffitt & Gilbert, 2008, p. 222). By focusing on the entertainment circuit side of mediumship, they certainly evidenced the popularity of the idea of talking to the dead. However, as the authors admitted, such performances are often stripped of any sacred or philosophical significance,¹ and as such fail to capture the potential broader significance of Spiritualist spaces and practices. It is these wider geographies of Spiritualism, which Walliss also hinted at, that I wish to look at more closely.

Only two other papers within this journal have addressed Spiritualism directly. In the first, though not focused on the religion specifically, Arnason et al. (2003) explore obituaries in Iceland's biggest national newspaper which take the form of 'letters to the dead'. This phenomenon, they suggested, echoes the historical significance of spiritualism in Iceland. An enduring 'prominence and acceptance' of continuing contact between the living and the dead is also reflected in the sustained popularity of mediums and spiritual healers across the nation. In the second paper, Lee (2015) also explored a lingering modern fascination with the spirit world, including an interest in psychics, mediums, and near-death experiences. This he labelled 'neo-spiritualism', suggesting individuals embrace this afterlife philosophy to enhance their search for authenticity. In his analysis, consumption of the occult combines with the subjective turn and 'empowers the self to rediscover its sense of continuity' (2015, p. 92). He suggests practitioners of neo-spiritualism are able to creatively explore the self and continued existence, with the occult providing 'a meeting ground between the quest for inner realms and communication with worlds beyond death' (2015, p. 88).

Lee's occult embraced 'a plethora of products', including books, online resources, workshops, and networks. I would include tarot as another such product. Tarot is an increasingly common framework through which spiritual practitioners attempt to 'build their own narratives and relationships with soul' (Fink, 2022, p. 73), deepen their understanding of the everyday, and the potential agency of spirit within that. The detailed imagery and storytelling depicted through a deck of cards is one of the particular strengths of tarot and engaging with this narrative can help to foster an openness to the unknown, creating 'space for unexpected conversations' (Wiesner & Cornejo-Valle, 2021, p. 253). It is important to stress that not all users of tarot engage with the cards for spiritual insight or as an expression of Lee's neo-spiritualism. They are also widely used to aid creativity with no interest required in the spiritual significance others might apply to them. For example, in her 'Tarot for Writers', Kenner (2009, p. xv) suggests tarot can be used to 'break through writer's block, serve as a source of creative inspiration, and give you insights into your characters' past, present, and future'. Not surprisingly, the clear link between tarot and creativity has led in recent years to a proliferation of decks catering for an immense variety of audiences. From decks for practicing modern witches or fans of Buffy the vampire slayer, to literature enthusiasts and Art Nouveau designs, there is something for everyone. Even Urban Outfitters and Gummy Bear have their own specially designed decks, suggesting every corner of Lee's occult marketplace is catered for.

The creativity of tarot has also been harnessed and reimagined to empower diverse communities in unique ways. For example, Failla explores how 'Black tarot' has become a tool of resilience for Black women, helping them 'to navigate and heal from the racial and gendered violence' inflicted upon them (Failla, 2021, p. 49). As such it has been proposed tarot might be adopted as a decolonising methodology for challenging the

disenchantment of colonial modernity (Greenberg, 2023). This idea is reflected in the one paper mentioning tarot within the pages of this journal. In that article, Rodríguez (2023) explores Puerto Ricans' creative expression following the devastation of Hurricane María. She looked at artist Jo Cosme's reinterpretation of tarot's symbolism, where the creation of a new deck of cards provided an act of resistance to the appalling political response and the ensuing necropolitics in the aftermath of the storm. The vivid symbolism of tarot is co-opted and reinterpreted to portray key events, players, and decision makers with stark clarity.

Such uses reflect the way in which tarot is seen to expose the unspoken, triggering new ways of 'seeing and knowing' (Fink, 2022, p. 73). Hence, in the psychology literature, it has been suggested that Tarot can serve as a valuable tool for practitioners and their clients, bringing people 'deeper into relationship with themselves'. This deeper relationship often involves what might be called a spiritual element. Spiritual in the sense of being about the 'more than' aspect of our earthly existence. There is no requirement for this to be religiously grounded, and someone might explore their spirituality as easily through art or nature as someone else might do through prayer or scriptures.

