

How Psychics and Mediums Work:
A Case Study of James Van Praagh
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Source Link: <http://www.skeptic.com/otherstuff03.html>

Talking Twaddle with the Dead

For those of you who managed to sit through that awful ABC special, "Contact: Talking to the Dead," you saw George Anderson, a medium dubbed by the network (on their web page) as the "Edgar Cayce of our time," a man with a true "sixth sense." Of course, for such a prime-time special he can't talk to just anyone's dead friends and relatives, he needed to talk twaddle with the likes of Vanna White, Mackenzie Phillips, WWF and WCW champion Bret "The Hitman" Hart and the family of murder victim Bonny Lee Bakley who, we are told, apparently did not commit suicide. Now that's a shocker. What's next? Nicole Brown Simpson also didn't kill herself? Quick, call the LAPD!

This must be the psychic specials week, as on Sunday and Tuesday, April 28 and 30th, CBS is running a television miniseries Living with the Dead, starring Ted Danson, Mary Steenburgen, Jack Palance, Diane Ladd, and Queen Latifah. Then, coming this fall, Van Praagh gets into the TV series act alongside John Edward, with his own syndicated show entitled Beyond, starting September 16.

Given all the hoopla, I thought I would present once again the section from my book *How We Believe*, on "Talking Twaddle with the Dead." It explains how psychics talk to the dead, plus the psychology of belief to explain those who buy into this flapdoodle:

Throughout much of 1998 and 1999, the best-selling book in America was by a man who says he can talk to the dead (and so can you, if you buy his book). It turns out that our loved ones who have passed over are not really dead, just on another spiritual plane. All you have to do is fine tune your frequencies and, like Sri Leachim Remresh, you too can turn off the Here and Now and tune into that Something Else.

I am referring to James Van Praagh, the world's most famous medium — for now anyway. He appeared three times, unopposed, on Larry King Live. He was featured on NBC's Dateline, The Today Show, and on ABC's 20/20. He made the talk-show rounds, including on Oprah (who was mildly skeptical) and Charles Grodin (who was not skeptical at all), and even had Charles Gibson on ABC's Good Morning America talking to his dead dad. Cher met with him to talk one last time with Sonny. Denise Brown received a reading to make a final connection with her sister, Nicole Brown Simpson. What is going on here? Who is James Van Praagh, and why do so many people believe in him?

An Actor in Search of a Role

A brief glance at Van Praagh's biography is revealing. According to Alex Witchel of the New York Times (February 22, 1998), Van Praagh is the third of four children, born and raised Roman Catholic in Bayside, Queens, New York. At one point, he considered becoming a priest. He served as an altar boy and even entered a Catholic prep seminary — the Blessed Sacrament Fathers and Brothers in Hyde Park. His father is Allan Van Praagh, the head carpenter at the Royale Theater on Broadway (where his brother still works). His mother was Irish-Catholic and one of his sisters is a eucharistic minister. While attending college he found part-time work at the theater where, says Witchel, while the other stagehands were playing cards during the shows, Van Praagh "was out front watching, picking up pointers he still uses for his numerous television appearances." The lessons were well learned.

His college career was checkered, including enrollments at Queensboro Community College, State University of New York at Geneseo, Hunter College, and, finally, San Francisco State University where he graduated with a degree in Broadcasting and Communications. Subsequently he moved to Los Angeles and began working in the entertainment industry, including Paramount Studios and a stint with the famed William Morris agency in Hollywood. He confesses in his book, *Talking to Heaven*, "I dreamed of a career as a screenwriter. As luck would have it, while coordinating a conference with the creative staff of Hill Street Blues, I became friendly with one of the show's producers. When I told him I would be graduating soon, he offered what I thought was my first big break." After graduation, Van Praagh moved to Hollywood where "I vowed that I would not leave Tinsel Town until I realized my dream and became a writer." Through a job at William Morris, Van Praagh met a medium who told him "You know, James, you are very mediumistic. The spirit people are telling me that one day you will give readings like this to other people. The spirits are planning to use you." Van Praagh had found his role in Hollywood. He would act the part of a spirit medium.

