



The Supremacy of Personal Experience

Published Friday 5, January, 2007

Note: This article was originally published on the BadPsychics website, under the name "Anne O. Nymous". It was an introduction to a full transcript of the seance in question. The transcript is available at Skeptic Report.

"Of course I know about cold reading but that is out of the question in this case – I gave the medium no information whatsoever and yet she produced very accurate details."

"Since you haven't experienced mediums yourself, your arguments are futile."

"You don't go to psychic readings yourself, which proves that you are scared to find out that it really works."

If you are a skeptic and sometimes engage in discussions with "believers" in the supernatural in general, and psychic mediumship in particular, I'm pretty sure that you are familiar with these arguments, or variations of them. Although it can be argued that it is possible and valid to discuss something, or anything for that matter, without personal experience, these arguments have a point in the respect that you are engaged in discussing someone's personal experience, of which you have no experience of your own. It's like reviewing a film you haven't seen or a book you haven't read. No, you say, that is a silly comparison. I agree with you. But it is the principle at work in the minds of the "believers".

"Believers" cling to the supremacy of personal experience as the only faculty of knowledge in issues of spiritual nature. They can go on for hours praising each other's experiences, recognizing other's testimonials as valid evidence without hesitation. But when you question their beliefs, personal experience rules.

You can make well supported claims that memory is fallible and subject to recreation due to lots of different human factors, that such experiences are deceptions created by skilled conjurers – and the "believer" may even agree with you! But in this particular case, he or she argues, circumstances were such that deception can be ruled out and yes, memo-

ry is indeed fallible, but he or she was mentally on guard against any foul play as he or she took part in this particular happening and he or she is able to describe it in such vivid detail, which rules out that he has forgotten or missed something.

You can't argue against that in the sense that you will never be able to challenge his or her personal experience. So, should you give it up? No, get experience of your own. It is true that you can never get the same specific experience of a "believer" – you would have had to be with him or her for that. But you can obtain the second best.

All "believers" have authorities, i.e. mediums, writers, celebrities, etc. These are the people that "believers" turn to for confirmation of their beliefs. They are the sources of inspiration, "knowledge" and even comfort. If you question, for instance, psychic mediums in general, there are always a couple of mediums the "believer" will claim are proven genuine. They don't have to have had a personal contact with the authority; a tv show, a book or interviews in the tabloids are enough.

The psychic authorities are unquestionable; a "believer" will eagerly admit that there are charlatans in the trade, but in discussions, those are rarely mentioned by name and this common agreement on the existence of anonymous frauds serve more as a reassurance to the "believer" himself that he still, in his mind, remains critical and, in his opinion, able to be objective in the matter. But if you question an authority, you will probably end up being regarded by the "believer" as insane or aggressively arrogant.

That's why the authority is the second best – if you debunk the authorities, you weaken the belief of the "believer". The "believer" may not confess to that fact, but in his mind a process of disappointment is growing. He has invested a great deal of intellectual confidence in someone that turned out to be a scoundrel. If you restrict yourself to doubt the authority, you are going to lose. But if you experience the authority yourself and debunk him or her, you will end up with a great deal of useful knowledge and information to

submit to other skeptics and the public.

It doesn't have to be fancy, it doesn't have to include a staff of scientists or stage magicians. Use the means available to you. Let me give you an example.

To the Swedish public, Terry Evans is known as one of the mediums that participated in the Channel 5 TV show *Sensing Murder* and the TV4 show *The Unknown* that is being aired during this fall in Sweden. *Sensing Murder* is of course a psychic detective show in which the mediums allegedly "sense" information that might bring new light to unsolved murders. *The Unknown* is the standard format of bringing mediums to haunted houses and flats in order to clean them from bad or worried spirits. Of the mediums consulted, Evans has perhaps made the best impression of being sincere and straight-to-the-point. He is held in very high regard among "believers".