It has been noted in both health care literature and practice that attention to spirituality is an important factor in therapeutic interventions, particularly around end-of-life, regardless of religious affiliation (or lack of) (see, for example, Edwards et al., 2010; Marie Curie, 2023). No longer the preserve of hospital chaplains, spiritual care is now 'everybody's business' in helping patients and their families make sense of illness or approaching death (NHS Golden Jubilee, 2023). Whilst this might often involve known religious rituals or cultural traditions, a pending death or bereavement has also been known to trigger less predictable spontaneous spiritual events. For example, near-death experiences are frequently reported as including encounters with deceased spirits or otherworldly beings (Greyson, 1999). Meanwhile, in a review of bereavement research, Keen et al. (2013, p. 339) suggest 'that almost half to over three quarters' of grieving people report experiencing a sense of presence of the deceased. Grouped together under the label 'anomalous experiences' several papers in this journal have explored such widely reported encounters (Egan et al., 2011; Fortuin et al., 2017). From 'the classic ineffable "feeling" that someone is there 'to clear sensory experiences' (Bennett & Bennett, 2000, p. 144), after death communications (ADCs), as they are also known, have been a natural part of the grieving process across time and societies and can play an important role in healing (Nowatzki & Grant Kalischuk, 2009). In a western context there has been a tendency to describe such encounters as 'paranormal' or 'extraordinary', yet the reality is that they are in fact fairly common (Beischel et al., 2014). Whilst they can occur in any context and at any time, they are particularly frequent in end-of-life care, where staff, carers, and patients routinely experience them as natural, comforting, and beneficial in facilitating the grieving process (Drewry, 2003). Yet despite the common nature of such experiences many are reluctant to discuss them for fear of ridicule and stigma, and they remain undisclosed in medical training and textbooks.

Research aimed specifically at exploring such accounts provides a safe environment in which they can be voiced, but such opportunities for open discussion rarely arise naturally in general conversation. This is, perhaps, in part due to a lingering concern that such experiences might be labelled as 'hallucinatory' (Keen et al., 2013) or seen as evidence of possible 'psychosis' (Alderson-Day et al., 2022). Framing such experiences from a clinical

diagnostic perspective also denies the possible involvement of any external agency or factors, despite people routinely reporting them ‘as evidence of some kind of life after death’ (Singleton, 2016, p. 178). This reflects Varjakoski’s (2019) claim that the dead’s earthly agency is severely restricted in Western culture. However, I would propose the continued significance of Spiritualism and popularity of mediums suggests that the dead *do* continue to retain some agency and, furthermore, that people are routinely seeking interactions which might invite otherworldly agency. But as researchers we can only capture this if, to paraphrase Pile, we are looking in a particular way. Both Spiritualism and tarot have a tendency to evoke for spiritual practitioners very similar experiences to those relating to anomalous experiences amongst the bereaved, but with one key difference: they are experienced from an ontological position which is explicitly open to such a notion, thereby rendering them more mundane than anomalous, expected rather than unexpected, ordinary rather than extraordinary. As such, Spiritualists and tarot readers offer an interesting but contrasting lens through which to view encounters with the dead from the perspective of those already open to such experiences. Exploring how such people engage with the presence of death in the world is, I would argue, worthy of reflection within the pages of this ‘inclusive, provocative and eclectic journal’ (Borgstrom et al., 2020, p. 1). This paper begins that process by drawing on empirical examples located in individual spiritual relationships between this and otherworlds.

Messages from spirit

Spiritual exploration takes many forms, but here I am interested in those which actively embrace a connection with spirit, particularly involving interactions between the living and the dead. The three examples I share from fieldwork illustrate unique ways in which people might receive an unsolicited ‘message from spirit’ and the impact this has on their everyday lived experience. The first example explores spontaneous messages received between a group of Spiritualists (though not as invited messages mediated by trained mediums). The second involves a non-Spiritualist receiving a message from spirit. The final message is received by a Spiritualist medium via his tarot cards. Together, these three examples allow us to explore a reframed relation between death and corporeal existence.

Part 1: continuing bonds in Spiritualism

All religions believe in life after death but only Spiritualism shows it is true by demonstrating that communication with departed spirits can, and does, take place. (Spiritualists’ National Union, n.d.)

