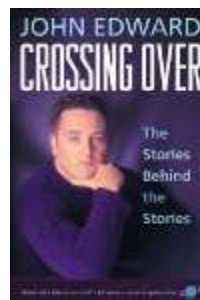


John Edward: Hustling the Bereaved

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Today's spiritualism traces its roots to 1848 and the schoolgirl antics of the Fox sisters, Maggie and Katie. They seemed to communicate with the ghost of a murdered peddler by means of mysterious rapping sounds. Four decades later the foxy sisters confessed how they had produced the noises by trickery (Nickell 1994), but meanwhile others discovered they too could be "mediums" (those who supposedly communicate with the dead).

The "spiritualism" craze spread across the United States, Europe, and beyond. In darkened séance rooms, lecture halls, and theaters, various "spirit" phenomena occurred. The Davenport Brothers conjured up spirit entities to play musical instruments while the two mediums were, apparently, securely tied in a special "spirit cabinet." Unfortunately the Davenports were exposed many times, once by a local printer. He visited their spook show and volunteered as part of an audience committee to help secure the two mediums. He took that opportunity to secretly place some printer's ink on the neck of a violin, and after the séance one of the duo had his shoulder smeared with the black ink (Nickell 1999).

The great magician Harry Houdini (1874-1926) crusaded against phony spiritualists, seeking out elderly mediums who taught him the tricks of the trade. For example, while sitters touched hands around the séance table, mediums had clever ways of gaining the use of one hand. (One method was to slowly move the hands close together so that the fingers of one could be substituted for those of the other.) This allowed the production of special effects, such as causing a tin trumpet to appear to be levitating. Houdini gave public demonstrations of the deceptions. "Do Spirits Return?" asked one of his posters. "Houdini Says No-and Proves It" (Gibson 1977, 157).

Continuing the tradition, I have investigated various mediums, sometimes attending séances undercover and once obtaining police warrants against a fraudulent medium from the notorious Camp Chesterfield spiritualist center in Indiana (Nickell 1998). The camp is the subject of the book *The Psychic Mafia*, written by a former medium who recanted and revealed the tricks of floating trumpets (with disembodied voices), ghostly apparitions, materializing "apports," and other fake phenomena (Keene 1976)-some of which I have also witnessed firsthand.

Mental Mediumship

The new breed of spiritualists-like Edward, James Van Praagh, Rosemary Altea, Sylvia Browne, and George Anderson-avoid the physical approach with its risks of exposure and possible criminal charges. Instead they opt for the comparatively safe "mental mediumship" which involves the purported use of psychic ability to obtain messages from the spirit realm.

This is not a new approach, since mediums have long done readings for their credulous clients. In the early days they exhibited "the classic form of trance mediumship, as practiced by shamans and oracles," giving spoken "spirit messages' that ranged all the way from personal (and sometimes strikingly accurate) trivia to hours-long public trance-lectures on subjects of the deepest philosophical and religious import" (McHargue 1972).

“Cold Reading”

Today’s spirits-whom John Edward and his fellow mediums supposedly contact-seem to have poor memories and difficulty communicating. For example, in one of his on-air séances (on Larry King Live, June 19, 1998), Edward said: “I feel like there’s a J- or G-sounding name attached to this.” He also perceived “Linda or Lindy or Leslie; who’s this L name?” Again, he got a “Maggie or Margie, or some M-G-sounding name,” and yet again heard from “either Ellen or Helen, or Eleanore-it’s like an Ellen-sounding name.” Gone is the clear-speaking eloquence of yore; the dead now seem to mumble.

The spirits also seemingly communicate to Edward et al. as if they were engaging in pantomime. As Edward said of one alleged spirit communicant, in a *Dateline* “He’s pointing to his head; something had to affect the mind or the head, from what he’s showing me.” No longer, apparently, can the dead speak in flowing Victorian sentences, but instead are reduced to gestures, as if playing a game of charades.

The “psychic” can obtain clues by observing dress and body language (noting expressions that indicate when one is on or off track), asking questions (which if correct will appear as “hits” but otherwise will seem innocent queries), and inviting the subject to interpret the vague statements offered. For example, nearly anyone can respond to the mention of a common object (like a ring or watch) with a personal recollection that can seem to transform the mention into a hit. (For more on cold reading see Gresham 1953; Hyman 1977; Nickell 2000.)

It should not be surprising that Edward is skilled at cold reading, an old fortunetelling technique. His mother was a “psychic junkie” who threw fortunetelling “house parties,” one of the alleged clairvoyants advising the then-fifteen-year-old that he had “wonderful psychic abilities.” Eventually he changed his billing from “psychic” to “psychic medium” (Edward 1999). The revised approach set him on the road to stardom. In addition to his TV show, he now commands hundreds of dollars for a private reading and is booked two years in advance (Mui 2001).

