

Magician Accuses Faith Healers of Hoax

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ABSTRACT: Discussions of faith healing have traditionally focused on the persuasiveness of the healer and the receptivity of the audience. Recently magician James Randi investigated popular American faith healers and accused them of deliberate fraud. The deceptions he identified are those used for many years by fraudulent mediums and psychics. This paper reviews the history of conflict between charlatans and magicians, providing a context for understanding the findings of Randi.

Conjuring is one of the few legitimate uses of deception. The magician withholds information from his audience and thereby creates a mystery for purposes of entertainment. People who fail to announce they are using the methods of magic are charlatans. Magicians easily spot these deceivers and are bitter about having their craft abused. Uri Geller, for example, was trained in magic but claimed that his feats resulted from psychic power. He thereby created double deceptions. That is, he used a deception to bend keys, and he deceived people by failing to inform them that he did it by trickery. Magician James Randi denounced this hoax and exposed his techniques.¹

Randi recently turned his critical eye to certain faith healers.² He saw the same lies and deceptions that charlatans have used to deceive the public and confound scientists. This history is not well known and is poorly understood. It is worth highlighting because it illustrates the ubiquity of fraud and the difficulty in identifying it. Further, this history provides an important context for understanding the deceptions of faith healers.

Spiritualism

In 1848 some unaccountable raps were heard in the presence of Margaret and Kate Fox. By using a code, the mother of these teenage girls was able to converse with the raps. She concluded that it was the spirit of a man murdered in their house years previously. Word of this seemingly miraculous communication was the beginning of the modern movement of spiritualism. The Fox sisters traveled widely with their show.

As others attempted to communicate with the dead, it seemed that the spir-

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its became impatient with the slow communication of raps. Mediums, those through whom the spirits communicated, also conveyed information through the movement of tables and objects, the playing of musical instruments, the materialization of spirit faces and bodies, messages written on slates, levitations, spirit paintings and photographs, and more.

The spiritualist movement spread rapidly throughout the United States and Europe, becoming a major religious and social force. Almost every city had a spiritualist church, and small groups of people met in homes and halls across the land. Spiritualism was attractive because it reassured people that departed loved ones existed in a peaceful state. Traditional Christian churches shunned communication with spirits and denounced fortune telling. On the other hand, spiritualism was attractive because it appeared to demonstrate that death was not the end of life here on earth. It appeared to offer proof of existence beyond the material world and provide a scientific basis for faith.

Investigations by scientists. The phenomenon of table movement was one of the early signs of the presence of spirits. Physicist Michael Faraday studied honorable people who were “successful table movers.” After extensive investigations, he concluded the tables moved as the result of self-deception and unconscious motor movements guided by expectation. Undoubtedly some mediums were not tricksters but were self-deceived about the effects they produced. Those who produced automatic writing during self-hypnosis might be another example of self-deceived believers.

The leagues of spiritualists were disappointed in Faraday’s explanation for many reasons. Often mediums could move tables in ways that could not be accomplished by simple muscular pressure. Also it did not explain the raps that occurred on tables in answer to questions. Other scientists who continued his research were more impressed with their findings. A bitter debate emerged in which both sides became alienated, a state that typified scientific interactions about spiritualism and later typified debates about psychic phenomena. These honest, well-meaning scientists got caught up in either-or positions that Hyman calls “the false dichotomy.”³

Faraday’s explanation failed to account for all the ways a table can move, thus giving him no right to dismiss the whole of spiritualism. The other scientists (Robert Hare, Alfred Russel Wallace, and Sir William Crookes) failed to acknowledge that something unexplainable does not necessarily confirm the existence of spirits. Similarly, the presence of UFOs does not confirm the existence of visitors from outer space. (A UFO is an *unidentified* flying object.) And the absence of evidence does not prove that intelligent life does not exist in space.

Faraday failed to appreciate the powerful influence of the dark seance room with people singing hymns, eagerly awaiting a message from a departed loved one. His antagonists failed to understand they were not prepared to detect fraud.

The findings of magicians. If a medium uses conjuring tricks, the scientist is no better in his evaluations than any other man, and possibly worse. Martin Gardner, the former *Scientific American* editor of puzzles and recreational mathematics, noted that gerbils and electrons don’t cheat. So far as we can tell,

the universe does not go out of its way to deceive us.⁴ The scientist is not acquainted with the arts of deception. This has been a hard lesson for “experts” to learn.

