



THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

The Quick (to Make a Buck) and the Dead

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | MARCH 21, 2003 ✓ PREMIUM

Recently, British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife, Cherie, was the subject of a national scandal after she admitted seeking regular help from a spiritual adviser. Her confession should hardly have come as a shock -- many of the elite, among them Nancy Reagan and Princess Diana, have owned up to taking counsel from clairvoyants. And why, after all, should we hold them to a higher standard than that to which we hold ourselves? Social scientists have noted that public interest in spiritualism increases significantly in times of widespread anxiety, and it seems no coincidence that the year and a half since September 11, 2001, has seen a sudden resurgence in the popularity of television psychics.

Anyone who has watched cable television in the wee hours will be familiar with the concept of the psychic hot line, where midnight sages like Kenny Kingston are available to dispense spiritual advice to credulous insomniacs at \$3.99 per minute.

The best known of these hot lines was probably Dionne Warwick's Psychic Friends Network, which went bankrupt in 1998. This past October, sultry soothsayer Miss Cleo was closed down by the Federal Trade Commission for deception and misrepresentation -- it turns out the alleged Jamaican mystic was actually an out-of-work actress from Los Angeles. That setback notwithstanding, Miss Cleo is reportedly now engaged in talks to develop her own TV show, as is the Internet astrologer Ferdie Pacheco. Moreover, the producer of the hit quiz show *The Weakest Link* is reportedly preparing a new show for NBC syndication featuring the spiritualist Char, whom TV Guide describes as "a psychic and talk-show staple since the '70s who also chats with the dead."

Another well-known medium who has recently developed his own show is James Van Praagh, author of the best-selling spiritual-advice books *Talking to Heaven* and *Reaching to Heaven*, whose own life story was made into a CBS mini-series featuring Ted Danson.

The most popular of the new brood of TV psychics, however, is undoubtedly the charismatic John Edward, whose show *Crossing Over* -- a major success on the Sci Fi Channel -- has now gone into syndication. With his penetrating eyes, chiseled features, and muscular physique, Edward -- described by *The New York Times* as "the Oprah of the Other Side" -- combines the looks of a football player with the fast-talking charm of an evangelical preacher or self-help guru; it is hardly surprising that the vast majority of his devoted fans are middle-aged women.

Edward specializes in what skeptics call "cold readings" -- conversations with audience members in which the psychic reveals surprising personal details about the lives of loved ones who have crossed over. Part of Edward's charm seems to be his unabashed honesty, and the deference he shows to the spirits of the deceased. If an audience member appears baffled by a puzzling message from beyond, Edward will often confess that he, too, has no idea what the spirits are talking about, but that they insist on getting their message across, often "holding him hostage" until they do. And unlike more facile and confident psychics such as Sylvia Browne, Edward will readily admit to getting his spirit signals crossed. In an appearance he made on the *Today* show, information he was supposed to be getting about a dead relative for a woman in the studio audience later turned out, he confessed, to be a message for a parking attendant outside the building.

Rather than revealing truths about the nature of the afterlife or the existence of God, the messages imparted by Edward's spirits usually have to do with such quotidian matters as the inheritance of Mother's vacuum cleaner or the whereabouts of Uncle Billy's false teeth. Perhaps unsurprisingly, however, these seem to be precisely the minutiae that anxious relatives appear so relieved to hear.

In his evocation of a rather insipid afterlife, Edward reminds me of Cynthia Vane, a second-rate medium featured in one of Nabokov's last short stories, "The Vane Sisters." "Fundamentally," we are told of Cynthia, "there was nothing particularly new about her

private creed, since it presupposed a fairly conventional hereafter, a silent solarium of immortal souls (spliced with mortal antecedents) whose main recreation consisted of periodical hoverings over the dear quick."

My own favorite spiritualist TV show is *The Pet Psychic*, which airs twice weekly on the cable channel Animal Planet. The pet psychic is an elegant, genteel English lady named Sonya Fitzpatrick, who -- as the show's opening sequence informs us -- discovered her unusual psychic abilities after suffering profound hearing loss in both ears as a child. After a traumatic experience when three geese with whom she was especially intimate were served up for Christmas dinner, Sonya "deliberately shut off her ability to communicate telepathically with animals," and, after a successful career in fashion, she moved to Houston to establish an etiquette consultancy. Fortunately, however, her "channels of telepathic communication" were reopened in 1994, and she has now devoted herself full time to reading the auras and emanations of our animal companions.

The pet psychic's main interactions are with still-living animals, but she also possesses the ability to contact pets that have passed on. In this segment of her show, Sonya studies worn photographs of deceased cats, dogs, and guinea pigs in order to let their owners know what mischief their little rascals have been up to on the other side. It always makes me think of another transplanted Brit, the failed poet Dennis Barlow in Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel *The Loved One*. After going nowhere in Hollywood, Barlow is reduced to working in the Happier Hunting Ground, a California pet cemetery, where no expense is spared to heal the pain of grief. "Every anniversary a card of remembrance is mailed out without further charge," Barlow reassures the mourning owners of Arthur, an elderly Sealyham. "It reads, 'Your little Arthur is thinking of you in heaven today and wagging his tail.'"

Despite his many years working at the Happier Hunting Ground, Barlow remains perplexed by the remarkably contrasting attitudes his different customers have toward the death of their pets: "Some boggled at a ten-dollar burial; others had their pets embalmed and then went East and forgot them; one after filling half the icebox for over a week with a dead she-bear changed her mind and called in the taxidermist. These were the dark days, to be set against the ritualistic, almost orgiastic cremation of a

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nonsectarian chimpanzee and the burial of a canary over whose tiny grave a squad of Marine buglers had sounded Taps."



While it's easy to sneer at the pet psychic, those who seek out her services appear genuinely impressed by her knowledge of their companions' former habits, and her stately, Old World charm makes her show a pleasure to watch. Unlike the smooth-talking Edward, who really belongs on television, Fitzpatrick looks a little out of place on Animal Planet. She really belongs in the 19th century, the heyday of spiritualism, characterized by Nabokov in "The Vane Sisters" as a time of "solemn Victorian orgies with roses falling and accordions floating to the strains of sacred music; professional imposters regurgitating moist cheesecloth."

Anybody familiar with the history of spiritualism will know about the great magician Harry Houdini's fascination with the question of life after death. Before his death, Houdini made an arrangement that he would do his best to contact his wife with a secret message from beyond the grave. Houdini resolved that only a genuine medium would be able to convey his message accurately, but no one ever managed to do so. When watching the pet psychic, I sometimes wonder whether things would have turned out differently if Houdini had been a dog.

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