

Corinne G. Dempsey

BRIDGES *between* WORLDS

*Spirits and Spirit Work
in Northern Iceland*



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MAP OF ICELAND

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*For Sólveig Hrafnadóttir and Kristján Jósteinsson and the
“Strange” People in Akureyri*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Icelandic Language Notes</i>	xv
<i>Keeping Track: A Directory of Characters</i>	xvii
 Introduction: Bridging Worlds with <i>Andleg Mál</i>	 1
1. Roots and Layers of Icelandic <i>Andleg Mál</i>	19
2. Science and Skepticism, Belief and Blasphemy	48
3. <i>Skyggnigáfa</i> : The Gift That Keeps on Giving	75
4. Trance Work	105
5. Healers and Healing	135
6. Leaps of Geography and Faith	163
 <i>Notes</i>	 185
<i>Glossary of Icelandic Terms</i>	211
<i>Works Cited</i>	213
<i>Index</i>	223

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I also wish to thank those in Akureyri who helped me in many other ways. Upon my arrival in 2009, Hulda Hrönn Ingadóttir immediately opened a network of contacts to me and continued to do so when I returned in 2012 and 2015. A host of others also widened my circle throughout the years. For this I thank Ármann Hinrik, Björn Jónsson, Guðbjörg Guðjónsdóttir, Gunnar Karlsson, Hrafnhildur Sigurgeirsdóttir, Jóhann Rúnar Sigurðsson, Kristinn Már Torfason, Matthías Henriksen, and Ragnheiður Ragnarsdóttir. Gunnar Karlsson took it upon himself to ply me with countless newspaper articles, book chapters, and radio programs dealing with Icelandic Spiritualism, reaching back to the start of the twentieth century. Thanks to him I was also given access to decades-old recordings of trance medium sessions he had worked to preserve. For all Gunnar's contributions essential to the making of this book, I am beyond grateful. For his professional insights into Icelandic Spiritualism I also

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This book emerges out of research that began in 2007 and travels that launched in 2009. Yet in some ways my adventures with Iceland started twenty-three years ago, in late summer of 1993, when Sólveig Hrafnadóttir, Kristján Jósteinsson, and their two young sons, Sindri and Orri, moved into Syracuse University's family student housing where Nick, our two sons, and I lived. Finding each other on the playground jungle gym days later, we became fast friends. Keeping our ties strong over the years, we have become like family. If it were not for Sólveig putting the idea of Icelandic spirits and spirit work into my head during the fall of 2006, this book would have been impossible. During my three research stays in Akureyri, Sólveig and Kristján's home became my home where, for several months at a time, they welcomed me without a second thought, fueled me with glorious meals, and kept me afloat with their laughter and love. I dedicate this book, made possible by true friendship, to them.

I also dedicate this book to the "strange" people in Akureyri. While searching for a title, many *andleg mál* participants thought *Strange People in Akureyri*, suggested by a spirit named Hannes, would be perfect. It was a bold idea that made us laugh. Yet in the end I felt it was too bold; outsiders who did not understand insider humor might find it disrespectful. I am only too aware that, for people in Akureyri who claim the label "*skrýttinn*," or "strange," misunderstandings indeed loom large. I thus thank them, from the bottom of my heart, for sharing their stories with me and for trusting me with them. While this book no doubt falls short of full understanding, I hope it comes close and, in the end, does justice to this trust.

Icelandic Language Notes

THE ICELANDIC ALPHABET contains several letters not included in the (modern) English alphabet. I keep to original spellings of Icelandic names and specialty terms because letter variations are few and simple to learn. Here are some letters either not found in the English alphabet or that deviate in pronunciation from what English-speakers might expect:

- á ow, as in *cow*
- au oy, as in *boy*
- é ye, as in *yes*
- æ i, as in *like*
- ei ay, as in *way*
- ö e, as in *bed*, but with rounded lips
- ð soft *th*, as in *father*
- f v, as in *vase*, *when between vowels*
- j y, as in *yes*
- þ hard *th*, as in *thick*

Note on emphasis: the first syllable of multisyllabic words is always given greatest emphasis.

Keeping Track: A Directory of Characters

THIS BOOK IS brought to you by a host of characters whose experiences and opinions are distributed throughout. My hope is that readers will approach the following a bit like a symphony, paying attention to melodic themes or instrumental sections without too much concern for picking out individual players. Still, I can understand that some might want to track particular people and their storylines. For these readers, I present this directory. Listed alphabetically by first name, in proper Icelandic style, and with approximate age when we first met (when applicable), are all those, living and deceased, who appear more than once in this book.

