

BOOK REVIEW

An Extraordinary Journey: The Memoirs of a Physical Medium by Stewart Alexander. White Crow Books, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78677-137-7 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78677-138-4 (ebook).

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This is a revised and updated version of Alexander’s book published in 2010 under the same title. The changes are minor; there are some additional reflections on the subject of Spiritualism by the author, but mainly they consist of supplementary accounts from sitters who have taken part in séances with Alexander since the original publication. Some appear in chapters described as “seminars,” reported chronologically, but in fact they are also witness accounts of séance experiences. The most significant addition, in terms of reporting startling new phenomena, is the Epilogue provided by American journalist and author Leslie Kean. There is no index.

I found this book very readable. Also, having read it, I would find it difficult to disagree with the descriptions of Alexander by the late David Fontana (who provided the Foreword) and Annette Childs (who provided An Appreciation) as a person of integrity and dedication, as well as intelligence and good humor; in fact, “a true gentleman” (p. xxiii).

Alexander, together with his brother, became a Spiritualist after reading, in the early 1970s, *On the Edge of the Etheric*, first published in 1931. That book, by J. Arthur Findlay (a Scottish businessman who had an important influence on the development of the spiritualist movement), provides a theory of the spirit world based on the evidence of mediumship.

One can only admire the tenacity with which Alexander, having

become convinced of the reality of that spirit world, sought contact with it through the experience of mediumship. Spiritualist churches were a disappointment, offering semi-religious services with mediumship tacked on, while sitting in a variety of private home circles produced nothing but endless “evenings of bewilderment and embarrassment” (p. 5). Two years later Alexander started a home circle of his own, and even though he had not set out to become a medium he eventually had an experience “like merging with a presence” (p. 10), which turned out to be his guide, White Feather. However, the experience was initially frightening and uncomfortable, as well as questionable as to its nature: Could it be a secondary personality?

Altogether it took a number of encounters with other mediums and something like 14 years for Alexander to achieve demonstrable mediumship, with total trance, voice phenomena coming through with messages, and intricate movements of trumpets—the little metal cones that usually feature in traditional physical mediumship séances. Even when his circle matured into a coherent dedicated body with the right mix of people, there were more blank sittings than good ones.

The story of Alexander’s mediumship is interspersed with those of other mediums, some told to him by other people; they are second- or third-hand accounts from different periods, and with different perspectives on well-known mediums such as Alec Harris, Helen Duncan, Minnie Harrison, and George Valiantine, as well as those who never entered public life. And since Alexander’s own development as a medium involved very closely his family and friends, such as his circle leader Roy Lister, it is also at times a very personal story, but never a gossipy one.

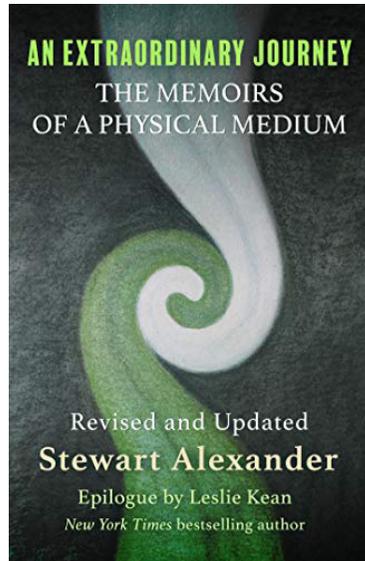
Alexander’s séances, which by now have been going for many years and been held at a number of venues, sound very traditional. They take place in darkness, with a cabinet for the medium, and with trumpets which during séances move through the air. Luminous tabs are placed on the medium’s knees, the cabinet curtains, and the trumpets. The numbers of sitters vary—it seems up to about a dozen. The medium sits in an armchair, his wrists strapped to the arms of the chair with plastic cable ties. There is also a table with a translucent red top that can be illuminated by an adjustable light within it. After the opening prayer and music, White Feather, Alexander’s control, speaks through

him. A small number of regular “spirit communicators,” with their individual voices and personalities, help put sitters at their ease and communicate with those in the spirit world. This is usually followed by a demonstration of “matter through matter” phenomenon, where Alexander’s hand, held up by an invited sitter, is seen to be free of the cable tie and then witnessed to be secured again to the arm of the chair. Another demonstration of materialization/dematerialization involves a blob of ectoplasm appearing on the illuminated translucent tabletop and forming into a hand. The

invited sitter, sitting at the table across from the medium, puts her hand on the table and is able to touch the hand, which then withdraws and melts away.

