Through the Eyes of a Skeptic

BY JOEL MARTIN

In the early 1970s I began hosting a late-night talk show on a Long Island radio station. Early in the show's history a colleague suggested I tackle ESP. She recommended a local couple who professed to have psychic ability. And so I found myself hosting shows about psychic and unexplained phenomena. My goal was simple: to get ratings.

"Is there interest in that nonsense?" I asked.

"It's not nonsense," she protested. "And yes, it's very interesting. You'll see."

Audience response was excellent, although I myself had no interest whatsoever in the subject. Psychic phenomena was simply not within my frame of reference. Born and raised in New York City, I was more familiar with subways than psychics.

I was a skeptic, but my audience clearly was more open to unexplained phenomena than I was. I concluded that those who professed to be psychics were researching, guessing or employing visual and verbal clues from their subjects. I was certain the subjects of psychic readings were naive and gullible, or possessed of vivid imaginations.

In my reality, unseen forces did not "go bump in the night." I did not believe people had out-of-body experiences; I once told a guest who claimed he did have one that perhaps he was out of his mind, not his body.

Because I was also an investigative reporter, my on-air style was to ask tough questions. Often my cynicism produced confrontations with guests, who included psychics, astrologers, numerologists, tarot readers, those who claimed to bend metal with alleged psychokinetic abilities, past-life experts, witches, and ghost and vampire experts, among others. I gave UFOs as little
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credence as other unexplained phenomena. I allowed that people might be misidentifying an object which was actually some natural phenomenon. Otherwise, my conclusion was that UFO sightings might be attributed to flights of fantasy rather than flights from other planets. I privately dismissed the subject as pure entertainment.

My radio show, meanwhile, was building a strong audience following. So what if I believed the world of the paranormal was entirely imaginary? My audience and guests obviously disagreed.

Science has long regarded the paranormal as unscientific, on the fringe of science, or pseudo science. Religion regards it as occult, of evil or demonic origin. Magicians view the paranormal as trickery. I bought those arguments. Many of my colleagues in the media have long relegated psychic phenomena to supermarket tabloids and storefront tea leaf, crystal ball and palm readers. The exception was Halloween, an annual excuse to trot out a jumble of occult and supernatural happenings.

I relished those nights when I could expose the frauds. The debunker’s arguments had long gone this way: If one psychic was a charlatan, they all were. I bought that argument as well.

One night my guest was a woman named Jane, who claimed to be in communication with the spirit of a late friend, Kenneth. All she had to do to access him was to self-induce a trance state—which she did on my radio show. Strongly suspecting fraud, I invited Jane to return the next week to resume my interview with her and Kenneth’s spirit.

After the broadcast I was shocked to receive a phone call from Kenneth’s widow, Carla, who had been listening to the show. She knew nothing about a friendship between her late husband and someone named Jane. What if unknown to Jane, Carla appeared on the next week’s show and confronted Jane and the spirit of her late husband?

That’s exactly what we arranged. Jane returned and again self-induced a trance state. Her voice dropped an octave, and presumably we were in contact with Kenneth’s spirit. Carla quietly stepped into the studio while Jane’s eyes were closed.

“Jane—er, I mean Kenneth—I have someone here I’d like you to meet. Is that all right?” I asked.

“Yes,” Jane/Kenneth answered.

“It’s your wife, Carla.”

Jane froze. She quickly sat up and opened her eyes, clearly startled. Moments later she regained her composure and valiantly tried to continue as Kenneth. But she, Carla and our listening audience knew it was too late. We had exposed a fraud on the radio—psychic trick, if you will. I was ecstatic that I’d uncovered a charlatan. And if one psychic was fraudulent, weren’t they all?

While I paid no serious attention to psychic phenomena, even in the 1970’s I witnessed incidents that piqued my curiosity. Although I could not explain them, and I was a long way from accepting that genuine psychic phenomena could even occur, every so often events happened that gave me second thoughts.

Such an unexplainable incident occurred one night during a call-in show with a gifted psychic-clairvoyant named Robert Petro. Petro would take calls from listeners who phoned in anonymously. For each listener who made it through the busy phone lines he provided a brief psychic reading. He was often uncannily accurate. I did not know how Petro knew details about listeners he
had never met, but I could not accept any psychic explanation.

Petro turned to me at one point and humorously admonished my skepticism.

“Sometimes when I get upset my psychic energy can overheat or overload. I’ve been known to stop machinery.”

“I suppose even radio station equipment,” I retorted.

“Your never know,” he replied with a laugh. Moments later, during a commercial break, a shaken production assistant ran into the studio holding a plastic reel of audio tape which contained a recording of the live show. A moment earlier the reel had inexplicably melted. It looked as if someone had held the plastic over a hot stove or an open flame.

Petro laughed. “You see, I told you.” I never wavered in my public skepticism.

