



Selected articles from
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'Close Encounter of the 2nd-Hand Kind' with "psychic medium" George Anderson

By [Gary P. Posner](#)

[George Anderson](#), one of the country's three major "psychic mediums," may be less well known than [John Edward](#) and [James Van Praagh](#). But, like the others, he charges the bereaved a small fortune for the opportunity to ostensibly communicate with a departed loved one.

The closest I've ever been to Anderson was in October 1999 on the defunct MSNBC television show *Crosstalk*, which devoted an hour to discussing communication with the dead and that night's premier of Linda Ellerbee's HBO special, *Life Afterlife*. Anderson was a guest in the network studio, with Ellerbee, myself, and a couple others scattered in various remote locations. During [the program](#), in response to one of my comments, Anderson acknowledged that "skepticism is healthy . . . it means you're thinking." But I don't think the following is the sort of "thinking" that he would appreciate becoming the norm.

Last year, someone who had lost her twenty-something-year-old son (I'll call him "Adam" here) in an auto accident, and whose identity I need to keep in strict confidence (I'll call her "Eve"), sought out Anderson and paid \$1,200 to connect with her dearly and tragically departed. Fortunately for us "thinking" folks, she recorded the nearly one-hour session (with -- amazingly -- Anderson's concurrence) and has thoughtfully provided a copy. **[March 2013 update: I have now been granted permission by the mother to post the audio of the entire session -- [click here](#) to listen to the MP3 file.]**

The session begins with Anderson's announcement that "immediately a male presence comes forward . . . [pause, then under his breath] and two females follow." Eve's body language and verbal feedback help establish the sex of the deceased party with whom she desires communication. But age, unlike sex, presents nearly a hundred possibilities. Anderson: "He claims he passed on young? [pause, due to apparent absence of feedback] Excuse me, relatively young by today's standards, yes? That means 70

down." So, Eve's son did not cry out, "Mom, I'm here!" Or, to Anderson, "My name is Adam. I was killed at age 25 in an auto accident." Instead, Adam decided to play a version of the child's games "Hot and Cold" and "20 Questions." After some inane byplay with Eve (of the sort occupying most of the session), Anderson continues: "He's already on the defensive saying [again], 'I passed over young by today's standards,' but he wasn't a child." Anderson has obviously gone fishing -- Husband? Son? Father?

At this point, only 55 seconds into the 52-minute session, any "thinking" person should recognize that this "communication" simply cannot be genuine. The intact sentences that Anderson claims to relay are so ridiculous (the above example being but one) that I can only shake my head in bewilderment at the gullibility of his supporters.

Still floundering for the nature of their relationship: "He says he's your sweetheart, understood? [pause -- apparently not] But not romantically? [pause -- Eve says, "I don't know."] I think I have two people; one states he is your sweetheart romantically, yes?" But he had earlier specified *one* male and *two females*. This sort of transparent game-playing, and Anderson's excuses (such as, "He said ['sweetheart'] to be funny") wastes minute after minute -- at more than \$20 per.

One need listen to the entire recording to appreciate the endless stream of wild guesses and proffered questions, and the offering of no specific information whatsoever from or about the "next level" of existence.

Anderson's excruciating attempts to divine the departed's name continue intermittently until finally resolved at about the half-way point. At 12:38: "He is now telling me his first name is short." Eve offers "Yes," but no more, and Anderson abandons this attempt. At about 15:40 he tries again: "He doesn't have the most common first name . . . but you can shorten it? [Actually, no.] He showed me six letters, but it's less than that?" [Eve offers "Yes."] A bit later: "[The] letter 'J' -- anything to do with him?" Then, "Now why did your son say 'A,B,C,D' and he stopped, understood?" He offers the names "Kyle" and "Keith," both incorrect. He again moves on. At 36:13, after playing more letter games, and with more help from Eve: Success (though certainly not in my book)!

At 42:36 we learn why Anderson (and presumably his cohorts), even if they truly possessed their claimed abilities, would still choose to play such games rather than spend the hour providing a treasure trove of information about the great beyond to their grieving, paying (through the nose) clients: "To me, it would be boring as hell if you walked into the room and he said, 'Hi. I'm her son. My name is [Adam]. I died in a car accident.' Everything would just be an assembly-line bore. This makes it very challenging . . . and exciting to work it out."

And, as if he were being paid by the hour like Anderson, at 51:52 Adam decides to "pull back" and depart the premises, having imparted not one iota of information about the afterlife to his beloved mom, aside from Anderson's platitudes that he is alright and at peace. But he was thoughtful enough to provide Anderson with some time for a coffee or bathroom break before the next assembly-line client's arrival at the top of the hour.