It has often been assumed that Spiritualism is a religion of the past, enjoying its heyday in the first half of the twentieth century and since fading ‘into the margins of cultural history’ (Winter, 1995, p. 77). However, recent research suggests the British Spiritualist movement is alive and well (Bartolini et al., 2017; Wilson, 2011). Indeed, the numbers reporting as Spiritualist in the UK census rose by 17% between 2001 and 2011 (Bartolini et al., 2019). Spiritualism, in the popular imagination, often falls (if at all) somewhere between Wooffitt & Gilbert’s flashy stage demonstrations, and a darkened Victorian séance room, complete with tipping tables and ectoplasm (Holloway, 2006; Holloway & Kneale, 2008). As a result,

Spiritualism is often a misunderstood religion, with many asserting it prays on the vulnerable at times of grief (see for example MacKian (2015) on the reaction to 2015 'My Psychic Life'). The reality of Spiritualism today, however, is much more mundane. In over 300 churches and centres affiliated to the Spiritualists' National Union across the UK, congregations gather for weekly divine services, featuring hymns, prayers, and readings, in much the same way as any other religious community. Furthermore, Spiritualism is an officially recognised religion with Ministers holding the same rights and privileges as any other religion (Spiritualists' National Union, 2014).

The philosophy of Spiritualism is based on seven fundamental principles, and as with any religion, the philosophy and spiritual beliefs also spill out beyond the church walls, as practitioners take their faith with them into their everyday world. The first empirical example is an illustration of this, where a small group from one church congregation experienced the agency of spirit not through the channel of a medium but spontaneously as part and parcel of going about their normal daily life. The second example shows how both Spiritualists and non-Spiritualists may perceive the agency of spirit in remarkably similar ways, enhancing a therapeutic sense of continued bonds following a death.

We were conducting a research project on Spiritualism (funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/L015447/1]), when one of our participants died. Ken² was old and it was not entirely unexpected, but we were full of sorrow and condolences, because Ken had given so much to the project, and we knew how loved he was by so many in his community. For them, however, they did not think about his passing solely as a loss, because he was still around; he was simply 'in Spirit'. Audrey told us she had been working in the garden the morning he had died, and while she was busy, she had felt him come to her and say he was ready to go; he wanted to say goodbye. Derek said he had also heard from Ken shortly after he had died to say that he was well, he was 'home' and happy. At the time, Derek had not been informed of Ken's passing, but he knew from the message that he had gone. When these visits occurred, neither had been aware of the time of Ken's death, they only found that out later. Yet both visits were within a couple of hours of his actual death, Audrey's just before and Derek's soon after. This suggests Ken and – by association – Audrey had prior knowledge of his passing, and Derek had confirmation that the deceased can communicate with the living. The basic foundations of the Spiritualist philosophy were therefore confirmed through these two visits: namely that the spirit lives on and that those spirits can communicate with the earthly plain (Spiritualists' National Union, n.d.). Not only were Audrey and Derek's continuing bonds with Ken established but his messages also served to strengthen continuing bonds with others who had passed to spirit but had not sent messages. Ken's death was a strangely life-affirming event, therefore, because it reinforced their religious and philosophical convictions, and confidence in these otherworldly geographies of spirit.

Such an example might be dismissed as inconsequential, for this was the experience of two committed Spiritualists. We might, therefore, expect that with their epistemic and ontological positioning they *would* frame the death of a close friend in this way. Nonetheless, it illustrates the powerful therapeutic value of continuous bonds offered to Spiritualists. Further, and to counter such criticism, I offer a second example with someone who is not a Spiritualist but reported a remarkably similar sense of spirit agency in a most unexpected way. It took place during an exhibition staged as part of the same project aimed at sharing the history of Spiritualism in the

city with the wider population as well as exploring the everyday life of Spiritualists today.³ The exhibition was held in a pottery museum dedicated to showing the history and working conditions of the area's famous ceramics industry. The museum provided interactive opportunities for visitors to experience and reflect on the lives of their ancestors, and our exhibition also invited visitors to reflect on their own spiritual beliefs or experiences.

Soon after the exhibition opened a woman contacted us to ask why a picture of her granddad as a baby was included in the display. We explained the photo had been lent to us from one of the participants who was also related to the baby, and with permission from them both we were subsequently able to put them in touch. However, that was not the only connection which arose from the photograph. She went on to say: 'This might sound a bit strange to you, but I think there was a spirit in the room when I was in it yesterday'. For she had also taken her own photo of the picture on display, and when she got home, she discovered it had a strange distortion running from top to bottom. This lady was not a Spiritualist, and had happened across the exhibition by chance, but for her this was a clear invitation from spirit. She told us she was planning to return to the exhibition again the next day: 'in hope, I suppose that my Grandad will be there as I never got a chance to say goodbye'.

