

Biography of Rev. Adin Ballou (1803-1890)

Remembered primarily as an influential pacifist and abolitionist, Adin Ballou, a Unitarian minister, was also one of the very early psychical researchers. His 1852 book, with the lengthy title, *An Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts, Causes and Peculiarities Involved in Spirit Manifestations Together with Interesting Phenomenal Statements and Communications*, was published even before Judge John Edmonds' 1853 book, *Spiritualism*. It is not stated in the book when Ballou's investigations began, but since his book was published before Edmonds's, Ballou may very well have preceded Edmonds as the first dedicated psychical researcher.

Born in Cumberland, Rhode Island, Ballou was raised a Baptist until, in 1813, his parents were converted in to the Christian Connexion faith at a revival. Young Adin was said to have been inspired by a vision of his deceased brother, Cyrus, who told him to "preach the Gospel of Christ to your fellow-men." In 1822, Ballou married Abigail Sayles, whose mother, a Universalist, influenced him to join that faith. As a result of his conversion, he was excommunicated by The Christian Connexion and his father disinherited him. Abigail died in 1829, soon after the birth of a daughter, and he later married Lucy Hunt, daughter of a prominent family in his congregation.

Ordained as a Universalist minister in December 1824, Ballou first served in Milford, Massachusetts and New York City. As a result of disagreements in the hierarchy of the Universalist Church, Ballou and several other ministers formed a new denomination, the Massachusetts Association of Universal Restorations (MAUR), but conflicting ideals within that group prompted Ballou, in 1831, to accept a call to serve as a Unitarian minister, a position in which he focused most of his energies on social reform.

In 1837, Ballou announced himself as an abolitionist and in 1838 he converted to a form of pacifism called Christian non-resistance. He was one of the leaders of a group calling themselves Practical Christians. In 1841, led by Ballou, the group purchased a farm in Milford and converted it to a self-sufficient socialistic community called the Hopedale Community. From Hopedale, Ballou traveled around New England lecturing on Practical Christianity, including non-resistance, abolition, temperance, and women's rights.



In 1846, he authored his principal work on pacifism, *Christian Non-Resistance*, and in 1854 he wrote *Practical Christian Socialism*. According to Peter Hughes, who posted an Internet biography of Ballou in 2000, the latter publication was Ballou's only completed work of systematic theology. "He believed that God permeated an 'infinitarium,' that is an infinity of universes, and that space and time are without center or limit," Hughes wrote. "Every separate universe, he thought, has an unending sequence of 'grand cycles,' each appropriately described as an 'eternity.'" His christology was neither unitarian nor trinitarian, but similar to the ancient heresy of Sabellianism. He believed Christ to have been a manifestation of God, proportioned to the comprehension of finite minds. Nevertheless, Ballou recognized

that Christianity was not the only religion containing divine truth..."¹ Ballou's writings are said to have significantly influenced Tolstoy and Gandhi.

In his 1852 book, Ballou clearly finds for the reality of spirit manifestations and communications, but expresses his skepticism toward some phenomena. "I believe that spirits in the flesh, i.e., the mind of the medium, or the minds of persons surrounding the medium sometimes thwart, warp, peculiarize, or modify the manifestations and communications made," he wrote in the first chapter. "I also believe that low and very imperfect departed spirits sometimes manifest themselves. This is the ground I take. It enables me to account for the multifarious reliable and unreliable developments of this mysterious agency more satisfactorily than any other."²

After summarizing phenomena reported by credible witnesses, Ballou tells of his own observations beginning with a wide range of communicating "raps" and "taps," ranging from some like the ticking of a watch to that like someone pounding on the door, while also including a sound like scratching of a hard finger nail on a board. "I have heard the time and metre of tunes beaten out with utmost accuracy, and by several rappers in unison – not only while the tune was being played or sung, but afterwards, without accompaniment," he recorded. "And I am as certain that these sounds were not made by any conscious mortal agency, as I am of the best authenticated facts in the common transactions of life.