Evans' base of operations is the small village of Strånäset in the middle of Sweden. From there, he runs the company Creative Experiences Terry Evans AB, staffed by himself and two women. The main branch of this enterprise is The Mountain Meditation which is a sort of hodgepodge of New Age personal development ideas and spiritualism. Courses are held in MM and Mountain Leaders are licensed. Among the twelve Leaders, Annie Lionnet, author of Tarot guide books and astrology tutor at the London Faculty of Astrological Studies, is the only non-Swede.

Evans, 55, is of British origin. In his Channel 5 profile, he states that he was brought up in London and that he discovered his psychic abilities at the age of twelve. On <http://www.mountainmeditation.com/> he states that his first encounter with a spiritualist medium came at the age of twenty-two and it was that visit that motivated him to develop his own mediumship.

As is the case with another Swedish medium of British origin, Iris Hall, background information about Terry is very hard to come by so you just have to take his word for it. Regarding his work as a medium, he states that the foundation of it is based upon the philosophy of the British Spiritualist National Union. He is, however, not listed as an approved medium by the SNU. Evans' book *Berget* (The Mountain) is said to be based on teachings and inspirations he has received from the spirits.

As one way to demonstrate his work as a medium, Evans does clairvoyant demonstrations, what we call seances. He states that this is a way for the medium to demonstrate his or her ability to provide proof of the spirit contact and the messages the contact wishes to convey. As we shall see later, Evans may have imposed a standard on himself that he cannot fulfil.

I decided to personally experience Terry Evans – that is the only valid way to obtain knowledge about him according to the "believers". So I went through the scheduled clairvoyant demonstrations listed on <http://www.mountainmeditation.com/> and found a town only an hour's drive away. That suited me perfectly. In the car, I thought of the evidence the "believers" repeatedly had told me this experience would provide me with:

1. Terry Evans would give accurate, detailed and personal information, pertaining only to the addressed individual.
2. Terry Evans would give information that he by no means could have known beforehand.
3. Terry Evans would not engage in stock spiels, i.e. general statements that will apply to almost everyone, or any other cold reading technique as described by skeptics.
4. Terry Evans would not seek the participation of the audience in order to convey any messages.

With these criteria in mind, I smiled at the passenger seat. Not only was I mentally prepared for any attempts of deception, I was accompanied by a witness that would not recreate its memory, that would not forget or add anything as time passed after the experience, and that would deliver a reliable testimony to any man, regardless of bias; my MP3-player with an omni-directional microphone.

It was easy to find the old school auditorium where the seance was going to take place. I arrived half an hour early and when I had reached the top floor of the building, I found myself at the admission desk in the ante-room. Behind me, just by the entrance door, sat Terry Evans. I don't know why – it struck me as somewhat strange that the attraction of the evening would spend the time before the show looking at each and every person that came to see his demonstration. But I made an effort not to look startled by this and went into the auditorium to arrange my small but effective recording equipment.

Terry Evans speaks English and uses an interpreter. He understands and speaks Swedish but I can see the advantage of performing with the comfort of one's native tongue. Nothing strange about that. After an introduction by the interpreter, Terry Evans starts the seance with a short explanation of how he works:

"OK, as I'm working with the spirits, they will try to direct me to the person they want. So if they come to you, I need to hear your voice. If they come to you, please don't make the mistake a lot of people make. They suddenly become paralyzed with fear and then they try to slide off their seat and disappear."

Strike one. Hiding it in a bit of humour – and the audience does laugh – Evans starts by telling the audience that he needs their participation. Is he for real? This is a standard cold reading technique. Evans doesn't know who is "coming" so he needs the audience to tell him, i.e. Evans is not giving that information, the audience is. Evans suggests and the audience confirms or denies, thus leading him through.

Evans first target is a lonely woman at the far end of one of the middle rows:

"I'm being taken over here. I might be with that lady in the blue shirt or blue top. You're sitting at the end of the row. I think I'm with you, I'm not sure yet. Would you understand, is your father in spirit?"

"Yes."