The Living

- Anne—Corinne’s friend from Wisconsin who first encountered spirits while practicing reiki, 8, 132–134, 164, 170–174
- Ármann—trance practitioner in his forties who helps train others; freelance photographer who works at a home-supply store, 26, 35–36, 42, 77–78, 90, 99, 106, 113–114, 116, 121–122, 125, 137–138
- Ásdís—full-time healer in her forties who specializes in helping women conceive, 82–83, 95, 96, 98, 112, 113, 126, 141, 147–148, 158–159
- Binni—healer in his sixties; construction worker, 91–92, 160
- Birna—healer in her seventies; longtime organizer of Sáló prayer circles; retired, 103–104, 114
- Bjössi—trance medium in his sixties; owner of a house-painting business, 14, 18, 37, 40–41, 42–43, 47, 69–70, 90–93, 98–99, 100, 105, 114–115, 120–121, 123–124, 131–132, 159–160
- Dóra—Sáló event organizer and prayer circle participant in her forties; computer-networking specialist for the Akureyri hospital, 72–73, 80–81, 98–99
- Garðar—medium from southern Iceland in his sixties who trained many of Akureyri’s healers and trance mediums, 88, 95, 98, 101, 112–114, 121

- Guðbjörg—full-time healer and medium in her sixties who specializes in drawing auras and spirit guides, 3, 81–82, 98, 142, 169
- Gunnar—member of Halldór's trance circle in his fifties who helped gather historical data for this book; tax accountant, 105–107, 167–168, 190n20, 192n42, 200n2, 201n4
- Gunnhildur—healer and trance practitioner in her forties; university staff member, 11, 71–72, 99
- Halldór—trance medium and healer in his fifties; construction worker, 12, 14, 15–17, 29, 30, 37, 71, 90, 93–95, 98–99, 106–110, 123, 127, 130–131, 145, 169–170, 200n8, 200n2
- Hrabba—healer and trance practitioner in her thirties; social studies teacher and college administrator, 11, 12, 15, 78–79, 85–86, 88, 96–97, 99, 101, 102–103, 112–113, 118, 119–120, 123, 126, 201n3
- Hulda—former chairman of the Sáló in her thirties and participant in Kiddi's training circle; social worker and paramedic, 6, 12, 38–39, 41–42, 46–47, 69, 70, 76, 97–99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 128, 129, 130, 137, 140–141, 168–169, 181–182
- Ingibjörg—Sáló member in her seventies; raised in the west fjords; retired, 3–4, 40
- Ingveldur—member of Kiddi's training circle in her forties; a healer who specializes in children's chronic ailments; granddaughter of well-known deceased medium, Margrét; office manager, 12–13, 43–44, 79–80, 84, 99–100, 118, 139–140, 141, 155–157
- Jói—healer in his forties who also performs trance; car mechanic and labor union leader, 3, 71, 87–88, 138–139, 142–143, 146–147, 150–151, 154–155, 161–162, 173, 205n18
- Jón—former chairman of the Sáló in his thirties; trance practitioner; music manager, 36, 71, 88–90, 124, 137, 174–175, 180, 181, 203n15
- Jóna Lísá—Lutheran minister in her fifties, 59, 153–154
- Kiddi—trance practitioner in his forties; great-nephew of well-known deceased medium, Einar á Einarssstöðum; social worker, 12–13, 44–45, 70, 72, 76–77, 87, 98, 99–100, 102, 103, 111–112, 115–116, 117–118, 123, 126, 129–130, 136, 155–156, 168, 180
- Kristján—Corinne's longtime friend; co-host while she lived in Akureyri; counselor for people with disabilities, 1, 5, 19–21, 23, 48, 163
- Lilla—trance circle sitter in her seventies; longtime friend of well-known medium Guðrún; recently deceased, 58, 118–119, 123, 124, 203n17