"I have seen tables and nightstands of various sizes moved about in the most astonishing manner, by what purported to be some invisible agency, with only the gentle and passive resting of the hands or fingerends of the Medium on one of their edges. Also, many distinct movings of such objects, by request, without the touch of the Medium at all. I have sat and conversed by the

hour together with the authors of these sounds and motions, by means of signals first agreed on; asking questions and obtaining answers – receiving communications spelled out by the alphabet – discussing propositions sometimes made by them to me, and vice versa – all by a slow process, indeed, but with every possible demonstration of intelligence, though not without incidental misapprehensions and mistakes. I have witnessed the asking of mental questions by inquirers, who received prompt and correct answers as when the questions were asked audibly to the cognition of the Medium.

"I have know these invisibles by request, to write their names with a common plumbago pencil on a clean sheet of paper – half a dozen of them, each in a different hand. To make sure of this, as an absolute fact, the Medium was required to lay her left hand, back downwards, in the hollow of a veracious person's hand, both open; when a piece of pasteboard paper was laid on her hand, a well examined bland sheet of writing paper placed thereon, and a lead pencil on top of that; in which position (the Medium's right hand being held up to view) both the hands, with these fixtures resting on them, were placed under the leaf of the table, as insisted on by the *writers*. After a minute or two, at a given signal by the spirits that they had done, the paper was exhibited with various names written thereon, as above affirmed. This was repeatedly tested with the same results, under circumstances putting all suspicion of fraud and jugglery entirely at rest.

"I have requested what purported to be the spirit of a friend many years deceased, to go to a particular place, several miles distant from that of the sitting, and to bring me back intelligence respecting the then health and doings of a certain relative well-known to the parties. In three minutes of time the intelligence was obtained, nu-

¹ Hughes, Peter, *Adin Ballou*, Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography, <http://www25.uua.org>

² Ballou, Adin, *An Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts, Causes and Peculiarities Involved in Spirit Manifestations Together with Interesting Phenomenal Statements and Communications*, H. Bailliere, London, 1852, p. 14.

merous particulars given, some of them rather improbable, but every one exactly confirmed the next day, by personal inquiries made for that purpose."³

In one sitting, a spirit communicator asked if Ballou had selected his subjects of discourse for the next Sunday service. He replied that he had selected only one subject and asked the spirit if he would like to suggest another topic. The spirit replied that he would and spelled out the word "The," after which the message ceased. Another spirit then communicated and informed Ballou that the spirit giving the message had been called away for a few moments but would continue upon his return. Within 15 minutes, the spirit returned and completed the suggested topic, being "The second chapter of first Corinthians; the twelfth and thirteenth verses." Neither Ballou nor anyone else in the room could recall what that Bible passage covered, but upon checking a Bible, Ballou saw that it had to do with spirit communication, stating in part, "Which things we also speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth..."⁴

Ballou went on to say that he had seen a medium "gently magnetized and thrown into a trance in one minute, by the imperceptible influence of the spirits." The spirits then used her organs of speech and answered numerous questions, instead of responding with the usual raps. "That these trances were not superinduced by mortal agency, and were not *feigned* but *real*, I am as certain as I can be of anything not absolutely beyond the possibility of mistake," he wrote.⁵

Nevertheless, there were discrepancies and contradictions in the information coming from the spirits. "Sometimes it has been found that if the Medium was strongly prejudiced, or was overawed by associates of that character, the teachings of the first few weeks were biased considerably by

those influences," he explained, "whereas afterwards, when the communications seemed to be made more freely and independently of the Medium's mind, these peculiarities ceased, and the doctrines attested became accordant with the general current."⁶

Among the consistent "teachings" of the spirits recorded by Ballou were:

- There are seven spirit spheres, or circles, inferior to the heavenly or celestial spheres, and each sphere or circle has several degrees. Man progresses through these spheres, drawing nearer and nearer to God, or nearer to the divine standard of perfection.
- Death does not change man's real character, nor his proper spirit sphere, nor his capability to make progress, nor the laws of progress.
- Many spirits remain very long in the lower spheres, but while they are "spirits in prison" there is no such place or state as a hell, of unmitigated, hopeless mercy.
- God, angels, and all the higher spirits are forever seeking the elevation of the inferior spirits, by all just, wise, and appropriate means.
- Spirits in the higher spheres are employed in three general exercises: 1) in striving after a more perfect knowledge of and communication with God, whom they cannot see there any more than here, as a personal being, but only in spirit by faith and intuition; 2) in study, self-examination, contemplations of truth, and acquainting themselves with all useful knowledge attainable to them; 3) in ministering to struggling spirits on earth and in the lower spheres – endeavoring to elevate and bless them.
- Spirits in any circle can descend into all the circles below their own, but cannot, except by special permission, ascend into a higher sphere, until qualified by spiritual progress.

³ _____, pp. 49-51

⁴ _____, p. 51

⁵ _____, p. 52

⁶ _____, p. 54

Ballou called the element giving power to mediums “spiricity,” and said that he observed a wide range in the quality of the phenomena and the degree of strength of the mediums. “I have found that some Media were so imperfect, or had been so sophisticated by the management of overruling minds, that scarcely any reliance could be placed on what purported to come through their Mediumship. Others, especially *tipping* and *hand-moved* Media, are frequently so nervous, doubtfully balanced, and peculiarly affected, that one knows not what to depend on. But it remains true, that there are clear, passive, independent Media, worthy of all the reliances that ought ever to be placed in persons sustaining such a relation in the spirit world.”⁷

Ballou also observed that mediums in their “crude, incipient state, gave forth communications in accordance with their own prejudices, wishes, or wills, and very contrary ones to those generally received, but that they may outgrow their defects and become reliable.”⁸

He further noted that communications sometimes came from purported spirits of the dead, but it turned out that the person represented was still alive in the flesh. “What passes through such Media must be greatly liable to the influences of *undeparted* spirits,” he wrote. “Their own prejudices, will, imagination, low ideas, perverse sentiments, and peculiar absurdities of interior conception, must bias and characterize the communication, which any spirits should attempt to make through them. Mesmeric and psychological influences, from controlling minds near them, would be likely to have the same effect. Hence the communications, even of a decent and well-meaning *departed* spirit, might come out in an awkward translation – something quite unlike what was intended.”⁹

He recalled a situation in which a spirit came and communicated, purporting to be a well-known friend living in a distant country and still in the flesh. The information communicated was clearly unknown to the medium, thus ruling out fraud as well as the theory that the mind of the medium created it. He further concluded that mischievous spirits sometimes impersonated living people. Moreover, he concluded that some *undeparted* spirits had the ability to move objects by *will-power*, but that departed spirits had a “hand” in most phenomena of this nature. “As a believer in the exertion of will-power by departed spirits, there is no necessity for my utterly denying the existence of such power in *undeparted* ones,” he explained his position.¹⁰

As for the skeptics who denied the various phenomena he had witnessed, Ballou likened them to the chief of an African tribe who denied the existence of ice, because he had never seen it. He added that well-meaning spirits are often frustrated in their attempts to communicate because they are “choked on all sides by gross scepticism, boorish tests, Sadducean sneers, superstitious panic, sanctimonious anathemas, and all kinds of unreasonable opposition.”¹¹

Ballou noted that a number of mediums had been discredited because the words supposedly coming from great minds in the spirit world were not consistent with their modes of expression when in the earth life. He concluded that these great minds in the spirit world, realizing how difficult it is to find a medium with the necessary intellectual capacity to convey their message, concerned themselves more with communicating fundamental principles and ideas than with the verbiage. “I read communications purporting to come from these illustrious sources with a good deal of distrust,” he offered. “Yet, I cannot doubt

