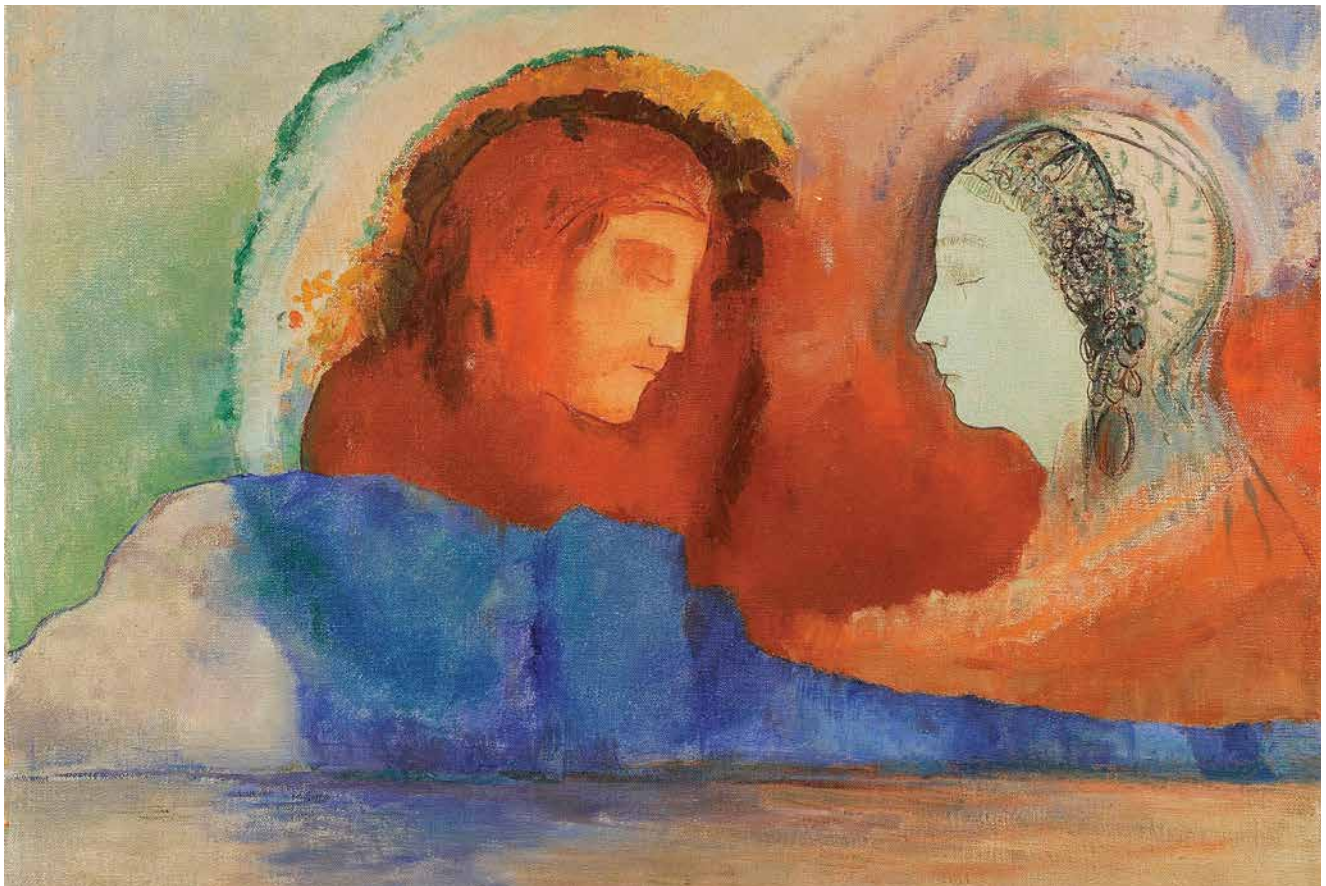


Dante and after death communications



Dante et Béatrice (detail), Odilon Redon, circa 1914. Uehara Museum of Modern Art, Japan. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

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Attempts to communicate with the dead date back to the earliest civilizations. However, research reveals that perceived communication with the dead is not limited to the distant past and that these perceived communications may take many forms, such

as seeing the dead, hearing a dead person speak, feeling the touch of a person who has died, or dreaming about a deceased loved one. In various studies, the percentage of participants who report perceived contact with the dead range from 35 percent to over 60 percent.¹ These perceptions are distinct from typical memories of the deceased. After death communication (ADC) is defined as perceived, spontaneous contacts with living individuals by the deceased.² Visitation dreams are often, but not always, included in the definition of ADC.³