- Matti—healer, trance practitioner, and prayer circle leader in his fifties; university electrician, 5, 6, 37–38, 39–40, 78, 83, 98–99, 117, 123, 126–127, 132–134, 141–142, 144, 169, 173, 199n4, 204n3
- Mínerva—lead member of Halldór’s trance circle in her forties; preschool worker, 12, 15, 17, 30, 37, 107, 108–109, 127, 130–131, 145, 170, 175–179
- Nick—Brooklyn-born doctor recently retired from practice at Akureyri hospital, 152–153, 160–161
- Ragnheiður—former Sáló president in her forties; interpreter, 18, 40, 69, 91, 118
- Ragnhildur—full-time healer and medium in her forties, 86–87, 116–117
- Rannveig—Sólveig and Kristján’s daughter-in-law and interpreter, 150, 161, 186n6
- Rósa—Hrabba’s mother in her fifties; member of her daughter’s trance circle; preschool cook, 79, 85–86, 200n5
- Sólveig—Corinne’s longtime friend; co-host while she lived in Akureyri; university counselor, 1, 5–6, 19, 37–38, 78, 132–133, 144, 163
- Silla—trance trainee in her forties, 35, 121–122, 125
- Svanur—member of Kiddi’s trance circle in his thirties; part-time healer, 85, 117, 156
- Valgerður—social worker and writer in her fifties; runs workshops on spirituality, 4, 19–23, 165, 183
- Pórhallur—full-time medium from Reykjavík in his fifties; radio and TV host, 36, 67, 68–69, 147

The Deceased: Notable Spirits and Historical Figures

- Einar á Einarssstöðum (1915–1987)—farmer from the valley east of Akureyri and Kiddi’s great-uncle; one of Iceland’s best-known healers, 44–45, 76, 78, 83, 141, 151–153
- Einar Kvaran (1859–1938)—poet, playwright, and newspaper columnist from Akureyri; considered the father of Icelandic Spiritualism, 31–34, 38, 43, 45, 163–165, 182
- Friðrik—spirit doctor who worked with famous healer Margrét; now works with her granddaughter Ingveldur, 44, 80, 141, 193n52
- Gosi—funny male spirit who works through Jón while in trance, 124, 174, 175–179
- Gudmundur Hannesson (1866–1946)—University of Iceland professor who ran tests on Indriði’s trance sessions, 33, 52

- Guðrún Sigurðardóttir (1911–1984)—Akureyri trance medium and healer; her channeled seventeenth-century conversations became best-selling books, 42, 43, 51, 53–58, 74, 123, 167, 196n24, 28, 197n23, 203n17
- Hafsteinn Björgsson (1915–1977)—newspaper worker and medium known throughout Iceland for his public readings, 42, 43, 50, 61, 70, 128, 167, 195n7, 197n34
- Hannes—spirit master of ceremonies for Halldór's trance sessions, 15, 16, 17, 107, 108, 109, 123, 131, 170
- Haraldur Nielsson (1868–1928)—Lutheran priest, professor of theology, and cofounder with Einar Kvaran of Iceland's Experimental Society, 18, 31–32, 33, 34, 37, 38, 40, 41, 42–43, 45, 47, 52–53, 60, 64, 70, 197n42, 198n51
- Indriði Indriðason (1883–1912)—medium who was focus of Iceland's Experimental Society; his feats key to launching Icelandic Spiritualism in Reykjavík, 32–34, 38, 42–43, 51–53, 58, 70, 74, 121, 123–124, 149, 167, 191n33, 191n35, 193n48
- Jón Arason (1484–1550)—Catholic bishop and last holdout against arrival of imperial Danish Lutheranism, 125–127, 189n13, 189n15
- Magnús—old spirit who showed up during Halldór's trance session to offer his advice for this book, 12, 31, 37, 130–131
- Maria Kristín—main spirit organizer for Halldór's trance sessions, 14, 15, 95, 107–108, 109, 169–170, 200n2, 200n8
- Margrét frá Öxnafeili (1908–1982)—Ingvaldur's grandmother from a farm south of Akureyri; one of northern Iceland's most famous healers, 42, 43–44, 79, 80–81, 84, 141, 157, 192n42
- Matthías Einarsson—deceased Reykjavík doctor; Matti's namesake who assists him when he heals, 78, 141, 199n4
- Ólafur Tryggvason (1900–1975)—Akureyri healer and spokesperson for *andleg mál*, 42, 116, 148
- Þorbjörg—itinerant *völva*; her spirit practices described in *Eiríks Saga*, 22–23, 29
- Þorgeir Ljósveitningagoði (b. circa 940)—Icelandic lawmaker-chief-tan whose decree in 999 prompted Iceland's peaceful conversion to Christianity, 24–25, 188n9

Bridges between Worlds

Introduction

BRIDGING WORLDS WITH *ANDLEG MÁL*

This is a land where your house can be destroyed by something you can't see (earthquakes), where the wind can knock you off your feet, where the smell of sulphur from your taps tells you there is invisible fire not far below your feet, where the northern lights make the sky the biggest television screen in the world, and where hot springs and glaciers "talk."