“It’s probably something wrong with the tape recorder,” I insisted.

The next day I spoke with the radio station’s chief engineer, who was a rational, scientific individual. To my shock he had no explanation for the melted reel other than to say that if it was a machinery malfunction, it was likely the tape recorder would also have overheated. But since it did not, there was no logical reason for what occurred.

Then he asked, “Would you put your finger in a light socket if you weren’t certain whether the electric current was on or off?”

“Of course not,” I replied.

“That’s my answer. You could be fooling around with energies we don’t yet understand.”

His response stunned me. It was 180 degrees from what I’d expected.

On another occasion, a psychic claimed he could travel out of his body and tell me what a relative of mine was doing miles away. I had no inkling where she was at that moment. He explained that he was “watching her” shop in a store for linens and towels, even as he sat with me. That evening we asked my relative exactly where she was at the moment the psychic claimed his spirit traveled to hover directly over her.

“I was shopping for towels and sheets,” she answered.

Had the psychic genuinely traveled out of body as he claimed? Or was it a lucky guess? I did not know. However, intriguing as these anomalies were, isolated anecdotes are not sufficient to prove a scientific case for psychic phenomena. At least that’s what the skeptics and debunkers claimed. At the time I agreed.

On one occasion my guest was a purported psychic healer. I happened to have had a terrible headache, which miraculously disappeared after he touched my temples with his
hands. Coincidence, I concluded, or the well-known psychosomatic effect. On another show a psychic successfully helped police locate a murdered woman.

Throughout the 1970's I privately continued to wonder about such incidents. I also continued to maintain the classic skeptical position: If you can't explain the paranormal by known means, then pretend it doesn't exist. Serious people will consider you gullible or, worse, weird.

In 1979 parapsychologist Stephen Kaplan and I nationally exposed the "Amityville Horror" as a hoax, rather than the haunted house it was purported to be. In 1980 every previously held belief I had about psychic phenomena changed. I had already hosted countless programs about every imaginable aspect of unexplained phenomena. I was introduced to a young man named George Anderson, who claimed he could receive messages from the souls of the departed. Mediumship is among the most controversial of psychic abilities. No one has ever satisfied science that genuine mediumship or life after death actually exists.

In a private demonstration, Anderson, whom I'd never met before, proceeded to offer me personal information that he could not possibly have obtained from any rational or earthly means. He knew details of my former wife's death in a traffic accident six months earlier, including the nature, location and extent of her fatal injuries, even before I learned them. Obviously, if Anderson knew facts that I did not, mental telepathy had to be ruled out. There was no way he could have researched the many accurate and highly personal details he'd given me. Most incredibly, he included a description of a mannerism my late wife had.

Some might argue that he could have researched such minutia, but it was highly unlikely. Where would he begin? I'd never met this man before. Collusion was too far-fetched. I was absolutely certain that I had not inadvertently offered visual or verbal clues. If Anderson had performed a psychic trick, it was the best I'd ever witnessed.

I'd seen more than my share of psychic hoaxes and frauds. But I also had to admit I'd witnessed some startling unexplained occurrences that could have no earthly explanation. As a result I proceeded to test not only Anderson, but other psychics, astrologers and various experts. I alone selected anonymous test subjects, whom I was certain did not previously know the psychics. When Anderson later went on the air, listener response was phenomenal and his accuracy astounding.

At a personal level I was undergoing a significant change in thinking and attitude. I was still a long way from arriving at any conclusion about the nature of psychic phenomena, but now I was traveling a different road. No longer was I so quick to dismiss every unexplained or paranormal event. I began thinking about how and why psychic incidents might be occurring, and why so many people were reporting them.

Now I paid attention when listeners shared stories of their contacts with deceased loved ones, precognitive dreams and premonitions. I kept detailed records on the accuracy of the psychics, mediums, astrologers and others who were guests on call-in shows. Considering them with an open mind, I concluded that indeed many readings were highly accurate beyond chance, coincidence or collusion.

By 1981 I was co-hosting a popular weekly cable TV show about psychic phenomena. That gave me an added opportunity to probe.
guests and investigate topics. I began studying parapsychology and unexplained phenomena. I discovered that not every scientist opposed or ridiculed the paranormal, as skeptics wrongly claimed. Serious parapsychological research was being done. That was a far cry from Hollywood’s treatment of the subject, and supermarket tabloid headlines that screamed “Three-Headed Telepathic Alien Found in Suburban Backyard.”

In my quest to find answers to whether psychic phenomena is genuine, I invited on my show throughout the 1980’s and 90’s willing scientists, magicians, psychologists, theologians, debunkers, computer experts and medical doctors to discuss the paranormal. They often joined psychics and parapsychologists in lively debates. I went a step further. I offered openminded scientists and physicians the opportunity to actually test psychics.

