

# Spirits, Ghosts, and Mediumship: Navigating the Spiritual in Research

Jessica Katherine Fink

Encounters with spirits are inherently numinous since they fill us with awe and a sense of connecting with something greater or other. The term *spirits* can refer to a wide variety of typically unseen beings including deities, spirit animals, nature spirits, and deceased persons. Jung thought that spirits were autonomous complexes separate from the ego, writing “Spirits, therefore, viewed from the psychological angle, are unconscious autonomous complexes which appear as projections because they have no direct association with the ego” (Jung, 1969, p. 309). The idea of spirits appearing as projections is often problematic for many spiritual practitioners because it can lead one to assume that spirits are imagined and therefore not real. For these spiritual practitioners spirits are very real and exist in the world alongside people. In the Reclaiming tradition where I have personally been involved, interactions with spirits are encouraged. Reclaiming founder Starhawk describes how one can connect with the Goddess,

In the Craft, we do not believe in the Goddess - we connect with her; through the moon, the stars, the ocean, the earth, through trees, animals, through other human beings, through ourselves. She is here. She is within us all. She is the full circle, earth, air, fire, water, and essence - body, mind, spirit, emotions, change (Starhawk, 1979, p. 77).

While Jung’s position does not exclude the types of experiences that spiritual practitioners like Starhawk reference, autonomous complexes are viewed as part of the inner world.

As researchers in Jungian psychology, we are often asked to acknowledge the deepest personal experiences yet also maintain the healthy distance and skepticism required of academic work. Mainstream psychology usually labels encounters with spirits as pathological or invented, while spiritual practitioners believe that these experiences are encounters with literal deities, beings, or deceased persons. Much like the medium or shaman who acts as a channel between the worlds of the living and the spirits, perhaps there is a liminal space where academic and spiritual perspectives can coexist? This essay explores researchers’ experiences with spirit phenomena and how one processes and learns from the numinous.

## C. G. Jung’s Experiences with Spirits

The fear of acknowledging personal encounters with spirits in academic writing is something that Jung (2009, 2020) encountered with his work. The powerful visions and encounters with spirit figures were written down in black notebooks released as *The Black Books* sixty years after his death. Similarly, *The Red Book* was released almost fifty years after his death, and it was a transformed version of his original account. The work he

published on archetypes and his memoir, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, can all be seen as a way of processing his experiences in places that some spiritual practitioners call the world of the celestial spheres, Bardo, the astral plane, the spirit world, the space between the worlds. Notably, Jung did not publish the versions of his work that were closest to his direct experience; instead his works that referenced the experiences were heavily abstracted from the original content.

When she was young, Jung's mother used to sit beside her father as he wrote his sermons in order to protect him from ghostly disturbances, and she kept a journal where she recorded unusual occurrences with ghosts and precognition (Jaffé, 1971). His grandmother would also see ghosts of people that were later verified to have existed historically. Jung (1902/1970) wrote his doctoral dissertation on mediumship, based on the experiences of his cousin Helena Preiswerk. Despite his early writings categorizing mediumship as pathological, Jung's public views on spirits and mediumship changed over time. Jung (1969) later acknowledged the universal nature of a belief in spirits who inhabit the same realm as people and have powers to influence people. He placed autonomous complexes within dreams, apparition sightings, and psychic disturbances (Jung, 1969, p. 305) and defined spirits as the unconscious projection of these complexes. However, he sourced the requested analysis of a series of letters relating direct experiences of spirits out to one of his students, Aniela Jaffé (1979), who published her findings in *Apparitions: An archetypal approach to death, dreams and ghosts* after his death.

While Jung's model made space for the experiences with spirits and informed a rich and valuable literature on archetypes, his approach of abstraction of direct experience can be seen as reductionist. Much like a dietitian who focuses on the nutrients within food and the effects of those nutrients, a focus on the archetypes of the psyche and their effects extracts them from the rich sensory and somatic elements that create the numinosity. Jung's explorations of art, literature, and alchemy appear to be attempts to grasp at the mysterious and experiential elements of these numinous experiences and to write about them. The emergence of Jungian Arts-Based Research in recent years also reaches towards the ineffable through the experience of creating art. Similarly, we must be able to find a way to bring these experiences with spirits into the research in a way that honors and respects the fullness of the experiences and does not reduce them down to an expression of the archetypes. There is so much more within them.