“Hot Reading”

Although cold reading is the main technique of the new spiritualists, they can also employ “hot” reading on occasion. Houdini (1924) exposed many of these information-gathering techniques including using planted microphones to listen in on clients as they gathered in the mediums’ anterooms-a technique Houdini himself used to impress visitors with his “telepathy” (Gibson 1976, 13). Reformed medium M. Lamar Keene’s *The Psychic Mafia* (1976) describes such methods as conducting advance research on clients, sharing other mediums’ files (what Keene terms “mediumistic espionage”), noting casual remarks made in conversation before a reading, and so on.

An article in *Time* magazine suggested John Edward may have used just such chicanery. One subject, a marketing manager named Michael O’Neill had received apparent messages from his dead grandfather but, when his segment aired, he noted that it had been improved through editing. According to *Time*’s Leon Jaroff (2001):

Now suspicious, O’Neill recalled that while the audience was waiting to be seated, Edward’s aides were scurrying about, striking up conversations and getting people to fill out cards with their name, family tree and other facts. Once inside the auditorium, where each family was directed to preassigned seats, more than an hour passed before show time while “technical difficulties” backstage were corrected.

Edward has a policy of not responding to criticism, but the executive producer of *Crossing Over* insists: “No information is given to John Edward about the members of the audience with whom he talks. There is no eavesdropping on gallery conversations, and there are no ‘tricks’ to feed information to John.” He labeled the *Time* article “a mix of erroneous observations and baseless theories” (Nordlander 2001).

Very Hot

Be that as it may, on *Dateline* Edward was actually caught in an attempt to pass off previously gained knowledge as spirit revelation. During the session he said of the spirits, “They’re telling me to acknowledge Anthony,” and when the cameraman signaled that was his name, Edward seemed surprised, asking “That’s you? Really?” He further queried: “Had you not seen Dad before he passed? Had you either been away or been distanced?” Later, playing the taped segment for me, *Dateline* reporter John Hockenberry challenged me with Edward’s apparent hit: “He got Anthony. That’s pretty good.” I agreed but added, “We’ve seen mediums who mill about before sessions and greet people and chat with them and pick up things.”

Indeed, hours before the group reading, Tony had been the cameraman on another Edward shoot (recording him at his hobby, ballroom dancing). Significantly, the two men had chatted and Edward had obtained useful bits of information that he afterward pretended had come from the spirits. Edward claims to ignore any advance information that he may get from those he reads, but concedes, “it’s futile to say this to a tough skeptic” (Edward 2001, 242-243).

Edward may have benefitted from actual information on another occasion, while undergoing a “scientific” test of his alleged powers (Schwartz et al. 2001). In video clips shown on *Dateline*, Edward was reading subjects—who were brought into the hotel room where he sat with his back to the door—when he impressed his tester with an atypical revelation. Edward stated he was “being shown the movie *Pretty in Pink*” and asked if there was “a pink connection.” Then he queried, “Are you, like, wearing all pink?” The unidentified man acknowledged that he was. Yet Edward had thought the subject was a woman, and I suspect that erroneous guess was because of the color of his attire; I further suspect Edward knew it was pink, that as the man entered the room Edward glimpsed a flash of the color as it was reflected off some shiny surface, such as the glass of a picture frame, the lens of the video camera, etc. I challenge Edward to demonstrate his reputed color-divining ability under suitably controlled conditions.

Inflating “Hits”

In addition to shrewd cold reading and out-and-out cheating, “psychics” and “mediums” can also boost their apparent accuracy in other ways. They get something of a free ride from the tendency of credulous folk to count the apparent hits and ignore the misses. In the case of Edward, my analysis of 125 statements or pseudostatements (i.e., questions) he made on a *Larry King Live* program (June 19, 1998) showed that he was incorrect about as often as he was right and that his hits were mostly weak ones. (For example he mentioned “an older female” with “an M-sounding name,” either an aunt or grandmother, he stated, and the caller supplied “Mavis” without identifying the relationship; see Nickell 1998.)

When the taped episode actually aired, the two lengthy failed readings had been edited out, along with second-rate offerings. What remained were two of the best readings of the show (Ballard 2001). This seems to confirm the allegation in the *Time* article that episodes were edited to make Edward seem more

accurate, even reportedly splicing in clips of one sitter nodding yes “after statements with which he remembers disagreeing” (Jaroff 2001).

Edited or not, sessions involving a group offer increased chances for success. By tossing out a statement and indicating a section of the audience rather than an individual, the performing “medium” makes it many times more likely that someone will “acknowledge” it as a “hit.” Sometimes multiple audience members will acknowledge an offering, whereupon the performer typically narrows the choice down to a single person and builds on the success. Edward uses just such a technique (Ballard 2001).

Still another ploy used by Edward and his fellow “psychic mediums” is to suggest that people who cannot acknowledge a hit may find a connection later. “Write this down,” an insistent Edward sometimes says, or in some other way suggests the person study the apparent miss. He may become even more insistent, the positive reinforcement diverting attention from the failure and giving the person an opportunity to find some adaptable meaning later (Nickell 1998).

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