

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense."

-- James Randi

May 2003

NBC Reveals Psychic Secrets

by David Bloomberg

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The first trick could have appeared in either a typical magic or with somebody who claimed to be using "real" powers - it was a card trick where a volunteer picked a card, pulled it across a table, and held it close so nobody could see it. Then the "psychic" called another "psychic" who would tell the volunteer what the card was. Of course, he was right.

The secret was in a combination of marked cards - seen by the performer in the studio - and a code on the phone. When the studio performer called his cohort, the one on the other end started saying, "Ace, two, three, four..." When he got to the proper card, the studio performer said, "Hello!" Then he did the same thing for the suit, knowing which it was when the studio performer again interrupted him to hand the phone to the volunteer. It was just that simple, but done in a situation where somebody claimed to have special powers, it could be quite convincing.

The second psychic also performed a trick that could have easily appeared at a magic show. He had audience members pick numbers between 1 and 1000. Then he called three up to write their numbers on a pad of paper. He had another volunteer add up the numbers and open previously-sealed envelope. Of course, the numbers matched!

How did he do it? Simple, really. A quick sleight of hand. After he had the three volunteers write down their numbers, he flipped over the notebook and handed the fourth volunteer the pad with three previously-determined numbers showing. So when she added them up, it came to the same total as the sealed envelope. Frankly, I have to admit that I found this to be a bit of a risky trick. The performer showed the three numbers to the first three volunteers to verify that they were indeed their numbers (before flipping the notebook). If any of them had paid attention, they might have realized that the addition didn't, well, add up.

Next up is a "psychic" who says he has the power of telekinesis, the ability to move objects with his mind. He wants to harness the mind power of the audience for something that he says he's never been able to do before. So after getting everybody to hold hands and focus on a wine glass sitting on a table, the glass shatters, apparently due solely to mind power.

How was it done? The trick is actually in the table. There is a thin metal rod with a pointed tip that is attached to a spring in a slot on the table. It triggers with such force and speed that it's barely visible even on the slow-motion camera. So it appears to the naked eye that the glass just shatters on its own.

Spoon bending is a classic example of mind over matter - or, more truthfully, of a magic trick pretending to be mind over matter. The performer selects a spoon, taps it on something to show that it's real, and then makes it bend and finally break into two with just the power of his mind.

Except, of course, it's not the power of his mind at all. The host wonders, "How did the phony psychic pull off this scam?" The spoon is actually pre-cut, though the audience can't see it. The performer uses the pressure of his thumb to finish the break and then merely pretends it is bending as he releases the pressure on the joint.

The problem I have with this particular segment is that there are many ways to do the spoon bending trick. I once saw well-known skeptic James "The Amazing" Randi give a lecture and do the trick. An audience member asked him to show how it was done. He refused, saying there are so many ways to do it, if he shows one or two and the next phony psychic uses a different way, you won't be looking for it and may be fooled all over again. Indeed, that is what this segment (and potentially others) set up. In this case, no volunteer was allowed to examine the spoon, or else they would have seen the cut in it. But in Randi's, he did have a volunteer examine it and pronounce it untampered-with. So obviously he did something different. One famous "psychic" has taken objects, like keys, from volunteers and performed the same trick, so we know those haven't been tampered with ahead of time. However, as Randi said at this lecture (and others), if a psychic really is using his mind power to bend the spoon, he's doing it the hard way, because sleight of hand works just as well.

Next up is a demonstration of telepathy - mind reading. In particular, this one would be about the transfer of images from the mind of an audience member to the mind of the performer. He picked a volunteer to draw three pictures. Then he goes through each, saying he sees a circle in a circle that might be a tire or a donut, a solid heavy object with a pincer on one end - a wrench, and a star. So that's it, star, donut, wrench. The volunteer says yes, though the donut was actually a tire (looking at the picture, there is absolutely no way to know that).

How was it done? Simple. Behind the volunteer, just over his shoulder, is an accomplice who has a hidden microphone. With everybody paying attention to either the performer or the volunteer, he can easily whisper into the mike, "star, donut, wrench." The performer puts on the finishing touches and there you have it!

Now we move outside the studio to the one-on-one setting of a private psychic reading. The host notes that the most common forum for psychic deception takes place in street-corner shops, and we see a large neon "PSYCHIC READER" sign.

Clients are led to believe, the host continues, that psychic readings are based on insights into their personalities. But in

this particular case, the reader is merely reciting a pre-memorized script that she uses for all of the clients here. It is cold reading, using universal themes that everybody can relate to. As the host notes, it makes "every innocent victim feel like the psychic is talking about them.

Throughout the reading, the "psychic" even tells each person that they have some innate psychic ability, and all agree to one level or another. (I have actually had people tell me that their psychic said they have psychic abilities too, and it seems a good way to rope them in with more belief.)

Everybody shown buys in to the reading. They all say it was right on, very specific, accurate, etc. But of course, we know it was all just a cold reading. They don't know until they are told afterwards.

Back to the studio, for more mind reading. A volunteer is given a sharp dagger and told to put it face-up into one of three slots. Then he covers each with a large Styrofoam cup. The psychic smashes each of two cups in turn, in such a way that if the blade were in either one, it would have impaled his hand. Of course, that doesn't happen. Why not? Because there is a small hidden peg on the side of the box that pops out to show which hole the dagger is in. It's just that simple.