There was, however, one sliver of a silver lining in this mephitic affair: Eve, though \$1,200 lighter in the pocketbook, is now much richer of mind. She has become a skeptic.

A version of this article also later appeared [here](#) on the cover of the June 2010 issue of Skeptical Briefs, the companion newsletter to [Skeptical Inquirer](#) magazine.

Noreen Renier denies allegations in lawsuit; files countersuit

By Gary P. Posner

"Psychic detective" [Noreen Renier](#), a Florida fixture for nearly two decades before moving back to Virginia in 2004, has filed a countersuit against long-time nemesis John Merrell, accusing him of the very infraction over which he sued her last year.

As reported in our [Spring issue](#), Renier (along with her co-author, editor and publisher) was sued by Merrell last December over her 2005 book, *A Mind For Murder*, which contains two chapters concerning their prior litigious history. Merrell alleges that the content of those chapters constitutes a breach of their March 1992 settlement agreement prohibiting either party from ever again publicly disparaging the other, including via "media of any type."

Renier's response and countersuit, filed on March 28, denies Merrell's allegation and asserts that his case is "frivolous" and that he is the one who first breached their 1992 settlement. Specifically, "Merrell breached the agreement with Ms. Renier prior to the publication of 'A Mind for Murder' by providing false and defamatory information about Ms. Renier for the 1994 book 'Psychic Sleuths: ESP and Sensational Cases.' . . . Merrell's claim is barred by the doctrine of unclean hands." *Psychic Sleuths* contains [my 26-page chapter](#) about Renier's career, including her rancorous dealings with Merrell.

Although Renier has read my book review of *A Mind for Murder*, as published in our [Summer 2005 issue](#) and on my website, apparently she does not believe the following passage from it: "Ever since their 1992 out-of-court settlement . . . I have been hard-pressed to squeeze anything more about Renier out of John, even though we are good friends. I have inferred that their settlement forbids either from speaking ill about the other again."

From Renier's countersuit:

Renier complied with the [settlement] Agreement. . . . Merrell intentionally, and with the improper motive of damaging Ms. Renier's career, interfered with [Renier's] contractual relationship [with her publisher] by falsely accusing Ms. Renier of breaching the Agreement and by demanding that the publisher cease distribution of "A Mind for Murder." Because of Merrell's actions, Penguin Books and Berkley Publishing ceased printing and distributing [the book]. As a direct and proximate result of Merrell's improper actions, Ms. Renier has suffered and will continue to suffer damages in an amount to be proven at trial.

Her countersuit adds that Renier "is unable to obtain adequate supplies of the book for customers,

booksellers and lectures." It also asserts that Merrell has "contacted other persons and entities in the book industry and provided false information about Ms. Renier to those persons. Because of Merrell's actions, Ms. Renier has lost multiple business opportunities."

As mentioned in our Spring report, Merrell began the discovery phase of his lawsuit by issuing a series of interrogatories/questions on February 3, with Renier's responses due in 30 days. Renier did not supply answers to the questions, and instead filed her response and counterclaims with the U.S. District Court in Seattle, rather than with the Superior Court of Washington for Snohomish County (the forum in which Merrell filed his suit and interrogatories). She also has filed a formal brief arguing that their litigation should take place in federal rather than county court.

Merrell, who for strategic reasons prefers to have the case litigated in county court, has cited the provision in their 1992 settlement agreement specifying that the "venue to seek such enforcement will reside in the United States and in the county of residence of the non-breaching party." Renier in turn argues that "the Agreement's forum clause is no model of clarity" and that "in the United States" could be interpreted to mean in federal court. And, again, she contends that she -- not Merrell -- is the "non-breaching party."

An April 13 letter from Renier's attorney to Merrell's complains about "more improper actions taken by your client. . . . He has launched a website that appears dedicated solely to the lawsuit, in which he attacks Ms. Renier. In addition, he has posted messages on Court TV's website again attacking Ms. Renier." Renier has been [interviewed on Court TV's website](#) and has been featured in numerous episodes of its pro-paranormal *Psychic Detectives* television series. The letter goes on to request that Merrell "cease these actions immediately."

But Merrell has expanded his website and has filed papers denying Renier's counterclaims. We will follow this story as it continues to unfold. [Note: [Merrell's website](#) was revamped in early 2010, and much material removed, in conjunction with an apparent cease-fire with Noreen Renier.]

"Psychic Detectives" and the Media

By [Jack Robinson](#)

Many years ago, shortly after I became a member of Tampa Bay Skeptics, Gary Posner played for us a videotape showing part of a local Ch. 13 newscast in which a "psychic detective" was credited with having [located the body of a man](#) in Williston, Florida, who had been missing for more than a year. According to the news report, Noreen Renier -- by handling some of the missing man's possessions -- divined that the body was in a particular water-filled quarry. It then showed the man's truck being pulled from the water with his body still in it. And a Navy diver who had found the truck testified that, though he was previously skeptical, he now believed in psychic detectives.