In one test we discovered significant temperature changes in a psychic medium who performed readings in the presence of a thermography machine, a device which measures temperature variations in the body. Another dramatic result came from a series of EEG tests which measures brainwave activity. The medium being tested showed marked asymmetrical changes in brainwave activity in his right temporal lobe while doing readings for subjects.

What do we make of these and the many other tests I conducted or observed? Did we “prove” the existence of life after death? No. But it is clear that physiological changes were occurring during certain paranormal events. One does not have to be a scientist to conclude that the so-called “supernatural” may be perfectly natural and potentially explainable, but for the absence of one key ingredient—an open mind. Simply because an event cannot be explained by present knowledge doesn’t mean the incident did not occur.

We have also utilized computer analysis to determine statistical probabilities in the accuracy of psychic readings. One lesson is that highly accurate, legitimate psychics are not “guessing,” as skeptics often accuse. At some point, the statistical probability of guessing becomes too remote for that to be a plausible explanation.

Too many people are reporting psychic experiences for all of them to be dismissed. One witness to a crime can alter a verdict,—skeptics would have us believe that 100 million Americans are fibbing when they report psychic incidents.

I have also come to realize the value in psychic experiences. I believe psychic phenomena has much to teach us about human potential and the nature of consciousness. From encounters with angels to alien abductions, people are now more willing than they used to be to share their experiences aloud. When an individual has a psychic or paranormal experience, he or she will discover what millions of others have,—that it was a genuine, if unexplainable, event.

Is everything in the paranormal legitimate? Of course not. Are there psychic frauds and charlatans? Yes. But there are also art forgers, counterfeiters, even fraudulent medical research and quack cures. That doesn’t make us reject all art, currency and medical treatment, however. The same standard should be applied to the paranormal.

I was once accused by a colleague on TV of telling “little white lies about little green men” when I broadcast reports of UFO sightings. We are a long way from solid evidence of extraterrestrial contact, but it was very satisfying to learn of the discovery of a life form on Mars, albeit a primitive one.

What is your opinion of psychic phenomena, I am often asked. Years ago I would have deflected the question. Today that frequent query brings from me an entirely different response. “If you mean, is psychic phenomena genuine? Yes. Are psychic experiences genuine? Yes. I answer without hesitation.

There is a saying from long ago that still holds much relevance: The limits of our perception are not necessarily the limits of all there is to perceive. I don’t know if Atlantis existed or if I had a past life there—or anywhere. I’m uncertain whether I have a guardian angel, nor have I yet glimpsed the other side. I don’t believe I have any psychic ability beyond that which we all possess. But I do strongly believe we all have the right and responsibility to pursue the most fundamental questions that parapsychology might help.
answer. Are we all connected by some unseen force or energy? What is the connection between mind, body and spirit? Is there a soul? Does it survive death? Where am I going when I die?

Where once my position was obdurate skepticism, I now regard myself as open-minded. My files contain thousands of accounts of paranormal events shared with me by people from all walks of life. I no longer immediately dismiss claims of the paranormal. I've witnessed too much evidence to the contrary. On the other hand, I do not believe every claim laid before me. But now before I close the door--and my mind--to a psychic event, I allow for the possibility that it might be genuine. I question. I investigate.

The key to unlocking the mystery remains largely in the hands of science. Skeptics and the close-minded, blinded by their own dogma and prejudices, may never find the answers. I am pleased today to count myself among those who will keep searching. I've experienced too much for it to be otherwise.

It's in the Cards

The first "high scorer" in the history of parapsychological laboratory testing was a man named Adam J. Linzmayer. An undergraduate student in one of Dr. J.B. Rhine's psychology classes, Rhine was conducting his pioneering ESP card-counting experiments. Linzmayer helped cement Rhine's belief in the existence of psi, which up to that time Rhine had questioned, when he correctly called nine cards in a row during an ESP test. The very next day Linzmayer again called nine cards in a row. On the third day of testing, Linzmayer did even better: He correctly called fifteen cards in a row (a feat achieved against odds of thirty billion to one)! Linzmayer's spectacular results helped to give Rhine new enthusiasm for his research, and provided him with the impetus for his future work. Linzmayer, upon leaving Duke in 1933, was eventually replaced in the ESP lab by a dozen or so other psychically gifted subjects. As Rhine later wrote, none of these, however were "so brilliant as Linzmayer." A special article about Linzmayer's seminal work as an ESP test-subject appeared in a Life magazine article in 1940.

On July 22, 1930, the first recorded modern sighting of the Loch Ness Monster occurred. Three boys were fishing from a boat when an animal more than 20 feet long rushed toward then veered off. Since then, Nessie, as the creature is affectionately called by local residents, has been glimpsed by thousand of people. A number of those who have reported seeing the enormous animal have managed to take photographs of it.