



STATEMENT DN-025

BOOK REVIEW

A SUMMARY CRITIQUE: Talking to Heaven: A Medium's Message of Life After Death

by James van Praagh

In the pop publishing world's ongoing reinvention of spiritualist literature, medium James van Praagh's book, *Talking to Heaven*, is the latest to top the New York Times best-seller list. He's been a guest on *Larry King Live* and *Good Morning America*, and one of his more unusual psychic readings has been re-enacted on CBS's *Unsolved Mysteries*. Two main factors contribute to the book's success. One is the undying interest many people hold for finding any kind of "proof" that their loved ones live on after death. The other is that if such proof can be found, then it would put to rest their own fears of death, especially if the departed are happy.

Van Praagh's route into spiritualism is a typical one. A strong disillusionment with institutional Christianity (he attended Roman Catholic schools) paralleled a number of psychic episodes he experienced, which, he writes, gave him hope of God's existence in a way that the Catholic Church never did. In the early 1980s, a professional medium told van Praagh that he was "very mediumistic" and would one day "give readings" to people. "Haunted" by the medium's suggestion, van Praagh bought and studied dozens of books about mediumistic development. He began experimenting with psychic readings and eventually "could not believe what was happening...I had actually talked to spirits" (p. 26).

In most spiritualist literature, such as *Seth Speaks* by medium Jane Roberts or Shirley MacLaine's New Age autobiographies, the spirits pontificate about the great metaphysical conundrums of the ages. What makes *Talking to Heaven* different (actually, a throwback to pre-New Age spiritualism) is that the bulk of the material, supposedly from the spirit world, concentrates on mundane details surrounding the clients and their departed loved ones.

There is a reason for this difference. Van Praagh's clients are not as interested in metaphysical riddles as they are in finding "proof" that their departed loved ones are still around. So, when clients arrive at his "seance room" or when van Praagh holds public meetings, he warns the people not to tell him about their lives, or who died, or how someone died, or why they have come for a reading. This run-of-the-mill information must be seen to come from out-of-the-blue, otherwise clients are not going to accept it as evidence for the ongoing existence of their departed loved ones. His book, therefore, is what might be called "personal experience narratives" from the spirits (supposedly) to the clients.

Any number of particulars might come from the beyond to clients: the kind of collectibles displayed in the den (duck decoys), the color of the bridesmaids' dresses (pink), a child's favorite stuffed animal (red pony), how a loved one died (AIDS). Details like these never fail to impress clients. Van Praagh reports that they leave his psychic readings with a great sense of peace and comfort, which, many say, they haven't had in years.

The question on most people's minds is, of course, Is it true? Is this man in touch with the spirit world or is it a clever sham? It is understandable why people are asking. They are pragmatists when it comes to making value judgments. No one wants to be duped.

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I believe people *are* being fooled, and I'm not the only one. A large amount of literature from psychic critics, such as James Randi (the Amazing Randi), Michael Shermer, Ray Hyman, and Dan Korem, explains how anyone with enough expertise at "cold readings" can seem to be "the real thing."

The principles of cold reading, which may be applied knowingly or unknowingly, include: (1) making educated guesses from general comments; (2) pinpointing a client's personality type (helps in guessing an occupation or likes and dislikes); (3) looking for clues from a client's skin, clothes, or body posture (helps in guessing one's emotional state); (4) eavesdropping or researching a client ahead of time; (5) asking leading questions, making open-ended statements, and skillfully alternating between the two (leaves the medium a graceful way out if wrong and the freedom to switch to another topic without embarrassment); and (6) knowing the most common first names and the percentages of certain types of jobs held. An excellent analysis of cold readings is found in Dan Korem's *Powers: Testing the Psychic and Supernatural* (InterVarsity Press; 1998).

None of this, of course, is mentioned in *Talking to Heaven*. Van Praagh's book is slanted to achieve a particular end; namely, to convince readers that the author is nearly infallible. But this is merely the editing process in action. In actual fact, van Praagh's readings overflow with mistaken remarks and conclusions, and when he gets it right, it is largely due to the guesswork surrounding his version of the parlor game "Twenty Questions." When you ask enough questions, you are eventually going to get the right answer. Pace and lead, pace and lead.

Although this does not come through in the book, it was blatant during ABC's *20/20* segment with van Praagh (3 April 1998) because *20/20* did not edit out van Praagh's misses. With the help of author Michael Shermer, *20/20* examined what actually happens during the readings. Shermer correctly highlighted van Praagh's expertise in three fundamental areas of cold readings: asking questions, sticking to generalities, and manipulating the feedback of the audiences' facial expressions and vocal cues.

Time and time again during the *20/20* segment, van Praagh needed to ask a considerable amount of questions and make many mistaken remarks before coming up with just one accurate detail about a client. It was no better than random guessing, as Shermer rightly noted. "If you're psychic," he chided, "you should be able to do better." Using generalities also leaves Van Praagh doing no better than chance guessing. When he asks a large group, "Does anyone here have photos or pictures hanging on a wall?" or, "Who here knows a departed one named Charlie?" what are the odds against *someone* stepping forward? Smiles and sad looks also become clues.

When accurate details are mentioned by van Praagh, he claims no prior knowledge of them. But during the *20/20* interview he was picked off. When he denied knowing ahead of time that one woman's grandmother had passed away, a replay of the video tape revealed that an hour earlier, during a break, the woman had told van Praagh that very bit of her history.