### **Through the Eyes of Spiritual Practitioners**

In contrast to Jung, most religious practitioners who work with spirits do not consider the entities involved to be rooted in psyche. Spiritual practitioners Filan and Kaldera (2009) devote an entire chapter in their book *Drawing Down the Spirits* to arguing against the archetypal view as minimizing the experience. My intuition is that this resistance has to do with a perception that psyche is only defined as "inside" and therefore not experientially real. However, when we look at the whole world as ensouled and emphasize that the psyche is real, I think that there is the possibility of a shift. At least for me it there is because it allows space for what I have experienced yet roots it in psyche. As researchers in Jungian psychology, we must hold multiple ontologies and respect the beliefs of religious practitioners and attempt to convey the full range of experiences, while also maintaining a critical awareness and aim to talk about these experiences as psychological in addition to spiritual.

A further dilemma involves how engagement with the spirits of dead people could be psychologically activating, yet we must also respect the personhood of spirits. Many religious traditions engage with spirits as ancestors with deep respect, and for others engagement with spirits involves deities who are considered sacred. When I engage in writing about these types of experiences, I set the intention to be very careful to include the context of traditions and disciplines and actively work to avoid reductionism of experiences. Individual and collective experiences are true to those who experience them, and efforts must be made to ensure that their perspectives are respectfully maintained throughout the research. For example, an academic challenge emerges when working with experiences that involve communications with spirits, because there is a risk of misattribution of communications as there is currently no definitive way to determine the source of these communications. Where specific cases of dead people are discussed, we must honor and respect who they were and not conflate what seems like communication with dead people with who they were when they were alive.

### **Bridges and Discernment**

Myth and religious stories may serve as a bridge between the academic researchers and the spiritual practitioners, especially if we include religious stories from modern religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and examine them through the same lenses that we use with myth. Accounts of experiences with deities and other spirits allow the reader to enter into the stories through active imagination or ritual theater. Many spiritual traditions carry on the telling of myths or stories from their holy books and enact them in ritual or plays. By respectfully including accounts of encounters with spirits within our research, we can give these numinous experiences a voice. As Jungian researchers, we often employ the technique of active imagination to step into the dreams of others. By entering into active imagination with stories of encounters with spirits, we can come to know these spirits as numinous figures and learn from them. Discernment in interpreting these interactions is key. As spiritual practitioner Christopher Penczak (2002) wrote,

We should not believe everyone and everything at face value. We are open to other people's beliefs and advice, but when it comes to our own happiness, we have to find what is right for us. We would be foolish to follow anyone blindly, spiritually, and physically. Blind obedience is the cornerstone of a cult. We must use our minds to understand the message and determine if it is right for us. (p. 87)

He also points out that both hearts and minds are required for true discernment, and he advocates taking time with any messages that are confusing or do not make sense for any reason. Several of my spiritual teachers have provided similar advice in employing careful consideration of what a spirit says or asks just as one would with another living person.

Jungian psychology has the unique potential to provide a helpful pathway to understanding these experiences, especially for people who encounter spirits but are not trained within a spiritual tradition that accepts the potential of these experiences to be beneficial. However, this approach must be done in a way that respects the personhood of spirits and is not reductionistic. A deity or a deceased loved one must be allowed to be experienced as that deity or deceased loved one, yet we can shift the conversation about how to work with that experience. Psychology then shifts from purporting to interpret

numinous experience to providing tools to process them. For those who are drawn to parapsychology there is a strong hunger for psychological resources that do not involve judgment. Inviting people to work through the experience via active imagination, to revisit certain details, and to ask questions of the spirits are ways to help psychologically process the experience and allow persons to remember details they may have forgotten. Jungian research can encourage innovative approaches that help people process their experiences and fully honor the numinous. Jungian analysts and psychotherapists may already be doing this type of work in the consulting room, yet writing about it in a research context helps get the word out and provide validity to those having experiences.

