

Cool Appraisals of Cold Readers

No Dent in Reality

Margaret Dent Psychic Connections, March 10, 2004, Canterbury-Hurlstone Park RSL Club.

Margaret Dent claims to talk with dead people. She makes money from performing, using this claim as the basis of her show. Together with long-time subscriber, Daryl Colquhoun, I attended her show. If we were expecting something exciting or even paranormal, we were soon disappointed. Even as a dedicated Skeptic, I was still quite ready and willing to accept any real communication with the departed. I would even have been happy just to have seen a new trick!

Each of the tables in the auditorium held small slips of paper containing messages, front and back, as shown in the box:

Slips were collected before the show and placed into a 'bingo barrel' on the stage to facilitate the first part of Dent's performance. Then she picked some out at random, read them aloud and gave us the benefits of her amazing insights. This must surely rate a new low in pure laziness — any self-respecting cold reader simply does not need to gather just about all the information they need in this fashion.

On one slip was written, *Is there anyone who has passed that wants to talk to me?*, to which Dent responded, *On your father's side there are two brothers, on your mother's side there are five women and a little girl. How am I supposed to know who you want to hear from?*" Funny, I thought that was the just the sort of thing she claimed to know! Alas, the audience just accepted it and

even applauded. *Feel free to clap, it raises the vibrations!*"

The second part of the show was more personal with Dent walking about with a microphone to 'answer questions'. One of her best 'hits' came from the line, *I see a toy train set... who was it that played with the train set?* to which a man responded, *I've worked on the railway for years.* A miss turned into a hit by someone wanting to make a connection.

SURVIVAL READING

(A loved one that has died) for example: your husband, wife, mother, father sister, brother, grandmother, grandfather, friend etc;

Your Christian name

Surname

Relationship - My

How long have they been in the spirit

PSYCHIC READING

Only one question

For example; Will I move house? Will I find a job? Will my son marry? (give age of son) Will I find a relationship? Will I change my career?

Your Christian name

Surname

Your Question

When Dent got it totally wrong, she herself turned a miss into a hit. For example, a question *Who was Ken?* elicited the reply from a man, *"Ken is my uncle. Yes, that's right,* replied Dent turning a 'was' or 'dead' Ken into a living Ken. Or to a woman, *Someone played the piano..... Who was that?.. No? Someone did! Think about it.* This gave the impression that Dent knew something about the woman's past or family that the woman herself didn't even know. It's a standard cold read-

ing trick. No matter what your victim says, you appear to be right. Imagine the hit Dent would have had if the woman recalled childhood memories, as many, many people do have, of someone dear to them playing the piano. At no stage during her show did Dent stray from text book cold reading techniques. In fact she spent a good deal of the time simply agreeing with whatever people told her and people told her a lot.

So, just what is going on here? I think there are two possibilities.

1. Could she have an illness that makes her think she is hearing voices and seeing things?

2. Is she an outright fraud, using cold reading to make money?

A third possibility, more applicable to other 'clairvoyants' such as Tarot Card readers, where they are simply self-deluded, acting on feelings and intuition, at all times being reinforced in their delusion by compliant clients. It's hard to see this being the case with Dent as she makes it clear from the start that she is hearing and seeing messages from the dead.

Whatever the real situation, one thing was crystal clear. This sort of act, if taken seriously, corrupts and distorts the precious memories people have of their lost loved ones. That day all her readings ended with words to the effect that, *Your (lost loved one) is happy and is watching over you.* If that is what you want to hear (and many people do) then such mechanistic reassurance can be given by any total stranger who knows no more about you than Dent does. But are false reassurances of any real value? Somehow I doubt it.

Dent has a stock reply she has used for years when asked about sceptics: *Those who believe need no proof, for the sceptic, no proof is ever enough.* This is just the sort of sound bite the media love and while the first point is true enough, the second is clearly nonsense. If Dent would submit to a mutually agreed test of her claims and pass, I would be the first to trumpet her success.

