The title of this chapter comes from the famous spiritualist denial of the existence of death. The kind of dispelling of belief implied by this claim is particularly striking when it is considered that spiritualism gained new adherents at key moments of trauma associated with widespread levels of death—notably, the period of the Civil War in the United States, and the 1914–1918 war. At each of these moments there was a revival of interest in the spirit world.\(^1\) What are the difficulties, or even the opportunities, faced by a system of beliefs that denies the existence of death when confronted with the devastation it causes?

The violent internal struggle of the Civil War and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln were two events that particularly tested the degree to which such a denial might appeal to, or repel, Americans. The kinds of comforts and euphemisms that spiritualism might offer at periods of massive internal turmoil and unprecedented crisis had found their moment. Violence on the scale experienced during this period produced problems of language as well as comprehension. Such catastrophes test the limits of language and understanding and require new explanations and ways of dealing with crisis, mourning, and loss.\(^2\)

Spiritualists responded to this in a number of ways. One was through consolatory writings that emphasized the reconstitution of
broken and disfigured bodies within a realm that was rendered accessible and comprehensible through spiritualist ideology. Another was through a preoccupation with Lincoln as an iconic figure that, especially for Northerners, could act as a surrogate or substitute for the dead soldiers they mourned.

The war was often seen as a fratricidal conflict. With the president (in conventional terms) seen as both leader and father of the nation, metaphors of the familial abounded. The status of dead soldiers as fathers, brothers, or sons was frequently invoked and reminded Americans of the networks of the bereaved that were left behind while soldiers headed into battle. Visceral images of bloodied bodies brutally vivisected by the war were also common. Emma Hardinge Britten utilized such a rhetorical trope in an oration she made after Lincoln’s death. She described him as “uniting again in one fraternal clasp the severed hands of North and South.” The reunion of the traumatized and amputated hands provides an image that suggests both the massive death caused by the war and its brutalizing human consequences.

The two events—the war and the assassination—were often played out as strikingly domestic dramas within a familial/local set of parameters. Yet at the same time the limits of what constituted the domestic were also being tested by the implications of the events overtaking the nation and this, in turn, suggested the limitations of the kinds of language being used to describe disaster on such a gigantic scale. Spiritualism was well positioned to take its place within such constructions. Its role as a provider of comfort to bereaved families who healed grief by allowing for hands to be joined, literally, once more, was well established by the time of the war. Séances frequently took place within domestic environments in which the families were significant both as living participants and as returning spirits.

The war brought substantial challenges to the ways with which the dead were dealt, building on changes that had already been taking place within antebellum culture. In addition to this, meanings of death and the imaginative responses to it were undergoing significant shifts during the period. The ways in which death and mourning were conceived of changed considerably throughout the nineteenth century. The developments of new ways of dealing with the bodies of the dead—the emergence of the funeral parlor, the improvement in techniques of embalming and preserving the body—took corpses out of the domestic space they had once occupied and into a new