

Deconstructing The Dead: Cross Over One Last Time To Expose Medium John Edward

By Michael Shermer

History is not just one damn thing after another, it is also the same damn thing over and over--time's arrow and time's cycle. Fads come and go, in clothing, cars, and psychics. In the 1970s it was Uri Geller, in the 1980s it was Shirley MacLaine, in the 1990s it was James Van Praagh, and to kick off the new millennium it is John Edward. Edward's star is rising rapidly with a hit daily television series "Crossing Over" on the Sci Fi network and a New York Times bestselling book "One Last Time." He has appeared, unopposed, on Larry King Live and has been featured on Dateline, Entertainment Tonight, and an HBO special. He is so hot that his television show is about to make the jump to network television, as he is soon to go opposite Oprah in CBS's afternoon lineup.

Last month Skeptic magazine was the first national publication to run an expose of John Edward in James "The Amazing" Randi's column (in Vol. 8, #3, now on newsstands and bookstores or at www.skeptic.com), a story that was picked up this week by Time magazine, who featured a full-page article on what is rapidly becoming the Edward phenomenon. There is, in reality, nothing new here. Same story, different names. In watching Edward I'm amazed at how blatant he is in stealing lines from medium James Van Praagh. It reminds me of entertainers, comedians, and magicians who go to each others' shows to glean new ideas.

Time's reporter Leon Jaroff, quoting from the Skeptic article, wrote a skeptical piece in which he reported the experiences of an audience member from an Edward taping. His name is Michael O'Neill, a New York City marketing manager, who reported his experiences as follows (quoting from the Skeptic article):

"I was on the John Edward show. He even had a multiple guess "hit" on me that was featured on the show. However, it was edited so that my answer to another question was edited in after one of his questions. In other words, his question and my answer were deliberately mismatched. Only a fraction of what went on in the studio was actually seen in the final 30 minute show. He was wrong about a lot and was very aggressive when somebody failed to acknowledge something he said. Also, his "production assistants" were always around while we waited to get into the studio. They told us to keep very quiet, and they overheard a lot. I think that the whole place is bugged somehow. Also, once in the studio we had to wait around for almost two hours before the show began. Throughout that time everybody was talking about what dead relative of theirs might pop up. Remember that all this occurred under microphones and with cameras already set up. My guess is that he was backstage listening and looking at us all and noting certain readings. When he finally appeared, he looked at the audience as if he were trying to spot people he recognized. He also had ringers in the audience. I can tell because about fifteen people arrived in a chartered van, and once inside they did not sit together."

Last week an ABC television producer flew out from New York to film me for an investigation of Edward they are conducting. The segment began as a "puff piece" (as she called it), but a chance encounter in the ABC cafeteria with 20/20 correspondent Bill Ritter, with whom I worked on an expose of medium James Van Praagh a few years ago, tipped her off that Edward was, in fact, a Van Praagh clone and that his talking to the dead was nothing more than the old magicians' cold reading trick. After watching the 20/20 piece the producer immediately realized what was really going on inside Edward's studio. She began to ask a few probing questions and was promptly cut off by Edward and his producers. ABC was told they would not be allowed to film inside the studio and that they, the Sci Fi network, would provide edited clips that ABC could use. The ABC producer became suspicious, and then skeptical. She has been trying to get an interview with Edward to confront him with my critiques, but they continue to put her off. In fact, she just phoned to tell me that Edward's publicist just left a message on her voice mail (with a date and time) stating that Edward was not available for an interview because he is out of state, yet the producer just caught him on television live in studio on CBS New York! Something fishy is going on here and I know what it is.

The video clips I was shown make it obvious why Edward does not want raw footage going out to the public--he's not all that good at doing cold readings. Where I estimated Van Praagh's hit rate at between 20-30 percent, Edward's hit rate at between 10-20 percent (the error-range in the estimates is created by the fuzziness of what constitutes a "hit"--more on this in a moment). The advantage Edward has over Van Praagh is his verbal alacrity. Van Praagh is Ferrari fast, but Edward is driving an Indy-500 racer. In the opening minute of the first reading captured on film by the ABC camera, I counted over one statement per second (ABC was allowed to film in the control room under the guise of filming the hardworking staff, and instead filmed Edward on the monitor in the raw). Think about that--in one minute Edward riffles through 60 names, dates, colors, diseases, conditions, situations, relatives, and the like. It goes so fast that you have to stop tape, rewind, and go back to catch them all. When he does come up for air the studio audience members to whom he is speaking look like deer in the headlights. In the edited tape provided by Edward we caught a number of editing mistakes, where he appears to be starting a reading on someone but makes reference to something they said "earlier." Oops!

Edward begins by selecting a section of the studio audience of about 20 people, saying things like "I'm getting a George over here. I don't know what this means. George could be someone who passed over, he could be someone here, he could be someone that you know," etc. Of course such generalizations lead to a "hit" where someone indeed knows a George, or is related to a George, or is a George. Now that he's targeted his mark, the real reading begins in which Edward employs cold reading, warm reading, and hot reading techniques.

1. Cold Reading. The first thing to know is that John Edward, like all other psychic mediums, does not do the reading--his subjects do. He asks them questions and they give him answers. "I'm getting a P name. Who is this please?" "He's showing me something red. What is this please?" And so on. This is what is known in the mentalism trade as cold reading, where you literally "read" someone "cold," knowing nothing about them.

You ask lots of questions and make numerous statements, some general and some specific, and see what sticks. Most of the time Edward is wrong. If the subjects have time they visibly nod their heads "no." But Edward is so fast that they usually only have the time or impetus to acknowledge the hits. And Edward 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. Edward 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 Edward will take credit for this specific hit that actually applies to most people.

Edward 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. Sometimes psychic mediums cheat by obtaining information on a subject ahead of time. I do not know if Edward does research or uses skills in the audience to get information on people, or even plants in the audience on which to do readings, but in my investigation of James Van Praagh I 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.

The ABC producer also asked me to do a reading on her. "You know absolutely nothing about me so let's see how well this works." After reviewing the Edward tapes I did a ten minute reading on her. She sat there dropped jawed and wide eyed, counting my hits. She proclaimed that I was unbelievably accurate. How did I do it? Let's just say I utilized all three of the above techniques. After the show airs on ABC New York this week (Wednesday, Thursday, or Friday I'm told) I'll reveal the details in another posting.

Most of the time, however, mediums do not need to cheat. The reason has to do with the psychology of belief. This stuff works because the people who go to mediums want it to work (remember, they do the readings, not the mediums). The simplest explanation for how mediums can get away with such an outrageous claim as the ability to talk to the

dead is that they are dealing with a subject the likes of which it would be hard to top for tragedy and finality--death. Sooner or later we all will face this inevitability, starting, in the normal course of events, with the loss of our parents, then siblings and friends, and eventually ourselves. It is a grim outcome under the best of circumstances, made all the worse when death comes early or accidentally to those whose "time was not up." As those who traffic in the business of loss, death, and grief know all too well, we are often at our most vulnerable at such times. Giving deep thought to this reality can cause the most controlled and rational among us to succumb to our emotions.

The reason John Edward, James Van Praagh, and the other so-called mediums are unethical and dangerous is that they are not helping anyone in what they are doing. They are simply preying on the emotions of grieving people. As all loss, death, and grief counselors know, the best way to deal with death is to face it head on. Death is a part of life, and pretending that the dead are gathering in a television studio in New York to talk twaddle with a former ballroom-dance instructor is an insult to the intelligence and humanity of the living.