It is suggested in the literature that an ongoing dynamic association with the deceased opens up the possibility of resolution of any pre-existing tensions, conflict, or unresolved concerns in the relationship (Root & Exline, 2014). Our visitor's failure to find an opportunity to say goodbye could be seen as a small example of unresolved tension, and the photo provided an invitation (from spirit) to address that and 'move on'. The distorted photo taken in the exhibition may simply have been the result of a technical glitch,⁴ but it served as a prompt for the visitor to think in a different way about her granddad's passing. It gave her a chance to create a more meaningful goodbye by linking her need for closure with the surprise distortion. The photo threw up a new perspective on the current circumstances around her loss and relationship, which suggests continuing bonds involving talking with the dead is not the special preserve of Spiritualism. Furthermore, it shows this can have material impacts on day-to-day lives; because it had made her decide to return to the place to 'say goodbye'. Such communications are frequently perceived by people as evidence that they have not been forgotten by the deceased (Stemen, 2020), and serve as an important coping mechanism, bringing a sense of comfort and support in grief. Although Stemen reports people often visit special places to provide opportunities for such continuing bonds, our visitor's experience suggests a special place is not always what or where one might expect; it may emerge in the least likely of places. This was also reflected in the messages conveyed to Audrey and Derek. It was not just proof that there was life after death, but by taking the time to get in touch in their own homes, their friend had shown he was still thinking of them.

The insights from the two encounters I have shared, therefore, offer a very different – but not uncommon – way of thinking about death, dying and the lives of the living left behind. The first was framed by the pre-existing beliefs of Spiritualism. In the second, the visual cue of the photograph opened up a new framing of the situation and took our visitor on an unexpected journey, back to the living room, to say goodbye to her granddad. Which brings us to the final example from a tarot reader,

for tarot is also based around a journey full of unexpected encounters – ‘the Fool’s journey’.

Part 2: calling cards and tarot

At some point in my research among spiritual seekers, I realized that tarot cards were excellent deliverers of open, unexpected conversations, the kind of fruitful talk that neither the interviewee nor the interviewer know where it starts or where it ends. (Wiesner & Cornejo-Valle, 2021, p. 259)

The Fool is a simple soul open to embracing whatever comes their way as they embark on the journey of life. Unaware of the hardships they will inevitably face, they step out with confidence and an innocent faith that something good will come of it, even though, as the card illustrates, they are about to step over a cliff and their dog is barking a warning at their heels. Adopting the childlike innocence of the Fool takes nerve and can lead to accidents. But it can also help to advance our understanding of what it means to be human; shedding light on areas where others might fear to tread. As such, the fool carries a valuable message about new beginnings and embracing the unknown. ‘This might sound a bit strange to you ...’ as the lady tentatively put it to us, but nonetheless she asked the question because something had shifted her perception and stirred her curiosity as a result of the encounter in the living room.

The Fool’s journey takes us through 22 Major Arcana cards, illustrating the growth from innocence to enlightenment (Wille, 2023). Along the way, the Fool meets – amongst many others – the Magician and the High Priestess, the Empress and Emperor, the Moon and the Sun, and, of course, Death. In popular culture, Death is often depicted as a card to dread, heralding doom and literal death. However, the Death card in tarot rarely represents an actual death, and even if it does, it does not present death as the end point and sole message. Instead, it appears as a reminder that nothing is constant, and in order to make way for the new, we must usually say goodbye to something. Sometimes, therefore, the card reminds us not to be scared by change. Even in our darkest moments, something brighter is looming on the horizon, depicted on the card by the sun rising in the distance.

Death in tarot, therefore, also represents significant change *in* life, rather than simply the *end* of it. It is a card of transformation, substantial change making way for the new, it’s about endings, transitions, *and* new beginnings, ‘and the only path forward is a rebirth and re-imagining’ (Fink, 2022, p. 67). Quite appropriately then, Death does not mark the end of the Fool’s journey and is not the last card in the deck. There are still several stops to make before the Fool reaches the end of the spiritual journey and then, in all likelihood, the journey will start again as there are always new lessons to learn and new experiences to be had. Key to the central message of this paper, therefore, Death recognises the broader context within which change happens (including an actual death) and gives space to acknowledging the continuing bonds which often remain in the wake of change.