I have been teaching a course this spring on "Science and Pseudoscience" for the Learning in Retirement program at the University of South Florida in Tampa. With Gary's active participation, one of the lessons I put together was about "psychic detectives." We started by showing the students

that same Ch. 13 news report. We then involved the students in a "psychic detective" game by instructing them to do the following:

Pretend you are an investigative reporter, and your editor assigns you to find out whether or not the TV story about the psychic detective was the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. List the different kinds of information you should seek as a basis for your investigative report. Then list the possible sources of such information.

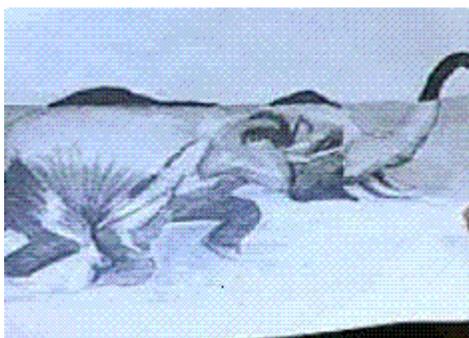
But before we could even formally begin the game, the students started bombarding us with questions: Could we learn more about the missing man from his neighbors? Was he ill and depressed? Might he have committed suicide? Could we obtain maps of the area showing the quarry -- or more than one quarry?

These questions, and more, well represented what Gary actually had done following the broadcast in question. He even jokingly accused them of cheating -- I suppose he suspected they had used "psychic" power to figure out what he would be presenting.

Gary then did his PowerPoint "show and tell" presentation revealing what he had learned by investigating the case thoroughly. It turned out that the missing man had indeed told a friend about being sick and contemplating suicide -- and Gary had obtained the police report indicating that they knew about this months before calling in the psychic! Also, the body was not found in the quarry that the psychic's clues seemed to best fit, but a different one. These were just a few of the revealing things that the TV newscaster could have discovered had he done more to prepare for his report.

Earlier in the spring, Gary and I made a similar presentation to Dr. Cheryl Koski's class of literary journalism students at USF / St. Pete. Afterwards, the consensus seemed to be that such local TV "news" reports can't really be expected to provide viewers with hard journalism -- rather, that they are really just entertainment.

Snippets



The curator of paleontology at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow has proposed, in the Open University Geological Society journal, that perhaps Scotland's Nessie the Monster was really just Bessie the Elephant. He noted the striking similarities between Nessie's descriptions and the

appearance of an elephant swimming (see the "dark" portion of the elephant above the water line). Plus, he notes, a traveling circus, packing pachyderms, passed by murky Loch Ness in the 1930s at the height of the monster sightings.

(BBC News online, Mar. 6; *St. Pete. Times*, Mar. 8)

Florida "psychic" Linda Marks has received four years in prison and three years of probation, and was ordered to pay \$2-million, for the scamming of elderly victims out of more than \$2-million between 1994 and 2002. Delray Beach police detective Jack Makler, who pleaded guilty for his supporting role in the operation, was sentenced to five years in prison and three years supervised release.

(*Daytona Beach News-Journal* online, May 11)

Letter to the Editor

Editor: During the first week of April my wife and I began noticing scattered tiny blinking lights drifting around our 17-acre property. As soon as it gets dark the strange lights would appear. They terrified us because we had never seen such a thing before. We were even afraid to use our new outdoor hot tub. We thought of everything they could possibly be, from marsh gas to bugs to UFOs, even ghosts. Looking on the Web for help, we found Tampa Bay Skeptics and contacted Gary Posner.

Dr. Posner visited our house the very same day we called. His approach was level-headed, factual and skeptical. As soon as it got dark the floating lights started to come out, and he observed them and immediately mentioned that they could be lightning bugs, though he agreed that their light seemed awfully bright and white. My wife and I had previously discounted the bug theory because we could not see an actual bug when we shone a spotlight on it, but our reasoning had become distorted. Dr. Posner, with a fresh, untainted attitude, eventually led us to literally surround one of the lights that approached us, and we discovered that it was indeed a lightning bug, not a ghost or alien!

My wife and I were greatly relieved and grateful for Dr. Posner's scientific approach to problem-solving. This whole episode is typical of people who start to obsess over things and let their minds run wild with crazy thoughts. Our brains are powerful organs that many times deceive us and lead us in the wrong direction, and we fell victim to this as well. I learned a lot from this adventure about why being skeptical is the best approach, and I want to thank Dr. Posner again very much for his evaluation and attention to this matter.

--Tony Fanto
Palmetto
tonyf@weisersecurity.com

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