Following that is a demonstration of remote viewing, in which a psychic sees through the eyes of somebody else. An audience member is pulled up and told to concentrate on her home. The "psychic" then takes her through from pulling up in the driveway. There is a porch, hedges with one bigger than the other, the car is blue, in the front door - which has a horse-shaped bell, inside with the living room to the left and bedrooms on the right, to the kitchen. There he sees the initials J.B. and a seven. Wait. A zero, a zero, and a seven. The woman says she has a James Bond shot glass in her kitchen! Then out the back door, a big tree to the right and something new - a trellis but no flowers yet.

Pretty impressive! How did he do it? Earlier in the week, he obtained the name and address of the woman from the ticket list. He sent an accomplice to the house. She scouted the outside and even managed to get in by saying she was lost and needed to use the phone. That's how they got all the info, right down to the James Bond shot glass! The host notes, "As in most psychic scams, good information is the psychic's best friend."

The volunteer, interviewed after being told the truth, says she thought he was the real deal. Now when she watches psychics on TV, she'll know that most of them are running a con game. Um. Only most?!

Next up is a rather painful-looking demonstration. A performer puts a large needle through his arm and then heals it through psychic power. I was cringing through the whole trick. But trick is what it was! It turns out to be a fairly easy one, as well. The performer pre-loads his arm with two strips of rubber cement. Then he brings out the needle and makes sure to face his arm away from the audience as he slides it in (probably with an excuse about it being too gruesome). After he gets the needle against his arm at the right place, he folds the two rubber cement strips over to temporarily glue the skin together and make it look like the needle is actually going through the skin. He can move it up and down and pretend to be in pain. Then he takes it out, wipes up the area - thus separating the skin again - and he's healed!

Card tricks are back again for the next demonstration. The performer is blindfolded and has his hands tied behind his back. A card is picked, shown to the audience, and then put into his hands. Of course, he guesses what the card is.

So, how does he do it? Cards marked in Braille? No. The blindfold is rigged so he can see downwards. On his shoe, he has a mirror that he can pop out and thus look down to see the card he is holding behind his back. Of course, he has to stand the right way so the audience can't see the trickery, but that's no big deal. This was another one that you'd be more likely to see in a magic show than as a demonstration of psychic power, but it's still pretty good.

Telekinesis makes another appearance with a moving wooden matchstick. The performer holds it in the palm of his hand as it turns around and then stands up on end. Two volunteers sit right at the table so he can't do any trickery.

Or can he? Of course! There is a powerful magnet in the table and the matchstick has been pre-loaded with a small nail. The nail reacts to the magnet and we have the moving matchstick!

Back to the psychic shop again, we are told that the psychics there have a variety of scams to fool clients. A common one involves bringing in a treasured item, such as a ring, from a deceased family member. The psychic then does some sleight of hand tricks with the ring - for example, having it move up and down on a pencil to show that she is in communication with the spirit world - and then moves to the psychic slates to get specific messages. She shows that the slates are blank and then asks for a message. She opens the slates again and there it is! A specific message, not just some general cold reading. The host notes that the victim is sure to come back again and again, and keep paying again and again.

So, how is it done? Well, the ring is pulled up and down by a thin hair attached to the pencil, which the ring is slipped over. The slates involve an accomplice hiding (in this case) under the table. The accomplice hears the story of the deceased relative and comes up with a personal question. Then he loads the slates so it will appear blank, but when turned over a cover will slip into the top to show the message.

Back to the studio, and here is a really easy one. The "psychic" claims to be able to generate heat with his mind. He takes out an ordinary metal spring and, by concentrating, it turns red-hot. Well, not really. It does turn and it is red. The secret is that the spring is painted black on one side and red on the other. So he turns it gently and it appears to turn red.

Another quicky is a dollar bill that folds up by itself. How? It's rigged with fish line in a zig-zag pattern so as the line is pulled, the dollar bill moves and folds up without any apparent outside aid.

Now we're on to talking with the dead. Frankly, I was afraid they would just go for tricks and not tackle this one, even though it is the most popular on TV right now. I was happy to be proven wrong. The performer picks a volunteer. He says the person he wants to contact has been dead for some time, and it was quick - a car accident. Yes. There are the numbers seven and eight - they were on a team together, the volunteer was one and the deceased was the other. Yes. It was little league, he's asking you to remember and wants to know if you still have the baseball card he gave to you. Yes. He's happy.

Now, another. The volunteer has unfinished business. Someone is looking over your shoulder. A family member who passed. Grandfather. A strong person. Name begins with P - Phil? No, Paul. Close. You have to do things he wasn't able to do.

Both volunteers give stunning agreement. So how did they do it? Simple. An accomplice talked to one (in this case the same accomplice who radioed in the pictures earlier) before the show. He looked like an ordinary audience member just chatting about why they were there, but he was gently grilling the guy for info. The other was also the subject of an accomplice grilling, though a different accomplice this time. The stories are written down for various audience members and then the performer memorizes them. The audience members are labeled next to their seats with color-coded dots so the performer knows who is who.

That was the final trick exposed. The host says that tonight they exposed some classic tricks. So next time they watch a supposed psychic, remember that seeing is not believing once you know their secrets.