Providing space for the reality of experiences with spirits within academic research is a topic that is deeply personal to me because in addition to being a researcher in Jungian psychology I have studied in many spiritual traditions and experienced vivid encounters with spirits eschewed by mainstream psychology, yet they are very real and psychologically transformative for me. While psychology has a wide literature regarding how to process and describe these experiences through creating distance and abstraction, a level of respect and connection is missing when the literature assumes that numinous experiences involving spirits are pathological and require such distance. Jung himself advocated accepting what patients say as psychologically true, and since Jungian researchers are therefore open to accepting value in numinous experiences, we stand unique among psychological researchers in acknowledging the benefits of direct spiritual experiences. My training in mediumship and spiritual traditions that actively work with spirits has opened up new pathways and created a sense of tangible reality to these experiences. My openness to experience makes me more inclined to accept these beings and communications as real and true, which brings a closeness that allows for respect for the experiences of others. However, I must work to overcome the bias to maintain an additional level of critical awareness and skepticism beyond what spiritual practitioners advise around accounts of experiences with spirits in my academic work. Thoughtful weighing of evidence requires a balance between openness and skepticism as I develop conclusions. However, it is not easy to maintain that balance and takes additional work and feedback from others to find it. It is often very challenging to step away from openness to spiritual manifestation and then look through the lens of academic objectivity and then close those channels in order to be able to look through the lens of academic skepticism.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Many psychological disciplines eschew the spiritual and religious, pushing them to another realm of discourse which allows them to avoid the problematic topics that are difficult to prove. Since Jung did not, Jungian researchers have a foundation to build upon within his work, especially with the publications of *The Red Book* and *The Black Books*. Through embracing the significance of the numinous within psychology, Jungian researchers have a unique pathway through which to explore experiences with spirits and share research with the public. Some researchers may experience the challenges of openness to accepting the possibility of these experiences as being real, and others like me may face the challenge of embracing the skepticism required for academic discourse. There is a strong hunger in our culture and a need for validation of a diversity of numinous experiences with spirits that does not involve religion or the church. Developing techniques that honor and respect experiences with spirits and help people make sense of them has the potential to heal a

cultural bias that has alienated and created harm for many people. Through taking on these thorny challenges and broadening our perspectives in often uncomfortable ways, as researchers we can contribute to both society and our field.

### Contributor

Jessica Katherine Fink is a PhD candidate in Depth Psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. She has trained for many years in spiritual traditions that practice ecstatic ritual and direct communication with spirits. She has also studied and participated in many medium readings within the spiritualist community in Lily Dale, NY, and studied the science of apparitions, hauntings, and mediumship at the Rhine Research Center in Durham, NC.

### References

- Filan, K., & Kaldera, R. (2009). *Drawing down the spirits: The traditions and techniques of spirit possession*. Destiny Books.
- Jaffé, A. (1971). *The psychic world of C. G. Jung*. In N. Fodor, Freud, Jung, and occultism (pp. 187–203). University Books.
- Jaffé, A. (1979). *Apparitions: An archetypal approach to death, dreams and ghosts*. Spring.
- Jung, C. G. (1969). The psychological foundations of belief in spirits (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read et al. (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung: Vol. 8. Structure and dynamics of the psyche* (2nd ed., pp. 301-318). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1948)  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400850952.300>
- Jung, C. G. (1970). On the psychology and pathology of so-called occult phenomena (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read et al. (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung: Vol. 1 Psychiatric studies* (2nd ed., pp. 3-88). Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1902)  
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400850907.1>
- Jung, C. G. (2009). *The red book: Liber novus: A reader's edition* (M. Kyburz et al., Trans.; S. Shamdasani, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Jung, C. G. (2020). *The Black Books* (M. Liebscher & J. Peck, Trans.; S. Shamdasani, Ed.). W. W. Norton & Company.
- Penczak, C. (2002). *Spirit allies; Meet your team from the other side*. Weiser Books.
- Starhawk. (1999). *The spiral dance: A rebirth of the ancient religion of the great goddess*. Harper San Francisco. Original work published 1979.