⁷ _____, p. 63

⁸ _____, p. 65

⁹ _____, p. 69

¹⁰ _____, p. 121

¹¹ _____, p. 92

that some of them are substantially authentic and reliable. These, however, are not all invulnerable to the objection. A part of them exhibit the defects complained of. How is this to be accounted for? By making due allowances for the imperfection of the Media. Perhaps not one in fifty of those yet developed is susceptible of sufficient *spiricity* to be a clear intellectual Medium and at the same time passive enough not to perplex the impressions and expressions of a communicating spirit. Yet, without this strength, clearness, and complete passivity of the Medium, no spirit can be expected to give his own peculiar language. The Medium is a sort of amanuensis, translator, or interpreter of the spirit's leading ideas. In this character, Media will exhibit, in various degrees, the defects of their own respective rhetoric. Unless their perspicuity, force, and command of language be equal to that of the mind communicating through them, the same result will follow, as when an accomplished mind in the flesh is obliged to write or speak through a clumsy amanuensis, translator, or interpreter."¹²

Ballou wondered why messages coming through mediums sometimes reflected their own ideas. "In such cases the Media are of recent development and very imperfect, or else, for the time being, are in an impassive, feverish state, greatly influenced by positive minds near them," he opined. "These exercise a strong physical influence, and either suspend, or warp and deflect the action of the spirit attempting to respond."¹³

Strongly objecting to the argument by skeptics that he must accept all phenomena as spirit-related or as a product of the medium's mind, whether conscious or unconscious, Ballou said he felt no such obligation. "I have no hesitation in avowing just what and how much I feel obliged to believe in presentiments, forewarnings, apparitions, ghosts, demoniacs, haunted houses, and witchcraft," he asserted. "I believe there have

been *real* presentiments, and also many *unreal* ones; that there have been real forewarnings, and also many *unreal* ones; that there have been real apparitions of deceased persons – real ghosts, and also many unreal ones – counterfeit ones, mere imaginary ones. I believe that there have been real demoniacs, i.e., persons possessed, obsessed, or in some way infested by *low* departed spirits, and I also believe that many have been supposed such, whose unfortunate nervous condition was super-induced chiefly by physical causes of disease. I believe that there have been real haunted houses, i.e., houses in which super-mortal sights, movements, and sounds have been witnessed; and also that there have been many unreal ones – houses infested only by the pranks of cunning mortals, or of animals, or of the aerial elements. I believe that there have been witches and wizards, i.e., persons of mysterious psychological susceptibilities, powers, and peculiarities, some of whom have used those powers malignantly, others chiefly for a livelihood, and other for mere fame or distinction...All this I believe, on what is as good evidence to my mind as a truly rational being can demand. And I do not feel driven to believe more. I do not believe in effects without causes."¹⁴

He especially objected to the demand by skeptics that whenever anything was published about a particular medium setting forth reliable and edifying communication, that the author was obligated to include all *unreliable* and *unedifying* comments about the medium or the communication. "Do compilers and biographers ever act in this manner? he asked. "Would a man who would pursue such a course be fit for a compiler, biographer, or editor? Every mind of intelligence and candor will answer, *no*. Yet if I will not treat spirit writings confided to my disposal in this wicked and absurd manner, forsooth, I am *dishonest*, or at least a very uncandid man, endeavoring to make out a bad case, in a one-sided underhand way! In

¹² _____, pp. 113-114

¹³ _____, p. 112

¹⁴ _____, pp. 124-125

vain, I lead my reiterated position, viz. *some* of these manifestations and communications are really from departed spirits, and *others* are wholly or partly caused by the influence of spirits *in* the flesh. In vain I plead, that on my own ground, I have a right and am in duty bound to discriminate, select, correct, and make allowances. No, say these indomitable opponents, you shall not stand on any such ground. You shall take the *whole*, or *none*...You shall not alter a word, nor put in a comma, nor cross a t, nor dot an i. You shall consider it all as coming from departed spirits, from just such departed spirits as purport to be its authors, and with just such defects as may chance to mark it. Then *we* will demonstrate, by profound

criticism and magnanimous comments, that it is nothing but a hodge-podge of intolerable gibberish!"¹⁵

There was a time, Ballou remembered, when he might have been of that mindset. "But I have seen too much that my native ignorance deemed impossible, not to have been rendered modest in my scepticism. Truth is truth, in spite of all ignorance and unbelief. And there is a vast ocean of truths, which man will have to learn sooner or later."¹⁶



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¹⁵ _____, pp. 115-116

¹⁶ _____, p. 213