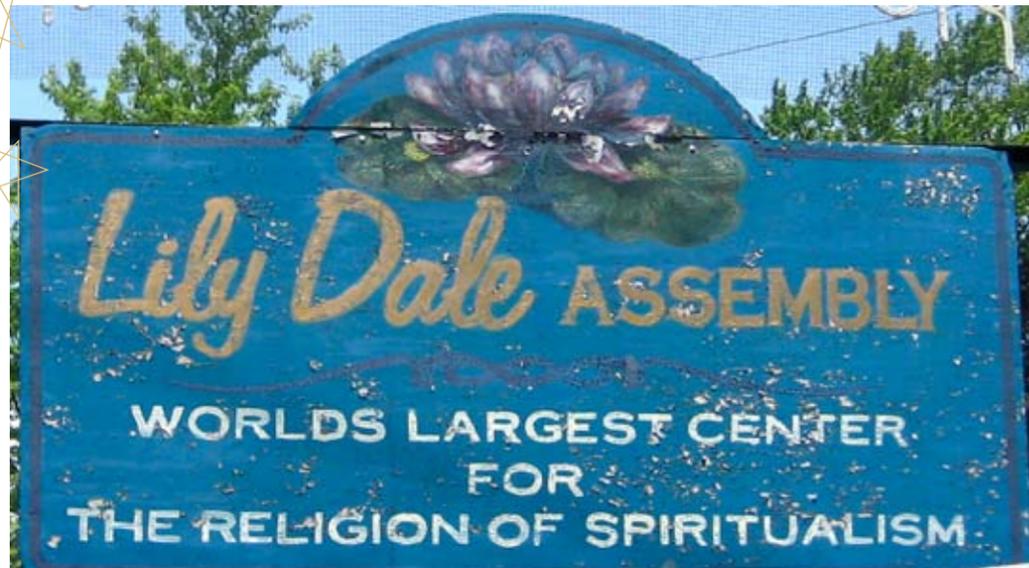


alternative
energies



THE SPIRITS SITTING on Sherry Lee Calkins' lap are telling her how to draw my soul, which, it turns out, is a black chihuahua sleeping on a papasan chair. My friend Tatiana, whose soul sat on Calkins' lap just before mine, is a half-pacifier, half-giant engagement ring. Tatiana's spirits apparently possess a better sense of humor than mine, as they make our little white-haired medium giggle as her chalk-covered fingers draw our souls.

Calkins talks to dead people and thinks there's nothing strange about it. They talk back, after all. She's in good company — Calkins lives in a town with 44 other psychics who hear them, too. She's a medium in Lily Dale, an historic village nestled on Cassadaga Lake 60 miles south of Buffalo. For 128 years, Lily Dale has served as the Disneyland of the Spiritualist Church, the heart of which is the belief that the living can communicate with the dead.

Spiritualism began in the mid-1800s in the spiritually charged western part of New York, where Mormons and Millerites spread their faiths decades before. The first mediums, the Fox sisters, began communicating through knocks with a spirit in their home.

They've come a long way from knocking. We received brightly colored drawings from the great beyond. Chatting with spirits doesn't come cheap, as readings cost between \$40 and \$100. In late June, the tiny gingerbread town opens its gates (for \$10 a pop), and around 22,000 guests flood in to attend readings and workshops on topics that range from UFOs to spoon bending.

Christine Wicker, a former religion reporter at the *Dallas Morning News* and best-selling author of *Lily Dale: The*

true story of the town that talks to the dead, spent a summer there. "I went into it thinking that they might very well believe it, but I didn't," she says. "I came away really feeling that life is more mysterious than we understand."

During the 3-hour drive from Syracuse, Tatiana and I discussed a similar hesitation. She believed it could be true, but I thought it wasn't possible.

At our session, Calkins peers at me through wire-rimmed glasses and asks me questions I don't understand. ("Would you welcome the idea of giving birth to your mother?") Most of the time she looks somewhere else, cocks an eyebrow, grins or frowns depending on the news, and draws away. She has a freaky knowledge of my past — deaths of loved ones, new jobs, and long-forgotten boyfriends. She promises me supreme happiness in three years. I want to believe her, but I'm not sure I do.

"You have a greater chance of having a life-changing experience here than anywhere I can think of. It happens all the time," says Shelley Takei, owner of The Angel House, where we stayed. It



INNER CHILD: Calkins illustrates a visitor's soul.

looks like a dollhouse that is, like much of Lily Dale, covered in knick-knacks.

We told her we wanted to talk to some serious spirits. She sent us to Calkins, one of the most respected mediums of Lily Dale and one of the few that give you something to hang on the fridge.

And spirits we got. Or just really good guesses. When we return to the Angel House, chihuahua and pacifier in hand, Takei tries to make sense of it and giggles. "Like I said, girls, either they're crazy or we're stupid."

«CLAIRE NAPIER-GALOFARO»

FROM TOP: MAGIN MCKENNA; SHERRY LEE CALKINS