However, dreams reported as ADC are qualitatively different from normal dreams in that they feel more real and remain more vivid in memory over time. People who have experienced a perceived ADC while sleeping often note that the experience was not like a dream.⁴ The most commonly reported ADCs are dreams, visual perceptions, and the sense of the deceased individual's presence.³ Testimonies collected from different parts of the world over the last centuries suggest ADCs to be fairly universal and timeless. The ubiquity of these experiences is also supported by clinical caregivers. "Experts in the fields of grief, bereavement counseling, and palliative care support the idea that ADCs are common, natural experiences that most individuals find comforting, encouraging, and sometimes even life-saving."²

Among those reporting these experiences, ADCs were generally perceived as positive life experiences. In a multinational, online survey of 991 participants, Penberthy and colleagues found that ADCs were associated with belief in life after death, belief that the deceased could communicate with the living, a reduction in fear of death, and increased reported spirituality (but not religiosity).² Reporting the results of a study of 618 older Americans (average age 81.6 years), Krause found that perceived contact with the dead was a common experience: 73 percent reported feeling as though a dead loved one was looking over them, 48.7 percent feeling as though a dead loved one was in the same room, 23.9 percent hearing the voice of a dead loved one, and 20.7 percent actually seeing a dead loved one.¹ He also found that older adults who reported having perceived contact with the dead were less anxious about death because they felt more closely connected with others and because they had derived a deeper sense of religiously-based meaning in life.¹

Some grieving survivors may actively seek communication with their deceased loved ones through psychic mediums, séances, or similar rituals.⁵ It is difficult to determine exactly how often this occurs, but in a 2017 YouGov poll of over 1000 US adults, 22 percent of respondents indicated that they had consulted a psychic or medium.⁶ At least some of those who attempt contact through assisted ADCs report decreased levels of grief.⁵

Another, uniquely contemporary way to seek a sense of communication with the dead is the use of artificial intelligence (AI) driven chatbots. Using data (e.g., text, voice, digital images) generated by the deceased

premortem, these chatbots can simulate responses the deceased might have provided and can use AI learning to adapt to the particular user. Kruger and Osler argue that for some people these chatbots may play a helpful role in establishing continuing bonds with the dead through habits of intimacy.⁷ They note that the grief experienced from the death of a loved one can alter the way we experience and relate to ourselves and the world. Their absence creates ambiguity in our lives:

Depending on our religious orientation or metaphysical commitments, we may believe they continue to exist in some other way, in some other realm. Even so, the dead remain inaccessible. We cannot touch or speak or do things with them the way we could when they were alive. We feel their enduring presence in our lives precisely via their absence.⁷

This ambiguity may be the genesis of visual, auditory, or tactile hallucinations of the dead experienced as ADCs. A "continuing bonds" approach to grief stresses "the importance of not leaving the dead behind but rather finding ways to develop and maintain new relationships with them."⁷ Chatbots may be tools to help develop these continuing bonds, "specific resources that help individuals find emotional stability and security as they negotiate the meaning of their loss, and recalibrate their relationship with the dead—as well as the world of the living—in the face of this loss."⁷ They could potentially serve a similar purpose to ADCs in the grief process.

On the other hand, there are potential dangers associated with chatbots configured to simulate the responses of a deceased individual, especially if the chatbot recreates the voice, mannerisms, and likeness of a deceased loved one. For example, depressed survivors might be harmed if the chatbot magnifies their despair. Alternatively, survivors might develop emotional dependence and attachment on the chatbot.⁸ Prolonged engagement with the chatbot could result in delayed or pathological processing of loss and grief.⁷ There is also potential for a chatbot to distort the memory of the deceased by providing fictitious "memories" or responding in ways that the deceased loved one never would.⁸

Given the frequency of ADCs, their reported beneficial effect of reducing anxiety about death, and their seeming contribution to normal grieving processes, theological engagement and interpretation is imperative. Beyond Jewish and Christian prohibitions against necromancy, how do ADCs fit into our understanding of death

and the afterlife? Christendom has had an ambivalent relationship with the distinction between the communion of the saints and contact with departed spirits. The New Testament acknowledges the “great cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), those who were “commended through their faith” (Hebrews 11:39), who commune with the living in a spiritual sense. Feast days for specific martyrs were an early way for living believers to remember and honor the dead. In 610 CE, Pope Boniface IV established May 13 as a day to remember all Christian martyrs, and a little over a century later Pope Gregory III moved the day of commemoration to November 1 and included all saints, martyrs, and confessors.⁹ This day came to be known as All Saints’ Day or All Hallows’ Day. To it was eventually added All Hallows’ Eve on October 31 and All Souls’ Day (to remember all the dead) on November 2 to form the triduum of Allhallowtide. These days were set aside to remember, honor, and pray for the dead, but they have also been mingled with pre-Christian practices related to veneration of ancestral spirits. For example, “during *Día de los Muertos* in Mexico and *O-bon* in Japan, food and drink are offered for visiting spirits of the dead.”⁹

