

Saying Thanks To My Ghosts

By Amy Tan

I didn't used to believe in ghosts, but I was trained to talk to them. My mother reminded me many times that I had the gift. It all stemmed from a lie I told when I was 4. The way my mother remembered it, I refused to get ready for bed one night, claiming there was a ghost in the bathroom. She was delighted to learn I was a spirit medium.

Thereafter, she questioned anything unusual — a sudden gust of wind, a vase that fell and shattered. She would ask me, "She here?" She meant my grandmother.

When I was a child, my mother told me that my grandmother died in great agony after she accidentally ate too much opium. My mother was 9 years old when she watched this happen.

When I was 14, my older brother was stricken with a brain tumor. My mother begged me to ask my grandmother to save him. When he died, she asked me to talk to him as well. "I don't know how," I protested. When my father died of a brain tumor six months after my brother, she made me use a Ouija board. She wanted to know if they still loved her. I spelled out the answer I knew she wanted to hear: Yes. Always.

When I became a fiction writer in my 30s, I wrote a story about a woman who killed herself eating too much opium. After my mother read a draft of that story, she had tears in her eyes. Now she had proof: My grandmother had talked to me and told me her true story. How else could I have known my grandmother had not died by accident but with the fury of suicide? She asked me, "She here now?" I answered honestly, "I don't know."

Over the years, I have included other details in my writing I could not possibly have known on my own: a place, a character, a song. I have come to feel differently about my ghostwriters. Sometimes their clues have come so plentifully, they've made me laugh like a child who can't open birthday presents fast enough. I must say thanks, not to blind luck but to my ghosts.

Ten years ago, I clearly saw a ghost, and she talked to me. It was my mother. She had died just 24 hours before. Her face was 10 times larger than life, in the form of a moving, pulsing hologram of sparkling lights. My mother was laughing at my surprise. She drew closer, and when she reached me, I felt as if I had been physically punched in the chest. It took my breath away and filled me with something absolute: love, but also joy and peace — and with that, understanding that love and joy and peace are all the same thing. Joy comes from love. Peace comes from love. "Now you know," my mother said.

I believe in ghosts. Whenever I want, they will always be there: my mother, my grandmother, my ghosts.

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Checking for Understanding

1. How does Amy Tan's belief about ghosts change throughout this story?
2. Who does Amy Tan thank for her writing success?

Vocabulary

- plentifully
- opium
- stemmed
- absolute

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