None of this comes through the many sessions detailed in the book because of the way it is edited. Only the "hits" are presented. Such manipulation creates a false impression and reality for readers wondering whether to believe van Praagh. When I spoke to his publisher, I was told that it was not up to Dutton to verify stories in a book like this, but that readers were to decide for themselves if they want to believe what they've read. Of course, readers *want* to believe this and the way the book is slanted, they will conclude that they'd have to be crazy not to believe! After *seeing* him, however, Shermer concluded, "I think they've been duped by a clever mentalist who's playing a game." After the *20/20* segment, Barbara Walters seemed on the fence, but Hugh Downs agreed with Shermer: "I don't believe him. I think he's very skillful." I agree.

What about clients who believe anyway, even when they're shown that they've been manipulated? They probably have so strong a desire to hear from departed loved ones, Shermer suggests, that they can be very forgiving of van Praagh for his mistaken remarks.

Other problems should also give people pause. For instance, from cover to cover, van Praagh makes pronouncements about religious beliefs and the conditions of the departed as if they were scientific givens that people would be stupid not to believe. Comments such as, "Spirits cannot interfere with karmic progression," and, "Your daughter is playing in heaven and her great-grandmother is with her" are found throughout the book. People may wish to believe, but why should they take his word? The language makes it all seem so matter-of-fact, but it is a far cry from that. He is asking them to take what he says *by faith*, but even he himself cannot know whether he's correct.

Furthermore, it never seems to cross van Praagh's mind that he could be fooling around with evil spirits. Actually, he is ready prey to an American can-do pop optimism applied to the supernatural: Evil spiritual forces are of no or little concern; if a few evil spirits exist, they can be easily detected and easily put in their place. Yet this contradicts thousands of years of religious literature of all kinds, including the Holy Bible, that warn of the existence and danger of evil spirits. Why should people believe van Praagh when he contradicts so much history? It is like asking people to believe the moon walks were fake and pro wrestling is real!

Then there's the world van Praagh has created, where his spirits reside. And what a world it is! It's a kind of cosmic playground he calls "heaven." Departed spirits can go to the racetrack (there's no gambling, though), or take studies in the arts, or enter therapy, or meet up with other departed loved ones. They also keep a watching eye on living relatives. Even departed pets have a place. Van Praagh recounts one reading when he received detailed information from a client's dead dog!

His world, of course, is hung together as all worlds are, with a certain metaphysics. Van Praagh's fundamentals clearly are not those of a biblical Christian world view. For him, God is "not the God who [sits] on a throne in heaven or the son of God who hung on a cross" (19–20). Rather, his god is a vague "Creative Expression" and "Source," which, according to him, is nonjudgmental and compromising (ix, 19). "We are all God," he writes, and "each one of us is perfect if we would only seek our divinity" (27). Furthermore, Jesus is a "master" who has "the Christ light of love," and we create our own realities by our thoughts (113, 123).

Karma and reincarnation are two other fundamentals in his metaphysics, and he has a penchant for kundalini yoga. He also asserts that his "spirit guides" help him make links "between the spirit world and earthly participants" (80), and his book explains various meditation techniques for discovering and contacting spirit guides.

Sounding more and more like a New Age spokes person, van Praagh notes that "everything is energy" and recommends that through meditation people can work with their energies and "return to wholeness, the oneness of who we are — our infinite self. In that oneness, we begin to discard [what] separates us from our Godself [and begin to] tune in with our divine self" (165, 183). "You are truly GOD," he shouts on the last page of his book, taking a cue either from the serpent in Genesis 3 or from Shirley MacLaine at the end of *Dancing in the Light*. Clearly, his spirit world lies within the metaphysics of pantheistic monism: All is One, One is All, All is God.

This is not the teaching of any historic or modern Christian tradition because it is not the view of the Bible. Scripture teaches that while people are special because they are made in God's image, yet they also need to be saved from hell because they are sinners, and such redemption comes only through Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:23–24). Thus, whether van Praagh is hitting homers or striking out with clients — however nice the three-piece suit looks, the Bible declares the world of spiritualism to be a false belief system.

Spiritualism excludes getting guidance from God because it is a deceptive and demonic method for instruction about life after death. Perhaps the most definitive passage related to van Praagh-type practices is Leviticus 19:31: "Do not turn to mediums or seek our spiritists, for you will be defiled by them, I am the LORD your God." The Hebrew in this verse specifically forbids calling up a "departed spirit" to make disclosures. Furthermore, if a spirit is being contacted, it is not a "departed" but a "deceiving" or "demonic" spirit (1 Tim. 4:1), for the spirits of the departed cannot come back (Luke 16:26).

During the years in which I read horoscope charts for people — a process quite similar to the way van Praagh chats up clients — most of my "accuracies" were the outcome of cold readings mixed with disclosures from the spirit world. (Most ex-"readers" will admit to this.) The reason such disclosures are possible is that the cold readings are practiced within a system for communicating with the spirit world. An in-depth analysis of the interaction between client, spirit, cold reading, and psychic can be found in chapters 5-11 of my book, *America's Fascination with Astrology* (Emerald House; 1998).

Clearly, van Praagh is asking people to take a blind leap into a religion of unrestricted supernaturalism. The only way one is safe with the supernatural world, however, is to impose the restrictions of Scripture on it, and this must be done within the context of Christian fellowship. There is ultimately room for only one religion per soul, and people ought to choose theirs with care. In the religion of spiritualism there is no moral demand made on conscience, no repentance required, no grace of God. Van Praagh holds out the age-old spiritualist anticipation of eternal life without having to believe in Jesus Christ. No one talking to heaven, however, will receive that message.

— *Reviewed by Charles Strohmer*