An additional 56 minor Arcana cards complete the tarot pack, offering everyday insights into emotions, creativity, communication, and finance (Wille, 2023). The complete deck of 78 cards covers everything from the ups and downs of love and relationships to the trials and tribulations of work, change, and loss. As such, the cards serve as keys to unlock intuition (Tempera et al., 2019), offering ‘an entry point into multiple perspectives

through which to view one's life experience' (Fink, 2022, p. 67). However, as already noted, tarot is not solely used for personal exploration or readings for clients. The framework of tarot has been used for collective reflection to explore disruptive pedagogies in radical scholarship (Tempera et al., 2019); disabled, queer, and neurodiverse experiences (Hyunh et al., 2021); even as a tool to get rich on the stock market (Gunther, 2011). In short:

You do not have to believe in the occult to see in the allegorical depictions of power, love, despair and expectation and hope a different mirror for your life, in that space between play and hidden meaning. (Wilson, 2013, p. 154)

In my own research, I found each spiritual practitioner would use their cards in unique ways to explore that space between play and hidden meaning, drawing on their particular understanding of the cards, the world of spirit, and their relationship to it. Whilst some readers would stick to tried and tested layouts for their readings, others would allow spirit to guide them as to how to lay the cards. As I have explored elsewhere (MacKian, 2012), the cards exist in multiple worlds, therefore. Most obviously, they exist physically in terms of the paper, ink and containing box. But they also exist socioculturally as a symbolic prop when reading for clients who hope the cards will reveal deeper insight into their life. These clients may have asked for a reading purely for entertainment, or they might share the belief that it will open a portal to deeper spiritual insight. The cards also exist in a subjective emotional world for the practitioner, who will invariably have several decks with each fulfilling a different purpose. Finally, the cards serve as a manifestation of the otherworldly, in that each card manifests a particular message direct from spirit.

Through a combination of their physical, sociocultural, subjective, and otherworldly placements then, the cards allow practitioners to create a sacred space which brings them, in a tangible way, in closer relation to the otherworldly in this world. Consequently, many practitioners treat their cards with respect and value them as much more than a material object. The Spiritualist medium and tarot reader I use as illustration here kept his cards safely in a wooden box and this box served as the location for an unexpected encounter, bringing to him a clear message from spirit. But the message was not from one of the cards; it was in the appearance of something else inside the box:

I've often heard of white feathers being found and always wanted it to happen to me, but it didn't, until one day when my patience and faith had been severely tested. I opened up my tarot box and on top of my cards was a small white feather. It couldn't have blown in or been put there by anyone. Big smiles! (Tarot reader and medium)

The cards, for this tarot reader, serve as a material proxy to open a channel between the physical world of here and now and the immaterial world of spirit. The mysterious appearance of the white feather at a particularly stressful time – following the death of his mother – reinforced that connection. White feathers are commonly reported following bereavement as indicators of communication from deceased loved ones (Keen et al., 2013). The appearance of the white feather in this box of tarot cards was, therefore, interpreted as a clear message that spirit was there for him.

The white feather in the tarot box and the photo of grandad in the exhibition both illustrate how the geographies of everyday life *are* geographies of spirit and the dead. Spirit can make its agency or presence felt in a range of mundane contexts. The closely guarded tarot box meant that, for its owner, the appearance of this small white feather

could *only* be the work of spirit. It was an acknowledgement, with spirit agency, that he was not alone. Similarly, the apparently random photo was an unexpected interruption into the everyday and invitation to connect to spirit. Many are happy to dismiss such spiritual insights as foolish fantasy and ‘not real’, even claiming that mediums and tarot readers pray on the vulnerable. Yet there is undoubtedly comfort and opportunities for healing to be gained from both and – as illustrated by these examples – for those who experience therapeutic benefit such encounters are *extremely* real.