TERRY GUNNELL, Professor of Folklore,
University of Iceland¹

Otherworldly Landscapes

Spirit work in Iceland, known locally as *andleg mál*, has a knack for bridging many things. Spanning eras, worldviews, and cultures, it most deliberately opens passage between this world and the next. When asked why spirit work flourishes in Iceland today, people most often point to the otherworldly landscapes surrounding them. It is here that we begin.

Stepping outside the home my friends Sólveig and Kristján shared with me during my stays in Akureyri (dubbed the nation's "northern capital," population 17,000), I would look back to see mountains. Craggy and snow-topped year round, they loomed so close they never ceased to take my breath away, impelling me to hike up into them. On most Sundays, weather permitting, rather than making my usual downhill trek toward the fjord and into town, I would head up into Súlur, our closest mountain (Figure 0.1). Taking one of its lesser-traveled paths, I eventually reached a treeless open field just below its snowy peak. Here I was surrounded by undulating mounds known as *púfur*, each carpeted in a dizzying array of mosses.² Depending on the season, their greens turning to reds, yellows, and golds, they would sport flowers, berries, or a blanket of snow. This is my favorite



FIGURE 0.1 The less-traveled path up to Súlur

Photo by author.

part of Súlur. Here I almost always found myself alone, welcomed by its peak, its luscious mosses, the winds, and arctic birds that made beeping noises to distract me from their nests wedged between the *þúfur*. My jogging route during the week was only slightly less spectacular. Leading me along a mountain-lined road, down to a view across Eyjafjörður, Akureyri's far-reaching fjord, the route finished, appropriately, at a tenderly kept cemetery. Before looping around the large cross keeping watch at the end of the cemetery road, I would slow down to take in Eyjafjörður's final stretch southward and into a valley flanked by more majestic peaks.

The opening quote extolling the drama of Icelandic terrain is a folklore professor's response to a British journalist who asked him to explain the country's continuing (although by no means unanimous) belief in elves and fairies. Iceland's array of unearthly natural activity, he suggests, enlarges people's imaginations. Those I spoke with agreed that the landscape expanded perception, its sparse population of only 320,000 adding to the effect. A Lutheran priest explained that, when living in Iceland, "Gradually things slow down and you start to listen and you start to look and you start to feel. And this is a whole new kind of school." Another priest echoed this sentiment: "My opinion is that this sensitivity to

something, you find it in many people who are living very close to nature. They have it. And we were once living very close to nature and perhaps it is dying now. And I think that this gift of seeing something more than what exists is universal but if you are urbanized, then it will die.”

While spectacular landscapes have ways of widening perceptions, *andleg mál* participants often pointed to the power of the earth itself, surrounded by the North Atlantic Ocean and alive with geothermal activity, as having a direct impact. Jóí, a healer, reflected, “Icelanders have spent much time away in the ocean [in the fishing industry] and there is a lot of energy there. This energy is in our land as well. We have very, very powerful sources in Iceland. And you can feel it when you walk around in nature. The source here is so clear because we have been isolated from so many things.” Local terrain is seen as having its own effect, helping to explain why *andleg mál* differs slightly between Akureyri in the north and Reykjavík in the south. Guðbjörg, a medium who lived in Reykjavík before settling in Akureyri, felt that the northern focus on healing was fueled by its surrounding lush landscapes whereas Reykjavík’s more traditional emphasis on delivering spirit messages had to do with the “energy” of an urban setting.

Whether awe-inspiring or energizing, Iceland’s forces of nature also demand respect. As recently as the 1970s, everyday life in Iceland remained harsh, made worse by regular run-ins with volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, avalanches, and storms at sea.³ Ingibjörg, an *andleg mál* participant in her eighties, felt that such hardships created a yearning to connect to a world beyond: “Maybe it is because of the location, the land. It is not very long since we had nothing to eat, very little to feed and clothe us. I think that people who have to work very hard to survive, they think more about faith than those who have everything already in their hands. It’s only been thirty or forty years since people in Iceland could afford things and have the comforts of life. It hasn’t been a very long time.” Growing up in the remote west fjords, the youngest of fourteen children, Ingibjörg recalled how her family’s vulnerability inspired their faith:

My father owned a very small boat that he used for fishing out in the sea. Just a rowboat. It was very cold during those times and we didn’t always have enough to eat. When my brothers grew up, as soon as they were old enough, they went out to sea as well. My father always said a prayer before he went out to sea. I don’t remember when the oldest went out but when my father was old and worn out and didn’t go out to sea, I noticed that he was always praying for them.