"I've got your papa here. And before you came here tonight, as you were preparing to come, would I be correct in saying that you wasn't sure if you were going to have enough time to do everything?"

Note that Terry Evans is not stating that the woman's father is with him, he is asking if her father is dead. He is not giving her information, he is asking her to provide him with information. He claims her father is with him after she has confirmed that her father is indeed dead. That is textbook cold reading. And what do we have next? How many in the audience do you think was in some way worried if they would make it in time for the demonstration? That is textbook stock spiel. And very soon, he gives an example of hot reading, i.e. actually seeking information prior to the show:

"So what he wants to say to you, you were right and he was wrong. There is life after death. Have you bought those new shoes yet?"

"Today."

So that's why he was sitting and watching people by the entrance door. This is the only time when Evans gives any information that could be considered accurate, detailed and personal during this seance. And he did it, not by listening

to the spirits, but by simply memorizing one person's face and the fact that she wore new shoes, before the demonstration, in the ante-room. "Believers" often claim that hot reading would demand an impossible ability to memorize loads of information but all it really takes is the ability to remember one or a couple of things and use them effectively. That is precisely what Evans did.

Immediately after, Evans makes a detailed guess:

"He can't find any restaurant where they sell good food. But he wants me to let you to know that he's happy. And he felt your presence, he felt you close by, as he was passing. But what was all this confusion about his grave, of his headstone?"

"Uh, there isn't a stone..."

"Ah, well if you fix his stone he doesn't want any angels on it. You can put some pictures of trucks and things like that on it. Then he will feel at home. So he's driving the biggest trucks you can find upstairs. None of the spirits was as good as him at driving a truck. You understand? He's been watching your life quite closely these last three years. And he is aware of the personal difficulties that you've been experiencing. And if he may, he's going to give you some advice this evening. The situation that you have found yourself in, it doesn't matter what you'll say, or how you say it, no one is going to listen. You understand?"

Read this carefully. The alleged spirit communicating through Evans is stating that there is confusion regarding the headstone of the dead father's grave. This is totally wrong – there is no headstone and probably not even a grave, given the common practice of memorial groves instead of graves. But this blatant miss does not put Evans off. He now suggests that if they were to arrange for a headstone, the dead father does not want angels on it. So, the confusion of the descendants turned out to be a wish of the deceased and the headstone turned out to be a possible headstone in an obscure future. Again, standard cold reading procedure.

And the trucks? Well, the woman neither confirms or denies anything about the trucks. She just sits there, listening. Had the trucks struck a core, I would imagine I would have seen a completely different effect on the woman.

And what do we have next? Standard stock spiel, again. Is it likely that every single person in the audience, or on this earth for that matter, has experienced personal difficulties of some kind during the last three years? And is it likely that you sometimes feel that no one listens to you?

It gets embarrassing sometimes, like when Evans asks if someone in the audience recognize having problems with a sewing-machine and when that fails, he changes it to if someone has a mother on "the other side" who is good at making cloth. Someone remembers that her grandma was good at that and the requested mother turned into a grandmother.

Or when Evans slaps his behind asking a woman who has a birthmark there, she or her dead father. When the woman denies knowledge of any such mark on anyone, he tells her to check it. Or when he states that spirits say that the same woman, who is stylishly dressed, likes shoes. On that supposedly personal note – it apparently doesn't pertain to every woman who likes clothes, he goes on:

"You've got a pair of dark red shoes that you, that don't even fit you properly but you won't throw them away."

"Dark red?"

"Yeab, or wine red. Have a look when you go home, they've been in the cupboard so long you've forgotten about them."

So, this well-dressed woman has forgotten about the dark red shoes that she loves so much that she won't throw them away although they don't fit anymore.

Evans next victim is subject to a more alarming message.

