



The Real 'Ghost Whisperer'

The character Melinda Gordon in CBS's fantasy TV series *Ghost Whisperer*, played by Jennifer Love Hewitt, is based on a real-life resident of North Royalton, Ohio. Her name is Mary Ann Winkowski, and she sports a silver Cadillac with a license plate reading "SPIRIT" (Kachuba 2007, 202). But can she really talk to ghosts?

Introduction

Winkowski does not claim to communicate with spirits who have "crossed over" to the Other Side, the purview of "mediums"; rather, she says she "can only see and talk to earthbound spirits," claiming, "I talk to the spirits and find out who they are and why they didn't cross over."

Her belief in a dimension where ghosts hang out is nothing new. It is basically a version of purgatory, which in Catholic dogma is a place (or state) "where souls are purged of sin before going to heaven" (Severy 1971, 381). Not surprisingly, Winkowski was raised Catholic. And just as the faithful are urged to assist those in purgatory by prayer and penance (Stravinskas 2003, 626–627), Winkowski believes she and

others can guide spirits who lag behind for whatever reason—such as being attached to a thing or place, seeking revenge, fearing judgment (for suicide or other wrongdoing), etc. (Winkowski 2007, 81–104).

She claims to have been freeing earthbound spirits since the age of four, when her Italian grandmother began taking her to neighborhood funerals. She would "see" the dead—who are "always there, right by the casket," she says—then envision "the White Light" and direct spirits to it. Eventually, after becoming a wife and a mother, she was so sought after that she "had to start asking for a little bit of money" and was "basically forced into making it a business" (Winkowski 2000, 11–13, 19–20, 35). In her work, she mixes Catholic and New Age practices—for example, using holy water (water blessed by a priest) to dispel malignant entities and scattering quince seeds around a house "as protection" (2000, 162–167; 2007, 228–234). By means of the power of suggestion, such actions can have a beneficial effect, at the expense of encouraging superstition.

A Question of Evidence

In her books—*As Alive, So Dead* (2000) and *When Ghosts Speak* (2007)—Winkowski provides no acceptable proof of

her alleged ability. Some of her evidence is laughable. One published photo, sent by a client, purportedly depicts a spirit energy but is actually the result of the flash rebounding from the camera's wrist strap, a common phenomenon (Nickell 2001, 128–131). Other "spirit" photos showing orbs, mists, and shapes (Winkowski 2007, illus. fol. p. 82) have similar mundane explanations (see Nickell 2008b).

The same is true of other phenomena reported by—or *to*—Winkowski, including the sounds of footsteps and other noises, the effects of drafts and warm spots, and indeed almost anything: Headaches may be "a sign of a curse or negative energy," she says, and insomnia can be a sign of "an earthbound spirit in your home" (Winkowski 2007, 198–210). Missing pieces of a board game, drained batteries, a broken toy—all may be caused by "child ghosts," asserts Winkowski (2007, 208). She experiences a ghostly visitation (Kachuba 2007, 206) that is obviously only a common "waking dream" (one that occurs in the twilight between being fully awake and asleep—see Nickell 1995, 55). She even naively relates versions of the "vanishing hitchhiker" folktale (Winkowski 2000, 189–191).

Contradictorily, she describes ghosts as "pure energy," a life force that survives death (Winkowski 2007, 41), yet she

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maintains that earthbound spirits “smoke, comb their hair, change their clothes—all those things we always do, too. Only I’ve never been able to figure out where they get the stuff from” (2000, 150). Indeed, the supposed spirit-world existence of *inanimate* objects is revealing: apparitions of people appear fully clothed and are often accompanied by objects, just as they are in dreams, because the clothes and objects are required by the apparitional drama (Tyrrell 1973). That is to say, the source of “the stuff” that puzzles Winkowski is the imagination.

As to her ability to talk with ghosts, Winkowski offers only anecdotal evidence, nothing constituting scientific proof. When Shakespeare’s character Glendower asserts, “I can call spirits from the vasty deep,” Hotspur counters, “Why, so can I, or so can any man; but will they come when you do call for them?” (*King Henry IV*, I.3.1). In fact, we know that death brings a cessation of brain function and consequently an end to the ability to think, walk, or talk. So why do Winkowski and others believe they can converse with spirits?

Fantasy-proneness

Although Winkowski distinguishes herself from both mediums and psychics (she claims no future-telling ability), she nevertheless shares much in common with them and other paranormal claimants, including alien abductees. Such persons tend to exhibit an array of traits that indicate a fantasy-prone personality. In their pioneering study, psychologists Cheryl Wilson and Theodore Barber (1983) listed several identifying characteristics of people who fantasize profoundly. Called “fantasizers,” such individuals fall within the normal range and represent an estimated 4 percent of the population.

For the past several years, I have been applying Wilson and Barber’s findings to the biographies and autobiographies of a number of contemporary and historical individuals, ranging from psychics, like Sylvia Browne and Dorothy Allison, to prophets, like Jeane Dixon and Edgar Cayce, as well as others, including many alien abductees, like Whitley Strieber. I have considered the

possession of six or more of the identified characteristics to indicate fantasy-proneness. As shown by her own statements, Winkowski—like the others mentioned here—clearly fits the profile of a fantasizer.



Mary Ann Winkowski

For example, (1) as a child she had apparent imaginary playmates (Winkowski 2000, 10–14), although she insists they were not imaginary; (2) she claims to receive special messages from paranormal entities (2000; 2007); (3) she is a good hypnotic subject and (4) through past-life regression has had fantasy identities in the form of “several lives” (2000, 28); (5) she has had hypnagogic/hypnopomic experiences, or waking dreams, with (6) classic strange imagery (Kachuba 2007, 206–207)

and (7) frequently encounters apparitions (Winkowski 2000; 2007); (8) moreover, while insisting she is “not psychic—at least not in the traditional sense”—she believes she channels energy, creates “White Light” and directs spirits to it, lifts curses, and so on (2000, 92, 176; 2007, 222).

Taken together, the evidence strongly indicates that Mary Ann Winkowski, “The Real Ghost Whisperer,” is only participating in elaborate encounters of her own imagination. Like “visionaries” who receive messages from the Virgin Mary or “contactees” or “abductees” who are in touch with space aliens, mediums and ghost whisperers are merely communicating with an adult version of a child’s imaginary playmate. Such fantasizers have rich imaginative lives and, often, a receptive audience, since they tap into shared hopes and fears. But they simply deceive first themselves, then others. □

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