Discussion: the value of an ontological reframing

The task now is not to produce a ‘new model of grief’. Rather it is to amplify the whispered communication across the boundary between the living and the dead that has hitherto been muffled by the noisy, dominant discourse and prescriptive professional rituals of modernity. (Howarth, 2000, p. 136)

The empirical examples I have shared in this paper illustrate how some groups in Western society are openly engaged with the dead in their everyday geographies, and that others might be prompted to engage, should the spirit move them. There is no doubt that ‘the dead continue to be embedded in the lives of the living’ (Varjakoski, 2019, p. 418), or that there is a willingness to acknowledge the weakness of the boundary between the living and the dead; it is how we recognise and respond to that willingness which remains an open question. Might there be insights which could be applied in wider contexts to allow others to benefit from the therapeutic potential of an openness to otherworldly geographies and the agency of spirit? Clearly, this would demand an epistemological openness to the very idea by those who might facilitate such opportunities.

Within clinical psychiatric practice, there is a growing awareness of the need to avoid epistemic injustice. Clinicians are encouraged to recognise they must hold each individual’s personal knowledge in a ‘safe space’ in which experiences are listened to, validated and respected ‘without passing judgement’, regardless of what that experience might entail (Cullinan et al., 2023, p. 3/6). Nonetheless, in relation to anomalous experiences, research has found student counsellors are keen to have training to demystify such encounters, so they can work sensitively with clients reporting them, as currently they admit ‘we get taken by surprise because it’s a subject we don’t talk about’ (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016, p. 543). Clearly, there is a risk of epistemic injustice here because of the lack of knowledge, or even prejudices, of others (Cullinan et al., 2023). Attention to possible epistemic injustice is valuable in that it fosters a framework for the therapeutic encounter in which different types of knowledge can be heard. However, Samra (2023) goes further, suggesting a concern for epistemic injustice does not adequately consider the potential for *ontological* harm. Within a mental health clinical context, she argues, a person’s epistemic knowledge (e.g. hearing voices which the clinician deems are absent): ‘is used to conclude that they have a distorted perception of reality (ontology). This can, in turn, expose them to prejudices if others view them as lacking contact with reality’ (2023, p. 223) (i.e. an assumption that the voices aren’t *really* there).

Obviously, such disparities can be hugely significant in a psychiatric context, where epistemic injustice and destabilising of ontological security can have serious implications. Admittedly, spiritual ontological disparities and epistemic injustices are less immediately

serious in their consequences. Nonetheless, I would suggest these are essential elements to consider when understanding the diversity of frames which people bring to any health care encounter. For example, Mol's (2002) *Body Multiple* detailed the overlapping, often contradictory, ontologies which merge in any clinical encounter. She did not, however, include a spiritual element. If we take Spiritualism as an example, the ontological framing offered for those approaching their own death or grieving the death of another has been shown to bring comfort to the extent that calls have been made for mediums and counsellors to work together to provide carefully tailored support for individual experiences (Beischel et al., 2014). This could allow for an open and unproblematic embracing of the idea that deceased members of our social networks can continue to provide vital social support despite their physical absence. End-of-life carers who are Spiritualists find their openness to discuss death with patients and family members – as well as their familiarity with what might for others be regarded as unfamiliar encounters – means they can support them more sensitively (Walliss, 2001).

The prevalence of anomalous experiences, ADCs, and the continued seeking of mediumship readings by grieving people in our modern technological and medically advanced world (Kalvig, 2017) suggests there is a willingness to engage with such alternative framings, especially when they bring comfort and opportunities for healing. Providing more opportunities for people to talk about such otherworldly encounters, without fear of stigma, could help to break the silence around death and acknowledge the personal and social importance of such coping mechanisms (Stemen, 2020). The growing popularity of 'death cafes' and events such as 'funeral feasts' shows an appetite for talking about death in relaxed, supported, creative ways (Miles & Corr, 2017). Our visitor's chance encounter and Walliss (2001) insights into the comfort of spaces where such conversations can take place, suggest there is clearly space for thinking creatively about how and where ontologically and epistemologically safe spaces might be created to facilitate the sharing of otherworldly experiences and insights in a variety of contexts.

In creative projects aimed at enhancing death literacy in palliative care settings, Bell explores the role of art 'in mediating issues of life and death' (2021, p. 241). She demonstrates the value of using visual and creative methods to initiate conversations and ease the taboo around death, with art serving as a 'starting point' - much like the photo in the living room. She argues this can support community resilience reducing stress and anxiety for both patients and staff. In such projects, art becomes a vehicle to affect perceptions of death and engage people in spiritual exploration, and perhaps the visual storytelling of tarot could provide a similarly accessible way into difficult conversations. Drawing on the potential of the interpretation of death offered by tarot and Spiritualism, therefore, I encourage creative exploration of alternative narratives around death; narratives which seek opportunities for learning and new ways of thinking about encountering death in everyday spaces in unexpected ways. Using such a framing we can discover what might be learnt about the intricately entwined relationship between life and death.