Evans tell this woman that she has a natural gift for writing, especially children's books. He tells her that it doesn't matter how many excuses she makes, writing is what she is meant to do in this lifetime and if she doesn't follow this gift, everything she does in life will feel like second best. But read what happens when he decides to push it harder:

"But she wants to say this to you. If you're going to write, it's never going to be as perfect as you want it to be. So why don't you just write and stop talking about getting work published and let the readers and let the publisher decide whether it's good or bad. How many manuscripts do you have now?"

"Uhm, I'm actually not writing and... I'm painting."

"Oh, okay, whatever it is... But you are going to write too, I'm not going to change that."

Ooops, what happen to her destiny to write? Doesn't she realize that everything else she does in life, like painting, will feel like second best? Wouldn't her dead grandmother know what's best for her? And what about Evans remark after having bombarded the woman with reasons for her to give up everything and focus on writing? "Oh, okay, whatever it is..."

Evans is also keen on talking about household appliances. He will tell you that you have a problem with your washing machine and when you tell him that you've bought a new one, he cashes in on that by stating that the old one sure needed healing, thus turning a wrong statement into a right one. The spirits also keep themselves updated on the status of your car, your TV set, etc.

And if Evans states that you have a problem with something and you tell him you don't, he will say that you are going to have a problem with it, i.e. the spirits know stuff about your equipment that you don't know now, but will become aware of in the future. When exactly? Evans told you, in the future...

He makes a complete fool out of himself when he doesn't have any success with a very overweight woman. He stresses that she is a woman that doesn't like to be told what to do by stating that even her man can't tell her what to do. But this woman has no man. Evans comment: he can understand that. Now, if you're an overweight woman or man, single, but with a longing for a partner, is that a sensitive response? Even if the context would make excuses for this remark, who knows what complex may haunt her? But Evans is a medium. He talks to dead people. He's above ordinary courtesies.

Anyway, he doesn't manage to succeed in anything with this woman so he tries with another, suggesting that the overweight woman was not right for this particular spirit. He fails an attempt with another victim too and returns to the overweight woman again and asks her if she's had aches or pains in her legs. As she confirms this, she is suddenly right, in spite of the failures just a couple of minutes ago, for this particular spirits.

In seeking a connection with a dead lady, he finds a woman saying that it could be her neighbour. He asks the woman if the neighbour left any cats or a dog behind. The woman says "No" and as he always does when he is guessing wrong, he asks the woman to check with the lady's husband. As if the lady would have locked her pets up in rented storage somewhere before moving next to this woman. And then Evans tells the woman that the dead lady wants to thank her for her help and support to. The dead lady had enjoyed their conversations. To make sure this would be correct, Evans asked the woman moments before if she talked to the lady quite a bit.

I could probably work this séance through much more than this. But that would be to deprive you of a lot of fun so instead, there's a link to the complete transcript. Enjoy it

and spread it around to your friends and family.

But let's get back to the criteria I mentioned in the beginning. Did the experience of Evans meet with them as suggested by "believers"? Let's see:

1. Terry Evans would give accurate, detailed and personal information, pertaining only to the addressed individual.

Fact: Terry Evans gave no accurate, detailed and personal information at all. Okay, there's the new shoes statement but that doesn't count because Evans noticed that the woman had new shoes when he was sitting and scanning everyone that entered prior to the séance.

2. Terry Evans would give information that he by no means could have known beforehand.

Fact: Terry Evans gave no such information.

3. Terry Evans would not engage in stock spiels, i.e. general statements that will apply to almost everyone, or any other cold reading technique as described by skeptics.

Fact: Terry Evans séance was nothing but stock spiel, cold reading and even some hot reading. Okay, there was a lot of old fashion guessing too – but without success.

4. Terry Evans would not seek the participation of the audience in order to convey any messages.

Fact: Terry Evans began the séance by stating that he needed the participation of the audience and he used that participation actively through the whole thing.

He starts off the séance by stating that he needs your participation, he needs "to hear your voice". Then he asks you who is dead, "would you recognize" someone or "is mama still in this life". He uses several different phrases to make his questions sound as he is only asking for confirmation. He is not, as you can tell by reading through the transcript. This is a technique, a skill. Evans is very skilled.

