I received a faculty development grant to aid me in my research activities during Fall 2009 and Winter 2010. I am in the process of researching various customs and methods people create and maintain in order to contact the dead. This research will culminate in a book-length manuscript. As all of my research is grounded in fieldwork, and particularly in the field method called ‘participant-observation’, I used the grant money for several trips in order to view and join those involved in different forms of afterlife contact.

My first trip was in November, 2009. I went to an afterlife conference in Connecticut put on by the Forever Family Foundation: an organization that exists in order to gather scientific proof of afterlife communication. Indeed, the organization puts mediums through rigorous testing in order to certify those they deem to be authentic. This trip was to garner data for a chapter on psychic mediums and meaning. Also, I presented a paper based on this experience at the Popular Culture Association Conference in April, 2010 called Mediums and Messages: Afterlife Contacts and the Transformative Experience. I attended informative sessions at the conference, a number of ‘gallery’ readings where mediums would contact deceased individuals connected to audience members and interviewed a number of attendees. My experiences at the conference caused me to alter my focus away from the mediums themselves to the attendees and the causes that lead them to visit mediums. I am using a functional perspective to analyze the experience.

My second field experience was at the Conscious Life Expo, which was held at the LAX Hilton in February, 2010. This was to garner information for a chapter on afterlife marketplaces. People can go online or to various ‘expos’ and purchase items or locate mediums to aid them in their attempts to contact the deceased. I found that various crystals, statues, meditation or dreaming techniques will allegedly aid one in contact. There were a number of mediums there and I avoided those with feathers in their hair and accompanying dogs. I participated in 2 psychic readings with female mediums. One insisted that my family members Martha and Peter wanted to talk to me. When I mentioned I had no one by those names in my family (they are not particularly traditional Jewish names after all), the medium continued and informed me I would remember them upon my return home. The second medium asked who I wanted to contact which is a big no-no in mediumship. I told her my mom. She asked for her name, another faux pas. Then she informed me she was there and had long dark curly hair like mine. My mother always wore her hair short and she was either blond or redheaded, depending on the year. It went on in this fashion. Expos may not be the best place to receive authentic messages from the beyond or to experience any form of comunitsas with other or a sense of the otherworldly. I intend to take a rather skeptical view of such marketplaces in this chapter!

My final trip was to Salt Lake City, Utah to visit members of the Wasatch Paranormal Society. I was acquainted this ghost hunting and paranormal research team as I had been a guest on their radio program “Residual Hauntings” in order to discuss ghosts and urban
legends. The team’s founder, Tom Carr welcomed me by driving me to a multitude of ‘haunted’ sites in and around Salt Lake City. The team took me to a ghost hunt at the Fort Douglas Cemetery at night. It was completely deserted which is a bit frightening during a snowy, echo filled night. While I heard many an eerie noise, I did not see any apparitions. The following evening the team gathered at the Baron Woolen Mill in Brigham City. This has become a regular investigation site for the team. It is a bundle of buildings and warehouses with cracked and broken windows, rusting equipment, a flock of nesting pigeons, stacks of wool on the ground, shadows in the corners and multiple narratives regarding on-site deaths and ghostly visitations. We were equipped with digital voice recorders to capture EVP’s (electronic voice phenomena), digital thermometers to monitor ghostly temperature drops, infrared video lights and cameras to capture apparitions, and layers and layers of clothing to combat the freezing nighttime temperatures. While I am not sure about the results of our hunt I now understand the process and techniques of ghost hunting, the rampant fear that individuals in a group can feed to one another in a spooky place and the manner in which Mormons justify ghost hunting within an otherwise conservative belief system. Ghost hunting is a fun-filled, thrilling adventure that can uphold and bolster one’s religious or paranormal perspective regarding different forms of afterlife beliefs.

Each of these field experiences was vastly important for my research. I have used this research to present a scholarly paper, will use it for a manuscript and I will also incorporate all of it into my Integrated Learning course, ‘Modern Mysticism and the Afterlife’. I would like to thank Otis College for this wonderful grant. I recognize that some of the research topics I choose as a folklorist may seem rather extreme to many scholars but Otis provides a supportive and non-judgmental atmosphere that enables its academics to pursue their academic passions and shine in their disparate areas of expertise. This creates an open and accommodating atmosphere both for instructors and also for students who are likewise inspired to explore aspects of the world they find most fascinating through their papers and artwork.

The following are titles for the attached pictures:

Items to inspire spiritual awareness

Ft. Douglas Cemetery at night, Utah

The haunted Baron Woolen Mill in Brigham City, Utah

Tools of the ghost hunting trade

Tom Carr of the Wasatch Paranormal Society