

The Medium by Laurel Doud

Retirement To-Do List

Sign up for Medicare

Meet with HR and pension provider

Call financial guy

Consult medium

Having attained my 65th year, I've decided it's time to retire. After nearly 45 years as a librarian, it's time for someone younger and more enthusiastic to fill the job. But I'm also nervous—about finances, of course, but even more, about *me*. If I'm not a librarian anymore, who am I? How much of my identity, self-esteem, and even self-confidence resides in, "I'm a full-time librarian?"

On a friend's recommendation, I decide to contact a medium. I sign up for a Life Reading—as opposed to a Spirit Reading—that, according to the medium's website, will focus on my personal journey through my present and future as it pertains to my "career, finances, relationships, and health." Just what I need.

I watch a couple of the medium's Youtube videos—readings in front of large audiences and in her office. I'm surprised she's so young and, well, so normal looking. No turban, no bangles, no multi-colored skirt. She's a fashionably dressed woman in her thirties with long auburn hair and clear blue eyes in a pretty heart-shaped face, a charming beauty mark above her upper lip. Her office features no beaded curtains or crystal ball. Instead, she is framed by a tall shelf of books. I imagine titles on meditation, yoga, psychology, paranormal phenomena, but she points out some of the larger tomes. "Anatomy and physiology. I was pre-med at UCLA. Medium wasn't on my guidance counselor's list." She laughs. I like her and I haven't even talked to her yet.

In the video, she sits across from her client, a box of tissue close at hand on a small side table. The set-up reminds me of a therapy session and, in fact, the medium confesses that she often tells people she's a grief counselor. That probably kills any follow-up questions.

As I wait for her call on an early winter's day, I'm anxious and not quite sure why. This has always been for a lark. The phone rings at the appointed time and she explains she's a medium first and a psychic second. "Every medium is a psychic," she says, "but not every psychic is a medium. A medium is someone who translates for the dead."

For my reading, she will focus on what's being created in my life, what's in progress, as opposed to what has been. "Now I'm going to take a moment to really hone in on your vibrational pattern, your radio station as it were."

I stifle a guffaw as I hear her take a deep calming breath and silence flows down the phone line. In my mind's eye, her eyes are closed, a flickering sandalwood candle by her side. As she begins to talk, I imagine her gesturing with her hands, creating eddies of fragrance with the movement.

Her initial observations, as any good librarian would know, could have been retrieved from any decent web search.

“There’s a lot of creativity around you. You create stories for yourself and, by creating these stories, you manifest a good mind space. You have a deep fantasy life. You’re working on a project now, a novel perhaps? Do you see that?”

My novel was published by Little Brown two decades ago, but it pops up immediately if you google my name, often from “fantastic fiction” sites, and I’ve been working on various projects since then.

“You live tucked away, removed from the city, and I feel this is purposeful, intentional. You like your space. Do you see that?”

My address is on the form I filled out and Google Maps can fill in the rest.

But then she says, “You have rubber boots, shoes you wear when you go outside, by your back door. Do you see that?”

Holy cow, I didn’t know Google Earth could zoom in so close, because I do indeed see a pair of rubber boots when I look out my back door. I wear them daily to take the dogs out. Suddenly, I feel exposed, spied upon. My shoulders hunch.

As I’m still reeling from the boots comment, she informs me that my deceased mother has apparently joined the session. I didn’t ask for a Spirit reading and I’m strangely affronted.

“She’s brought a dog with her. A dog of yours. A dog whose ashes you still have in your house. Do you see that?”

I feel prickles at the nape of my neck. On my wrist is a bracelet whose core is filled with the remains of Oberon, the dog of my heart.

Now she mutters, *Yes, thank you*, and I’m confused. Who she talking to? “Your mother says she just wants to be a part of this. She wants to support you in this. You and she had a nice relationship. It feels good.”

Despite my best efforts, tears spring into my eyes and I scabble about for a tissue. After a long illness, my mother died ugly and I watched her gasp for what seemed an eternity, her eyes bulging in their sockets, her skin turning mottled. When she was gone, the only thing I felt was relief—for her and for me. I was glad she was dead, a guilt I’ve carried for twenty years. My heart expands at the possibility that my mother, unbidden, has entered our session to support me, to let me know that I am forgiven.

