

SNU TODAY

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Spiritualism and Black History Month:

We take a look
at Spiritualists
of colour from
our history and
give greater visibility
to their contribution.

THIS ISSUE:

We talk to Spiritualist
writers about writing,
publishing, and their
inspiration.

Meet your new President
Minister Jackie Wright

SYMPHONY OF US

Minister Lynette Coulston tells us
about her involvement with the
production Symphony of us



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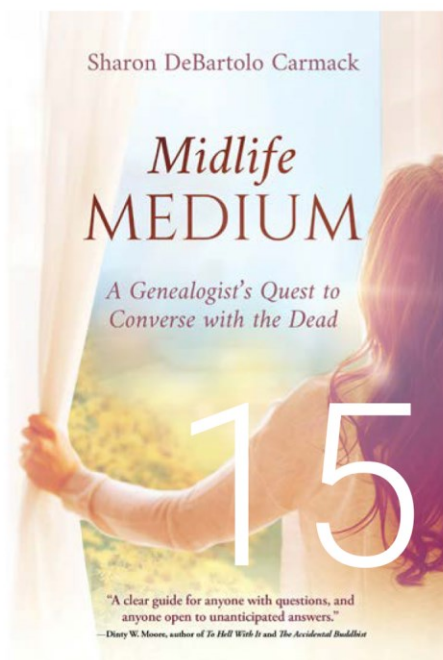
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Photo: Sharon DeBartolo Carmack DSNU

the midlife MEDIUM

We talk to Sharon DeBartolo Carmack DSNU about her latest book and discover there are many points on her journey that we might recognise or learn from.

Readers of SNU Today will be familiar with Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, DSNU. As a Certified Genealogist she's given us advice on searching out the facts about our Spiritualist pioneers from the many historical records available. She has an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing which has stood her in good stead to author the many books she has published, and most recently her book about Maria B. Hayden, which has helped to create a profile of a key pioneer that we knew little about. She also serves as the U.S. National

Rep for SNUi. Now Sharon has published a memoir, "Midlife Medium: A Genealogist's Quest to Converse with the Dead."

We interviewed Sharon to learn more...

For "Midlife Medium" you've switched focus to your own lived experience, rather than that of historical figures. What inspired this decision?

Many have had mediumistic abilities since childhood but some run from it. It scared them. But I went running toward it as a teenager. I played with Ouija boards

and tried to conjure the dead, but nothing happened. At the age of 56, I decided to find out if anyone like me could become a medium. "Midlife Medium: A Genealogist's Quest to Converse with the Dead" is what's known as an immersion memoir. I immersed myself in the world of mediumship—eventually finding SNUi!—and it turns out that, yes, I believe anyone can become a medium. But in order to become a good medium, a person needs to take classes, learn discipline, and understand the mechanics of mediumship. I always knew I'd write a memoir about my experience, so

I kept a journal documenting all the ups and downs. But I think spirit knew I first needed more life experience and maturity before this ability unfolded.

Why are stories about Spiritualists and their experiences important? What can people learn from them? (both inside and outside the movement)

Biographies and memoirs about Spiritualists and their experiences inspire others. I've heard from several readers who say they can relate to my journey in becoming a medium, that they had a similar path or experiences. As one post I saw on Facebook says, "I don't share my thoughts because I think it will change the minds of people who think differently. I share my thoughts to show people who already think like me that they're not alone." That's one thing readers inside and outside Spiritualism learn from these books: they aren't alone. If they have doubts, reading memoirs and biographies can overcome those doubts because they see the struggles others have faced. These books inspire them to stay on their path.

Although the book charts your own journey, it brings to life many aspects of Spiritualism and mediumship. What were the themes and experiences that you felt it important to tackle?

When I started writing the memoir, I knew it could not be a "this happened, then that happened" book. That's not an interesting story. It had to be more than "Here's how I became a medium." All memoir writers should answer these three questions before they begin writing, although the answers can change as they draft: "What is this book about?" "What is it really about?" and "What is at stake?" Yes, Midlife Medium is about my journey to become a medium. But at stake was what would happen if I didn't become a medium? Certainly, not only I, but the reader, would be let down. What the book is really about, though, is how my journey impacted my family. While my husband was on board, my only child, who is a high school science teacher, is a sceptic. That's what was truly at risk: my relationship with my daughter, and that became the driving conflict of the story. It was also about healing the relationship with my mother who was now in the spirit world. I wondered if such relationships could still

be healed. That became another part that was at stake: Could I live with an unsettled relationship if we couldn't heal now that she's in the spirit world? I found out that healing can happen even after someone crosses over.

I'm also passionate about being a Spiritualist, and it was important for me to share this, not only through the history of Spiritualism, but what it means to me to be a Spiritualist. Woven into the story, albeit subtly, is Spiritualism's seven principles and philosophy. I didn't want to come across as proselytizing. My goal was to make readers more aware and curious about Spiritualism, so they'd want to explore it more on their own.