In 1994 he was discovered by NBC's *The Other Side*, for whom Van Praagh made numerous appearances in their exploration of the paranormal. This, and other media appearances, generated countless personal and group readings, pushing him above the psychic crowd and eventually leading to his status as a bestselling author.

Who does James Van Praagh say he is? According to his own web page, "Van Praagh is a survival evidence medium, meaning that he is able to bridge the gap between two planes of existence, that of the living and that of the dead, by providing evidential proof of life after death via detailed messages." Van Praagh calls himself a "clairsentient," or "clear feeling," where he can allegedly "feel the emotions and personalities of the deceased." His analogue, he says, is "Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*." He claims that the "spirits communicate by their emotions,"

and even though they do not speak English or any other language, they can tell you, for example, "that you changed your pants because of a hole in the left seam or that you couldn't mail letters today because the stamps weren't in the bottom right desk drawer."

He readily admits that he makes mistakes in his readings (there are so many he could hardly deny it), rationalizing it this way: "If I convey recognizable evidence along with even a fraction of the loving energy behind the message, I consider the reading successful." In other words, if he can just get a few hits, then "convey" the all important emotional stroking that your loved one still loves you and is happy in heaven, he has done his job. From the feedback of his clients, this is all most people need.

Gambling on the Afterlife

By way of analogy, consider the gambling games of Las Vegas. Gaming is big business, as anyone can see driving down the ever-burgeoning neon-glaring strip. In fact, gambling is the best bet in business, far superior to the stock market, as long as you are the house. With only a tiny advantage on any given game, and heaps of customers playing lots of rounds, the house is guaranteed to win. For the roulette wheel, for example, with eighteen red slots, eighteen black slots, and two green slots (zero and double zero), the take is only 5.26 percent. That is, by betting either black or red, you will win eighteen out of thirty-eight times, or 47.37 percent, whereas the house will win twenty out of thirty-eight times, or 52.63 percent. If you place down hundred \$1.00 bets, you would be out \$5.26, on average. This may not sound like a lot, but cumulatively over time, with millions of gamblers betting billions of dollars every year, the house take is significant. Other games are better for gamblers. For straight bets in Craps the house take is a mere 1.4 percent; for Blackjack, with the most liberal rules and optimal (non-card-counting) player strategies, the house earns just under 1 percent. These are the best games to play if you are a gambler (that is to say, you will lose more slowly). With other games it is downhill for the gambler. The take for some slot machines, for example, is a staggering 25 percent. That is, you are losing 25 cents on the dollar, or, the house wins 62.5 percent and you win 37.5 percent of the time. Yet people still play. Why?

As B. F. Skinner showed in rats, pigeons, and humans, organisms do not need steady reinforcement to continue pressing a bar, pecking a plate, or pulling a one-armed bandit (slot machine). Intermittent reinforcement will do just as well, and sometimes even better at eliciting the desired behavior. A "Variable Ratio Schedule" of reinforcement turns out to be the best for gambling games, where the payoff is unpredictably variable, depending on a varying rate of responses. Payoff comes after ten pulls, then three pulls, then twelve pulls, then seven pulls, then twenty-three pulls, and so on. When I was a graduate student in experimental psychology in the mid 1970s I worked in an operant laboratory where we created these variable schedules of reinforcement for our subjects. It is

remarkable how infrequently the payoffs need to come to keep the subjects motivated. And this was for such basic rewards as sugar water (rats), seed (pigeons), and money (humans). Imagine how much more motivating, and, correspondingly, lower the rate of reinforcement can be, when the reward is the belief that your lost loved ones are not really dead and, as an added bonus, you can speak with them through a medium. This renders intelligible, in part, the success of someone like James Van Praagh, whose hit rate is far below that of even the lowest-paying gambling games in Las Vegas. It also helps explain the more general case of how we believe.