I decide then that the medium might have something to say to me that I want to hear. My shoulders relax.

“You’re very independent,” she says. “Very self-sufficient. Very private. Do you see that?”

Again, she’s right. As retirement approaches, I’ve been worrying about this. Will I end up being a recluse? Will my so-called independence become a barrier between me and others? Because my long-held dream is to be able to say in retirement, “I’m a full-time writer.” I’m going through a dry spell (well, honestly, a California drought), but I want to be published again. Badly. I want an audience and I’m getting discouraged. So many barriers keep popping up and I want to know whether I’m just wasting my time. Maybe I should take up something new. Woodworking? Painting?

"In your isolation, you will create more stories that will connect you to others," she says, but then advises me to refocus on the craft, to reconnect with the joy of writing. At once, I'm back in school, the creative writing teacher going on and on about writing for yourself. But my rational voice says, does that make the advice any less true? *Just keep writing. Writing. Writing.*

"But," she says and, for some reason, my heart skitters. "You haven't written the project yet that's going to get published. So you need new projects, new writing."

I groan. I can't help it. Have the last twenty years been for naught?

She's silent for a moment and, when she speaks, it's almost a rebuke. "I feel that you have this belief that you're not going to live much longer. You've been putting deadlines on your life because you think you don't have much more time, but that's not factual. And now those deadlines have become limitations."

It's absolutely true. As a virtual clone of my mother, who died in her seventies, I've always felt that was my destiny too.

"You can make that happen, of course, but you needn't." After a pause, she murmurs again, *Okay, thank you*, and continues, "You should write something shorter than novels. They would like you to focus on essays."

I groan louder. I'm not good at essays.

"Yes, but they're pushing it."

It isn't until later, when I listen to the recording, that I realize I didn't pick up on the *they*. *They* would like me to focus on essays. *They're* pushing it. Damn! What if she was translating for great essayists like Virginia Woolf or C.S. Lewis or Nora Ephron and I missed it?

"You're better at essays than you think you are," she tells me. "And what I'm seeing is that you would like your work to be seen by an audience which will then create more inspiration for you to work more."

Got that right.

"You have a very strong life force," she continues. "I see you living for at least two more decades. At least two more. You'll have lots to write about."

I actually haven't planned to live that long. I told my financial guy not to forecast a sustainable income beyond the age of 75. Guess some adjustments need to be made. I start to look forward to the day I can trade librarian for full-time writer.

A mere couple of months later, though, the coronavirus walks in and the world stops. I've been working from home since then, teaching students online how to build their research statements and use databases. As the cases of Covid-19 increase dramatically, I recall another of the medium's predictions. "Someone will be coming to live with you for two or three months. It's not permanent, but it's also not a quick visit."

At the time I thought she meant a real person, but now I wonder, could it be a metaphorical one, this spectral pandemic that shrouds our world? It feels solid enough to be a *someone*.

So like many who've had to rethink their lives, I've had to rethink my retirement plans—I have postponed it to 2021. I have a job and I'm good at it. I'm damned lucky. My identity crisis can wait. I can work and still write. After all, I've done it for decades. If I'm going to live another 20 years, I probably should be a bit more fiscally-responsible. I should be the ant, not the grasshopper now.

But being an ant is no fun and I'm trying to find other silver-linings in this decision. My son-in-law gave me one recently, "You didn't want to go out with a whimper this year."

It's true. No graduation or retirement ceremonies. No lunch with the college president and my fellow retirees. No goodbye parties with my co-workers.

"Next year you can go out with a bang."

Knock on wood.

I'm not a superstitious person or anything—well, maybe a tad bit—but when I saw a penny on the road yesterday, I picked it up. *See a penny, pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.*

I can always use the luck, but if I live as long as the medium says, I may need the coin.

Oh, and guess what, last night my son called and asked if he and his family could move in with us for two to three months in the fall. *Hmmm...*