Echoing Laws' call for more magical methodological engagement, I have resisted simple dichotomies of life and death in this paper by taking seriously a place for spirit. I offer these observations to add to other empirical research aimed at drawing out the 'the absence of disconnections' between transcendental and mundane geographies (Söderström, 2005, p. 107). Centring the ontological framing of continuing bonds assumed by research participants, would suggest people are not denying death or

clinging to the past. Rather, they are embracing a new dimension to relationships which can be carried into the future rooted in meaningful connections within and beyond their own embodied being.

Concluding message

When engaging in this type of reflection, we begin to question our assumptions about reality and what our unconscious motivations may be . . . we begin to ask what, instead of how or why. (Fink, 2022, p. 66)

Thanatologists today are asking how experiences of contact with death and dying can be enhanced 'to set up more human and meaningful relationships' (Association for the Study of Death and Society, 2022). In answer, we can return to the starting point of this paper about absent presences, for absence has agency, 'it "acts" or "does" things' (Meyer & Woodthorpe, 2008, p. 131). Meaningful relationships, therefore, are enacted not only around what is *there* but also around the presence of what is *not*. Grief is clearly relational, so whilst death marks the end of a life, it does not mark the end of the relationship (Gunzburg, 2019). As a result, it has already been argued that the powerful yet unexplained experiences reported between the bereaved and the deceased should be considered in grief support (Mäkikömsi et al., 2023). I would expand that to suggest other contexts should be included as potential safe spaces for discussion. We know that anomalous experiences happen routinely, and whilst it might be considered somewhat fool-*ish*, I am minded to agree with Dannenbaum and Kinnier's (2009) proposal that since we currently have no definitive evidence to prove that people *aren't* communicating with the dead, it is logical to at least acknowledge and accept the variety of therapeutic impacts such communications might induce. The undeniably beneficial comfort derived from such occurrences suggests we might fruitfully reconceptualise the processes and agencies through which therapeutic spiritual-material spaces might be coproduced, thereby broadening our understanding and awareness of the diversity of continuing bonds experiences in a complex, uncertain, and challenging world.

The examples shared in this paper illustrate that death – as in tarot – does not inevitably and only end relationships, it can transform them with potentially therapeutic and beneficial consequences. We know that *not* talking about death negatively impacts on wellbeing (Koksvik & Richards, 2021), yet many people remain reluctant to admit to ongoing relationships with the deceased out of fear that they will be seen as complicated grievers (Stemen, 2020). I am, therefore, in agreement with Howarth that the dead cannot be controlled and they will continue to challenge our disbelief with their presence; so we might as well reject our assumed 'spatial and temporal boundaries between life and death' (2000, p. 133). Instead, let us be open to embracing unfamiliar ontological frameworks which allow us as researchers to step beyond potential epistemic injustice and, as Cullinan et al. (2023) suggest, see and hear each other in more meaningful (and spirited) ways.

Notes

1. Spiritualism has always involved an element of 'entertainment' which does not require audiences to hold religious beliefs. However, it is worth noting that historically some high-

profile public mediums were well respected for the religious significance of their work (for example Cora L.V. Scott and Nettie Maynard in the US, or Annie Brittain and Gordon Higginson in the UK). Even today many public demonstrations will include philosophical teachings from the religion.

2. Pseudonyms are used to respect anonymity.
3. The public exhibition titled 'Talking with the Dead: Spiritualism in Stoke-on-Trent' took place at Gladstone Pottery Museum from September to November 2015. It featured a living room containing objects from participants' homes and Spiritualist churches, as well as interactive audio-visual materials. More information can be found on the exhibition website. URL: <http://www.talkingwiththedead.co.uk/>.
4. Many Spiritualists would also agree with such an analysis. However, they would assume it was spirit which had intervened to create that particular glitch at that particular time.

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Notes on contributor

Sara Mackian's research is driven by a curiosity for how people relate to health, illness, and wellbeing. She is a geographer by training. Inspired by the idea that the world is more mysterious and enchanted than we habitually think, she uses social science and art combined to explore the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the body and the spirit, this world and the otherworldly.

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