As soon as he has been told by you who is dead, he makes some very general statements based on gender or family stereotypes, by what he can find out about you just by looking at your appearance, age, and so on or by. Often, he will counter these very general statements, stock spiel, by making a guess about some ordinary thing that is likely to be right. It will be about your TV, your car, how you sleep or something trivial like that. If he guesses wrong, as he often does, he has a stock of evasions piled up – standard get-aways that will fit into any household appliance or whatever, and come out looking like he was right although he in fact wasn't. The transcript is packed with examples of this.

A speciality of Evans is the phrase "check it". He uses this when he is totally wrong and can't find any way to make way for an exit. "Check it" means that Evans, or the spirits, are right but you don't know it yet. But if you check it later, away from the attention of the rest of the audience, who firmly believes that Evans is right, you will find that the statements were correct. This also implies that if you check it but can't find anything, you have looked in the wrong place.

The important thing is that Evans doesn't have to support his claim during the séance, and once it's over, what you don't recognize at all but Evans claims is right, may very well be counted as an amazing insight by the rest of the audience. So, this spiritual experience confirms, not the assurances given by "believers", but the claims of deception made by skeptics – in every way, in every instance.

Terry Evans is, in every sense of the word, a swindler, feeding on people's emotional needs and their longing for contact with passed relatives or assurance of an afterlife. Without hesitation, he engages in messing with people's memories of their loved ones. There are people, even skeptics,

that claim that some psychics really think they have a gift. Terry Evans is not one of those psychics, Evans knows exactly what he is doing.

Now, there are some "believers" that claim that séances are worthless. If you want to really experience the powers you should book a private sitting. According to them, the con-artist of a séance is the miracle worker of a private sitting. This is of course nonsense. Evans doesn't issue a disclaimer regarding this before his séances. He's selling alleged contact with the spirits. Period. Be it in a hall in front of hundreds or in a room in front of one. The man is a fraud. Period. There are also those who say that every medium must be allowed to have a "bad day" – we are, after all, dealing with very sensitive abilities – and the séance I attended would probably qualify as such. I beg to differ. First of all, Evans did not excuse himself for not being able to deliver – as far as he is concerned, this séance was a success, he got his money. Secondly, I am pretty convinced that I was the only one in an audience of over a 100 people that thought it was anything but a very good séance. But in the light of the transcript and the recording it was a scam. "Believers" will only admit to it being a bad day for Evans. But in reality, it was a scam executed routinely.

I don't want to dissect this séance completely. I want you to read it through and find things on your own. There are some passages that convey an almost incredible arrogance and insensitivity, some that convey funny slips of the tongue, some that, when you read them, will make you either laugh out loud or scream in despair – how does he get away with it!? But keep in mind – Terry Evans made more money in three hours that night than most people make in two weeks. This is not a harmless prank, but a coldhearted fraud. And please, attend a séance at a theatre near you, book a private sitting, go see a tarot-tart, a healer or your local hypnotherapist. And bring your little friend, Mr. mp3. It's worth it.

Comments:

Victor clifton_is_great@yahoo.co.uk said...

This was really great! Well written, detailed and funny (Terry Evans is totally unintentionally funny). Never had a better description of what cold reading really is! It's very funny how this technique works. The believer claims that the questions that the medium ask is there to verify the mediums authenticity/or not. But it's really there to give the medium information.

The only thing that's missing is regarding the experience of the people that visited the "séance" in question, if you interviewed the "new shoes" woman and asked her what she thought about the fraudulent Mr Evan's responses to her, you would have a clear demonstration on how her experience distorted it. Well, her answer would be pretty predictable, but as you liked to de-bunk specific mediums, this could be well worth to be taken in the equation.

February 10, 2007 2:37 AM

Anonymous said...

Very good indeed. Keep the good work up, this is probably the only really good way of opening people's eyes – like you do, debunking the "authorities".

December 21, 2007 12:38 PM