Many of the reports quoted in the book provide additional interesting details, but the above summary is based on an article which appeared in the *Paranormal Review* (Sutton, 2009), a quarterly published by the Society for Psychical Research, summarizing Alexander’s séance procedures and phenomena. It is reproduced by Alexander in the chapter titled *An Academic Treatise* (pp. 123–137). The article’s author makes the comment that the conditions would not satisfy “outright sceptics” (p. 124); it seems to me that even open-minded skeptics might have problems taking the phenomena at face value when the conditions are fully controlled by the medium. At this point one might speculate about possible ways and motives for producing the phenomena by normal means, disregarding the numerous witness reports that point, at the least, to remarkable feats of clairvoyance and psychokinesis. One could also express regret about Alexander’s reluctance to take part in scientific investigation. However, the latter becomes easier to understand if one looks at the phenomena in light of the nature, consistency, and strength of Alexander’s beliefs.

As I interpret his story, for Alexander the spirit world is totally real.



His aim is to demonstrate to the world the existence of that other, spirit world, through the evidence of physical mediumship. He is well-aware of mediums' tricks and sitters' delusions, he has sympathy with the skeptics, but his sittings are not aimed at convincing investigators or doubters, which he regards as pointless. His refusal to participate in experiments with infrared or thermal imagery may have been the reason why in the 1990s he parted company with the Noah's Ark Society, devoted to promoting physical mediumship, of which he had been a prominent member. There may have been concerns about the dangers of such technology, but his main aim throughout has been to provide a link between this world and the spirit one, guided by his spirit communicators. This could well be inhibited by trying to fit in with test conditions imposed by outsiders. He also has a valid point when he questions whether participating in tests, or producing a film of his séances, would do anything to promote belief in the phenomena.

He can be quite scathing about today's Spiritualism, with its services and demonstrations, that "gives the message that Spiritualism rests upon a system of belief rather than demonstrable factual evidence of survival beyond the grave" (p. 257). It seems that what especially appeals to him are the accounts of some fairly controversial mediums, the most important one being Mina Crandon, to whom he devotes two chapters. Presumably it was his interest in her that encouraged the emergence during the séances in 1992 of Walter Stinson, Mina's brother, who died in 1911. Since then Walter has been taking charge of the physical materializations and it is his materialized hand that the sitters grasp on the illuminated table.

With Alexander, we do not get powerful and varied displays like those of D. D. Home, Stainton Moses, or Franek Kluski. He did not set out to be a medium, and his phenomena are controlled by the "spirit people" and are comparatively limited in range. However, they have steadily developed over the years and in 2000 the Spirit team was joined by Dr. Franklin Barnett, a fully materialized entity that interacts with the sitters, touching them and walking among them. From the Epilogue by Leslie Kean we learn that sittings can now take place via an iPad when she is in America, with successful book tests (where the otherworldly communicator directs the sitter to a particular book, line, and page to find a particular word) and a variety of anomalous events.

Alexander makes clear his commitment to the worldview where spirit communicators are real and influence events at the séances. His witnesses over the years give very similar accounts of their experiences. It seems that the current sitters are mostly known to each other and deeply committed and, whatever the nature of the phenomena, the emotions, elation, and sense of wonder are real.

Steve Hume, who reviewed the original version of the book for the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, had the benefit of not only attending Stewart Alexander's séance, but being in the séance room right up to the sitting itself (setting up microphones). He was certain that there were no wires attached to the trumpets, and that no wires or accomplices could have produced the phenomena he witnessed (Hume, 2011).

So perhaps Alexander has the right formula: his own empathetic personality and strong belief, and a cohesive group of dedicated sitters; conducive conditions helped by the darkness and not inhibited by tests that might dampen the enthusiasm; there is also the immediate feedback that strengthens belief, which then cumulatively builds up in repeated séances. His sittings accord well with Batcheldor's formula for sitter-group success, and with his view that, "The sitter group can be construed as a creative situation in which firm beliefs—whatever form they may take—will largely shape and determine the results" (Batcheldor, 1984, pp. 109–110). The vast literature on physical mediumship and materializations of the past takes us into a world where some people seem able to conjure up their own physical realities, whatever else might be involved. Alexander's book offers one interpretation of such a world, one that works for him and his sitters. It also makes for instructive and entertaining reading for those interested in mediumship in general and physical mediumship in particular.

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