Since the fourteenth century, one of the most influential pieces of literature to shape Western thought on death and the afterlife is *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri. *The Divine Comedy* presents separation between, but some degree of communion among, the living and the dead. The poem begins with Dante in a midlife crisis: “Midway along the journey of our life I woke to find myself in a dark wood, for I had wandered off from the straight path” (*Inferno*, canto 1).¹⁰ He has lost his way in life, having left “the path of truth,” and his heart is “plunged deep in fear.” At that critical moment in Dante’s life, his encounter with the ancient Roman poet Virgil is essentially an ADC. Virgil serves as Dante’s guide, and during their journey through the *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, they encounter and interact with many departed spirits. These spirits are generally able to recognize Dante as still living by his physical weight, his breathing, or (in *Purgatory*) the shadow he casts. Some of those he encounters in hell want to be remembered by him, and many of those whom he meets in *Purgatory* ask him to pray for them or to have family members pray for them in order to shorten the time until they can ascend to Paradise.

This dynamic interaction between the world of the living and the souls of the dead is expressed through

the many contemporaries, acquaintances, and friends he meets. In the lowest level of the *Inferno*, Dante is surprised to find in the Tolomea two contemporaries, Friar Alberigo and Branca D’Oria, whose bodies were still living but animated by demons while their souls were in hell (*Inferno*, canto 33). In *Purgatory*, he meets a friend named Casella who had died three months before but was just arriving at *Purgatory*. When Dante asks him about the delay, Casella indicates that he had been waiting to board the ferry to *Purgatory* (*Purgatory*, canto 2). In his excellent commentary on *The Divine Comedy*, Vernon surmises that this delay indicates that Casella had required this time to realize that he had died and had been like a ghost resisting death—“It might be that ties of hatred, revenge, or jealousy bind people to their earthly lives. It might be that life has been good, and too lovely to let go.”¹¹

An important moment in Dante’s journey is when he reunites with Beatrice, the young woman he loved who had passed away and ascended to Paradise. Her first word to him is to call him by name, which is the only time Dante uses his own name in *The Divine Comedy* (*Purgatory*, canto 30). Beatrice upbraids him for losing the path of his life. She calls him out for forgetting her, to his own detriment. Her rebuke continues unrelenting into the following canto until Dante finally breaks in tears of confession and repentance. The encounter culminates with him fixing his eyes upon her face until he could no longer see (*Purgatory*, canto 32). His contact with the glorified Beatrice has transformed him. There is a “continuing bond”—his eyes “were intent on quenching their ten years of thirst at last”—yet he has formed a new and higher relationship with her; he is seeing her as he has never seen her before. This new revelation has prepared him for Paradise and eventually for the beatific vision. In a sense he has experienced his own, transformative ADC with Beatrice that will lead him to deeper remembrance of her, deeper connection to God, and a deeper sense of meaning in life.

With Virgil and Beatrice as his guides, Dante moves from a place of fear and confusion to a clear vision of divine love and an understanding that he himself exists within the divine life. “Within God is the presence of humanity. He sees himself in the light. It is the origin of the sense that, within us, is a divine spark or flame which is our very life.”¹¹ *The Divine Comedy* ends with this “great flash of understanding,” and we are left to imagine how this insight transformed the rest of his earthly life.

How did this experience help him make sense of his life? How did it affect his relationships and sense of connection with other people? How did it prepare him for his own death and help him to lead a more meaningful and intentional life?

Imagine being Dante's personal physician. How would one help him to emotionally process his ADCs and integrate the new insights he gained through them into his overall understanding of life and death? In the aftermath of Beatrice's death, Dante's caregivers could have explored with him his experience with grief and specifically inquired about possible ADCs. Eliciting this history requires patience and a high level of patient-caregiver trust because many patients are reluctant to share their experience of ADCs for fear of being judged or ridiculed. For this reason, ADCs may be underreported.² Reflective and nonjudgmental listening would have provided Dante the opportunity to discuss his experiences and make sense of them. Through this kind of engagement, his caregivers could have helped him come to recognize his ADC with Beatrice as a way of maintaining continuing emotional bonds with her after her death and as a normal part of the grieving process.

Understanding how frequently people experience ADCs, especially older adults and those experiencing grief and loss, those providing care should be prepared to ask about these experiences, listen with compassion, help patients to understand and process these experiences, and guide them toward psychological and spiritual transformation, especially a closer sense of connection with others, increased sense of meaning in life, and decreased anxiety toward death.¹ We remember the dead and forge continuing bonds of love with them not for their sake but for our own. ADCs may not represent actual contact with the spirits of departed loved ones, but they nevertheless may help those grieving to maintain continuing bonds with the dead and develop new and transformative relationships with them. These relationships between the living and the dead enable us, the community of the living, to experience communion with those who have gone before.

“At this point power failed high fantasy but, like a wheel in perfect balance turning, I felt my will and my desire impelled by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

— *The Divine Comedy*, Paradiso, canto XXXIII

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