Seeing Margaret Dent in action is certainly an emotional experience. My emotions ranged from contempt to anger to pure disgust as I watched her victims break down in tears. Her cold reading routines were no better than those used by many other 'psychics' whose activities have been catalogued in the *Skeptic* over many years, and were worse than many. Anyone reading Ian Rowland's *Full Facts Book of Cold Reading* could learn how many of the tricks of cold reading work. My dear friend Lynne Kelly can do it better than any 'psychic' I've seen and she is a skeptic through and through. I have even done it myself and amazed people with my mystical insights (always being careful to explain that it is only a trick.)

Not 36 hours after Dent's performance, the world learnt of the appalling train bombings in Madrid. 200 people lost their lives. What a pity no one on the other side let her in on the secret.

Re-bunking an Unsinkable Rubber Duck

One of my favourite sayings comes from James Randi:

They [psychics] are like unsinkable rubber ducks. No matter how many times they are disproved, they keep coming back.

Ian Rowland uses the term 'Re-bunking'. Again, no matter what Skeptics do to show something is clearly false, all it takes is one bit uncritical media exposure and the 'psychic' is once again flying high. A case in point is the so-called "controlled and scientific" tests of three of Australian's leading psychics, car-

ried out by *TodayTonight* (Ch 7) shown on April 19.

Firstly, what makes someone 'a leading psychic'? Real ability? Fame? Connection to a particular magazine? For the *TodayTonight* story, the three psychics were, Ann Ann, psychic columnist of *Woman's Day*, "Rev." Glennis Sagers of The Christian Spiritual Fellowship in Wynnum, Qld and Anne Dankbaar, winner of the 1987 Bent Spoon Award for claiming to have psychically discovered the remains of the legendary Colossus of Rhodes. Their choice seems to rest on their claims to have been in contact with the dead for over 25 years.

Briefly, the tests consisted of each of the 'psychics' sitting behind a curtain, out of sight of the subjects, and being hooked up to an 'electro-encephalograph' to record their brainwave activity. (Why, I have no idea, but it gave viewers the impression that something scientific was going on.) The subjects were allowed only to give their names and ages and then only to answer 'Yes' or 'No' to the psychic's questions.

What ensued was nothing more than stock-standard cold reading. It really did not matter that the subjects were behind a curtain, or that they were limited to answering 'Yes' or 'No', as these answers still gave the 'psychics' valuable feedback. However it gave the illusion of the tests having strict protocols. In fact the protocols were laughable.

At one stage Glennis Sagers was trying to get a 'hit' with the name Alice. The subject had no idea who Alice could be, but Sagers was insistent. (This is a standard cold reading trick.) Suddenly, Sandy McGregor of the CALM Research Centre, the man recording brainwave activity and not a subject of the tests, chimed in saying that Alice is his sister's second name! "*But they're over there...*" says Sagers, implying that the message is from beyond the grave. "*Then it could be my Grandmother*", answers McGregor. So much for the protocols!

Another gem was when Dankbaar, clearly getting nowhere with the

subject, complains, "*Sorry, I'm going have to cut this one... I did not have the contact... she is not open minded.*" Putting the blame for a poor performance onto the subject is another cold reading trick.

Overseeing this sham was "the nation's foremost expert in the study of psychic phenomena", parapsychologist Dr Peter Delin from Adelaide University. (I'm not sure how someone becomes a "foremost expert" in this field, given the lack of any concrete results.) But whatever his history, he was clearly out of his depth. I would have thought any expert on these matters could have spotted the tricks a mile off. He was critical of science in general for not being accepting enough of psychic research, but if this was an example of his research, is it any wonder?

Despite Anne Dankbaar in particular being shown to have as much psychic ability as a donut, it was no impediment to her and the others receiving thousands of dollars of free TV publicity and apparent scientific endorsement. Truly unsinkable rubber ducks.

TodayTonight could only present simple black and white alternatives for their viewers — either the psychics are real, or they are frauds. A third possibility and the one I suspect accounts for a great many psychics, is that they are sincere but self-deluded. The only time I have ever heard this possibility being expressed on *TodayTonight*, I was the one expressing it! Having said that, I have more than a few doubts about the sincerity of people who claim to talk with the dead.

Richard Saunders