I once sat in on a day of readings with Van Praagh and kept a running tally of his ratio of hits and misses for each of ten subjects (one of whom was me, all filmed for NBC's *Unsolved Mysteries*). Being generous with what kind of information counted as a "hit," Van Praagh averaged 5-10 hits for every 30 questions/statements, or 16-33 percent, significantly below that of roulette where the player wins almost half the time. But because Van Praagh's payoff is the hope of life after death and a chance to speak with a lost loved one, people are exceptionally forgiving of his many misses. Like all gamblers, Van Praagh's clients only need an occasional hit to convince them.

How to Talk to the Dead

Watching James Van Praagh work a crowd or do a one-on-one reading is an educational experience in human psychology. Make no mistake about it, this is one clever man. We may see him, at best, as morally reprehensible, but we should not underestimate his genuine theatrical talents and his understanding, gained through years of experience speaking with real people, of what touches off some of the deepest human emotions. Van Praagh masterfully uses his ability and learned skills in three basic techniques he uses to "talk" to the dead:

1. Cold Reading. Most of what Van Praagh does is what is known in the mentalism trade as cold reading, where you literally "read" someone "cold," knowing nothing about them. He asks lots of questions and makes numerous statements, some general and some specific, and sees what sticks. Most of the time he is wrong. His subjects visibly nod their heads "no." But he only needs an occasional strike to convince his clientele he is genuine.

2. Warm Reading. This is utilizing known principles of psychology that apply to nearly everyone. For example, most grieving people will wear a piece of jewelry that has a connection to their loved one. Katie Couric on *The Today Show*, for example, after her husband died, wore his ring on a necklace when she returned to the show. Van Praagh knows this about mourning people and will say something like "do you have a ring or a piece of jewelry on you, please?" His subject cannot believe her ears and nods enthusiastically in the affirmative. He says "thank you," and moves on as if he had just divined this from heaven. Most people also keep a photograph of their loved one either on them or near their bed, and Van Praagh will take credit for this specific hit that actually applies to

most people.

Van Praagh is facile at determining the cause of death by focusing either on the chest or head areas, and then exploring whether it was a slow or sudden end. He works his way down through these possibilities as if he were following a computer flow chart and then fills in the blanks. "I'm feeling a pain in the chest." If he gets a positive nod, he continues. "Did he have cancer, please? Because I'm seeing a slow death here." If he gets the nod, he takes the hit. If the subject hesitates at all, he will quickly shift to heart attack. If it is the head, he goes for stroke or head injury from an automobile accident or fall. Statistically speaking there are only half a dozen ways most of us die, so with just a little probing, and the verbal and nonverbal cues of his subject, he can appear to get far more hits than he is really getting.

3. Hot Reading. Mentalist Max Maven informs me that some mentalists and psychics also do "hot" readings, where they obtain information on a subject ahead of time. I do not know if Van Praagh does research or uses private detectives to get information on people, but I have discovered from numerous television producers that he consciously and deliberately pumps them for information about his subjects ahead of time, then uses that information to deceive the viewing public that he got it from heaven. Leah Hanes, for example, who was a producer and researcher for NBC's *The Other Side*, explained to me how Van Praagh used her to get information on guests during his numerous appearances on the show (interview on April 3, 1998):

I can't say I think James Van Praagh is a total fraud, because he came up with things I hadn't told him, but there were moments on the show when he appeared to be coming up with fresh information that he got from me and other researchers earlier on. For example, I recall him asking about the profession of the deceased loved one of one of our guests, and I told him he was a fireman. Then, when the show began, he said something to the effect, "I see a uniform. Was he a policeman or fireman please?" Everyone was stunned, but he got that directly from me.

Deception or Self-Deception?

When I first began following Van Praagh I thought perhaps there was a certain element of self-deception on his part where, giving him the benefit of the doubt (he does appear likable), he developed his cold- and warm-reading techniques through a gradual developmental process of subject feedback and reinforcement, much like how gurus come to believe in their own divinity when enough of their followers tell them they are divine.

Human behavior is enormously complex, so I suppose it is possible that Van Praagh is both deceiving and self-deceiving, but over the years I have observed much more of the former than the latter. During the *Unsolved Mysteries* shoot,

which lasted ten hours and was filled with numerous breaks, Van Praagh would routinely make small talk with us, asking lots of questions and obtaining information, which he subsequently used to his advantage when the cameras were rolling.