How does it feel to have your story "out there" for all to read?

I've written a memoir before, "Inheriting the Gordon Hips", which is a collection of essays about my search for my identity as an only child and my interest in family history. Having read hundreds of memoirs during my master's program in creative nonfiction writing, I know that the more honest the writer is with the reader, the more engaging the story. If you are uncomfortable putting your story out there, warts and all, then writing a memoir is not for you. The warts are what makes us human and relatable, as well as makes the story interesting and believable. Plus, I'm 65 now. With age, you realize, "If I don't tell my story, who will?"

Should we, as individual Spiritualists, be more open about our journeys and experiences? This could be a valuable tool for promoting and destigmatising Spiritualism and mediumship. Would you agree?

It's unlikely that someone who doesn't believe in an afterlife will read books about it. In fact, one reviewer wrote that Midlife Medium "Won't sway cynics, but its depiction of family relationships shines." Well, I didn't write my memoir to sway cynics! But for those who question and are unsure about an afterlife, it is good to be open about our development and unfoldment, as well as about Spiritualism. Remember, we need convincing, too, so if we are honest with our readers about our journey, sharing our stories is a valuable tool for promoting and destigmatising Spiritualism and mediumship. It can remove a lot of fear and doubt.

But we have to detach our egos when we share our journey. Not everyone will be accepting or agree. Certainly, my daughter was a sceptic and continues to be so. I had to reach a point where I respected her opinions and beliefs, so she would respect mine.

The story of sceptic to "believer" has played out for many exponents throughout the movement's history. Do you think that talking about this aspect of many people's journeys is important in challenging tendencies to instantly dismiss the idea of survival? Could it make people reconsider and think again?

We should never completely lose our scepticism or analytical mind. Spirit should be able to prove to us that they are trying to communicate. We should rule out other earthly explanations, especially when it comes to physical phenomena, before declaring whatever we are receiving is from the spirit world. This scepticism is a healthy part of many people's journey. Our natural reaction is to doubt that the spirit world is making their presence known. I remember Paul Jacobs telling his students that he wanted to prove that he wasn't a medium. Looking at it from that perspective keeps us honest and challenges the spirit world to show their intelligence. And looking at your development as trying to prove to yourself and others that you're not a medium can certainly change how you look at survival. How could you possibly know certain information?

The book isn't just a memoir – can you tell us what else the reader can expect, and some of the areas that you explore with them, and what they might learn?

I share some of the history and principles of Spiritualism in my memoir. While the religion is better known in the UK, in America most people have little knowledge of Spiritualism. So I wanted to educate the reader, and hopefully inspire some to look into Spiritualism more closely. I love being a Spiritualist, and I hope some of my readers will embrace it as I have. You certainly don't have to be a Spiritualist to be a medium—many good American mediums aren't Spiritualists. But the birth of Modern Spiritualism is also the history of modern mediumship. How can we know where we're going if we

don't know where we came from? I find the history and evolution of mediumship fascinating, and that became deeper for me when I researched and wrote "In Search of Maria B. Hayden: The American Medium Who Brought Spiritualism to the UK."

In the appendix of my memoir, I also give advice for starting your own journey, advice for genealogists to connect with their ancestors, and ways to find a mentor and development classes. It's really a summation of what I learned, so readers don't make the same mistakes I did in my development. Of course, I encourage readers to join SNUi and to take advantage of all the classes, circles, and services that are online, as well as attend AFC if they are able to.

How has genealogy shaped your development as a medium?

As a Certified Genealogist for the past 33 years, I've always worked with the dead. The way I see it now is that genealogists are natural mediums, whether they realize it or not. After all, genealogy and mediumship have a lot in common.

- Both are interested in connecting with the deceased. Genealogists do this through research. Mediums do it through mental or other forms of mediumship.
- Both are interested in learning about the past. Genealogists want to know what life was like for our ancestors. Mediums learn about it through the information spirit people communicate.
- Both are interested in telling the life stories of those who have passed. Genealogists do this when writing family histories. Mediums do this when they allow the spirit communicator to talk

about their lives.

- Both are evidence based. Genealogists document their research and ensure that one generation connects to the next through that research. Mediums convey information and details about the spirit communicator that become evidence of their survival for the recipient.

So, for me, genealogy and mediumship go hand in hand. But mediumship for the genealogist doesn't work exactly as we might hope. Rarely do spirit communicators relay names, dates, and places that help genealogists get beyond brick walls in their research. Sometimes a person needs an experienced genealogist, not a medium!

You also rarely get genealogical problems solved for you by consulting or becoming a medium; more likely, you will get clues or fragments of clues, hunches, inspiration, or other more subtle means of commu-

nication that help with your genealogical research. As I mentioned in the SNU Today (February 2021) article where I talked about researching Maria B. Hayden, I have no doubt she guided me in my research and writing her biography. I constantly talked to her while I worked on that project and then persevered with the exhaustive research. I found obscure sources that I don't think many researchers would have even looked for. Plus, I had the knowledge and skills to analyze the historical documents. That came from my career as a Certified Genealogist. Some people might think my discoveries were serendipitous. I believe they were more about a synchronicity between a determined researcher and a spirit who wanted those discoveries made and her story told.