Is it possible he does not consciously realize that he is doing this? I contacted numerous mentalists about Van Praagh and they assured me that it is very unlikely he is self-deceiving because these are techniques that they all use, and they do so consciously and purposefully. I was told that I was being naive in trying to give Van Praagh the benefit of the doubt. I spoke to an individual who works a 900-psychic hotline, who knows Van Praagh and many of the people who work with him in that industry, and he assures me that Van Praagh is not self-deceived. The psychic industry consensus, this source tells me, is that James Van Praagh knows exactly what he is doing.

That may be so, but as a general principle self-deception is a powerful tool because if you believe the lie yourself your body is less likely to give off telltale clues, making it more difficult for an observer to detect deception. I am fully convinced that cult leaders, after being told for years by hundreds and thousands of followers that they are special, at some point begin to believe it themselves, making them all the more convincing to other and potential followers.

Caught Cheating

Even for seasoned observers it is remarkable how Van Praagh appears to get hits, even though a closer look reveals how he does it. When we were filming the 20/20 piece for ABC, I was told that overall he had not done well the night before, but that he did get a couple of startling hits — including the name of a woman's family dog. But when we reviewed the videotape, here is what actually happened. Van Praagh was failing in his reading of a gentleman named Peter, who was poker-faced and obviously skeptical (without feedback Van Praagh's hit rate drops significantly). After dozens of misses Van Praagh queried, "Who is Charlie?" Peter sat there dumfounded, unable to recall if he knew anyone of significance named Charlie, when suddenly the woman sitting in back of him — a complete stranger — blurted out "Charlie was our family dog." Van Praagh seized the moment and proclaimed that he could see Charlie and this woman's Dad taking walks in heaven together. Apparently Van Praagh's psychic abilities are not fine-tuned enough to tell the difference between a human and a dog.

The highlight of the 20/20 piece, however, was a case of hot reading. On a break, with a camera rolling, while relaxing and sipping a glass of water, Van Praagh suddenly called out to a young woman named Mary Jo: "Did your mother pass on?" Mary Jo nodded negatively, and then volunteered "Grandmother." Fifty-four minutes later Van Praagh turned to her and said: "I want to tell you, there is a lady sitting behind you. She feels like a grandmother to me." The next day, when I was shown this clip, one of the line producers said, "you know, I think

he got that on the break. Too bad we don't have it on film." After checking they discovered they did, so Van Praagh was caught red-handed. When confronted by 20/20 correspondent Bill Ritter with the video clip, however, he demurred: "I don't cheat. I don't have to prove — I don't cheat. I don't cheat. I mean, come on." Interesting. No one said anything about cheating. The gentleman doth protest too much. As an example of the power of the Belief Engine, even after we caught Van Praagh cheating, Barbara Walters concluded in the wrap-up discussion: "I was skeptical. I still am. But I met James Van Praagh. He didn't expect to meet me. He knew that my father's name was Lew — Lewis he said — and he knew that my father had a glass eye. People don't know that." Ritter, doing his homework on this piece to the bitter end, explained: "You told me the story yesterday and I told you I would look and see what I could find out. Within a few minutes I found out that your father's name was Lew and that he was very well known in show business. And this morning I was looking in a book and found a passage that says he was blind in one eye — an accidental incident as a child — and he had a glass eye. If I found that out, then he could have." While Walters flustered in frustration, Hugh Downs declared without qualification: "I don't believe him."

Where have we heard all this before? A hundred years ago, when mediums, séances, and spiritualism were all the rage in England and America, Thomas Henry Huxley concluded, as only he could in his biting wit, that as nonsensical as it was, spiritual manifestations might at least reduce suicides: "Better live a crossing-sweeper than die and be made to talk twaddle by a 'medium' hired at a guinea a séance."

(Excerpted from HOW WE BELIEVE: The Search for God in an Age of Science (W. H. Freeman, 1999, Chapter 3), by Michael Shermer.)