Some have asked me why our distant ancestors don't communicate. I'm guessing it's because they likely wouldn't be recognized. Unless you do genealogical research



and become intimately acquainted with your great-greats through not only genealogical research, but studying what life was like when they lived, would you even recognize them if they did communicate through a medium? Most people can recognize grandparents, but fewer can recognize great-grandparents or beyond, who are also more likely to have moved to a higher plane of existence. This is why we tend to hear more from the recently deceased than from the distantly deceased. We recognize those who have recently transitioned.

An interesting feature of the book is that it ends with a change of focus from your journey to the reader's journey. What are your hopes and aspirations for others embarking upon a Spiritualist journey?

I think those who read memoirs are already on their own journey of learning and discovery. They are looking for inspiration and to see how someone else accomplished what they want to accomplish. That's why I included a short guide for those who want to either start or steer their own journey.

My hope is that my readers will seek out competent mentors and instructors, either those who teach at the Arthur Findlay College, those who've trained there, or those who have studied with the teachers from there. I've not been to the College to take any courses, but many of those tutors now come to America and teach, and I've benefited greatly from that. While the College building is beautiful, and I'm sure the experience there is wonderful, to me, the teacher was more important to my journey than the building.

We've looked at other Spiritualists who have embarked upon writing – as an experienced writer, can you give any budding writers out there some words of encouragement?

Like developing mediumship, some come to writing with a natural talent, others do not. And like mediumship, it's an ability that can be learned and developed. I suggest budding writers do three things:

1. Read, read, read in the genre you want to write. If you want to write a memoir, read not only memoirs written by other mediums, but read spiritual memoirs and memoirs in general. But you need to read like a

writer, that is, as you read, study the story structure and identify the conflicts. How does the writer use scene and narration? What holds your attention? What loses it?

2. Take some writing classes and read writing guidebooks. Although a memoirist isn't writing fiction, Sol Stien's "Stein on Writing" gives advice that applies to memoir writing too. The guidebooks that helped me the most were Robin Hemley's "A Field Guide for Immersion Writing" and Dinty W. Moore's "The Story Cure." I teach online through Writer's Digest University a six-week course called Writing the Personal Essay Fundamentals, which is a good way to get started writing your memoir.

3. Join or start a writer's group. You need readers who can objectively read your drafts and tell you what's working and what isn't. My readers were invaluable in helping me craft my memoir. Also remember that early drafts are going to be flakey. Mine are!

“My hope is that my readers will seek out competent mentors and instructors, either those who teach at the Arthur Findlay College, those who've trained there, or those who have studied with the teachers from there”.

It's in the revision and polishing that the story takes shape.

Are there any projects you're working on at the moment? Is there any other research or writing in the pipeline?

Of course! My current project (and 28th book) is a dual biography that sheds light on an unfortunate and darker side of Spiritualist history. It's tentatively titled *The Scientist and the Spiritualist: The Gilded Age Scandal of the Scientific American Editor and His Obsessed Wife*. The story is about Harriet E. Beach (1828–1905) who became swept up in the Spiritualist movement much to the disapproval of her husband, Alfred E. Beach (1826–1896), an inventor and editor of the *Scientific American* magazine. Their conflicting views over Harriet's obsession

with mediums and the spirit world would haunt their nearly fifty years of marriage and beyond.

What should have been Alfred's rise into the nouveau riche of the Gilded Age became a public nightmare for them both. Harriet was a wealthy, credulous woman who was duped by fraudulent mediums. Alfred's solution was to commit her twice to insane asylums, then upon her release, lock her in a room for months at a time in their Stratford, Connecticut, home. Despite their dysfunctional relationship, they stayed married. Alfred remained editor of the *Scientific American* until his death, assisted inventors with their patents, and left a legacy known as the Beach Pneumatic Transit, the first attempt to build an underground public transit system in New York City. Harriet became a medium herself and a spirit artist. A year after Alfred died in 1896, Harriet married a charlatan medium, and her son sued to declare her incompetent. The Spiritualist

movement was meant to bring messages of hope that everyone's soul survives physical death and can still communicate with the living. For those ensnared by fraudulent mediums, as Harriet Beach was, it sometimes negatively impacted multiple generations. As with Maria B. Hayden, I know Harriet is working with me to tell her story. Sadly, fraudulent mediums are still a problem, so it's really a historical cautionary tale about an aspect of Spiritualism that other scholars and historians have often ignored.

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack was talking to Alv Hirst. Sharon's books are available on Amazon, and her book on Maria B. Hayden is available in the SNU online shop.