William Robinson understood the diabolical genius of deception. Robinson was a designer of stage illusions for Alexander Herrmann. He later became extremely popular assuming the role of a Chinese magician, Chung Ling Foo. Robinson easily identified the tricks of the mediums he visited. He attended hundreds of seances to investigate spirit manifestations, particularly the slate-writing phenomenon. Slates were common in schools and homes before paper tablets were widely available. A medium would bind two blank slates together to prevent any human means of communication. A message would appear, nonetheless, sometimes answering a personal question that the medium would have no way of knowing.

At times Robinson was completely startled by a new slate presentation. However, he knew that good performers change their techniques to improve the trick and to confuse the inquiring spectator. This drove him to puzzle out possibilities, returning to check his hypotheses. His small book⁵ reveals an unbelievable spectrum of tricks; it included the first description of some standard techniques used today by mentalists, those magicians who specialize in reading thoughts. Some of the slate tricks required skill, timing, and dexterity; others required complex faked equipment. But often the scams were simple but bold.

Some magic tricks are extremely simple. The power of a trick is measured by the effect upon the audience, not by the cleverness of its method. When laymen first read a magic book, they are usually disappointed. The methods are often so simple that it is difficult to believe anyone would be fooled. Yet even a bumbler can fool an audience, and the simplest trick becomes a miracle in the hands of a skillful magician.

The mystery of the spirit portrait combined the power of presentation and a clever method. Sitters watched as a portrait of a deceased loved one was painted before them by an invisible hand on a blank canvas. Sometimes the painting was guided, that is, it was created according to descriptions and suggestions given to the medium, who had perhaps never seen the individual being portrayed.

The editor of a spiritualistic magazine offered a large cash reward for anyone who could explain this wonder, and he eventually died without anyone collecting. For nearly 30 years many prominent men were converted to spiritualism by the witness of this miracle. Finally, David Abbott, an American magician, discovered the secret.

Abbott had written a book in 1907 exposing psychic frauds,⁶ but he never had the opportunity to observe the performance of a spirit portrait. Forced to rely solely on the written reports of others, he finally was able to divine the secret.⁷

Basically, the trick was performed by surreptitiously substituting a finished portrait for the blank canvas at the beginning. This “blank” canvas was inserted into a deep frame, but it appeared blank because a thin cheesecloth material was in front. By slowly moving this front cheesecloth a small distance,

parts of the painting gradually appeared, and it eventually meshed into the freshly painted canvas. By guiding the discussion of the sitter, the medium suggested certain features before they appeared, falsely giving the impression of free choice.

Hoax. Enormous amounts of money were paid for spirit portraits, and mediums gulled large sums of money by many methods from victims who innocently believed they were following the wishes of a departed relative.⁸ These hoaxes are especially vicious compared to traditional con games in which the victim believes he can make a large profit by participating in a sure-fire but illegal activity.⁹

It is important to know, however, that not all fraud is motivated by money. Amateur magicians, for example, spend time and money collecting tricks and performing for friends without earning a cent. Paul Eckman noticed that some people, especially experienced deceivers, obtain enormous pleasure from their deceptions.¹⁰ He called this "duping delight." Some find hoaxing enjoyable only when there is some risk. My own research in hospitals shows that some patients create hoaxes that are bizarre and self-destructive without any apparent value.¹¹ I am always amused when people claim that an event must be real because the individual could receive no benefit from his deception.

Once a hoax is widely believed true, many people refuse to change their opinion even in the face of evidence.¹² The eventual confessions of the Fox sisters, for example, were ignored by believers. In the 1870s Kate Fox was a disillusioned alcoholic, and she denounced everything she had done. In 1888 Margaret Fox denounced her life of fraud as a spiritualist. They confessed their first hoax was produced by tying a string to an apple and pulling it down the stairs. The rapping sounds used their whole life were created by cracking the knuckles of their toes.¹³

It cannot be argued, of course, that spirits did not communicate with people. However, spiritualism is essentially gone, or at least spiritualists stopped making public claims that they communicate with the dead. Perhaps the single most powerful person in the demise of spiritualism was Harry Houdini.

Houdini. The books by magicians exposed the techniques of spiritualism, but they were not widely sought or appreciated. After World War I there was an increased interest in spiritualism, perhaps because people wanted to know about lost loved ones. The fire of Houdini attacked this fraud directly.

Houdini attended his first seance in 1891 and echoed P.T. Barnum's observation that there's a sucker born every minute. Before the turn of the century Houdini and his wife created a spiritualist act when they were desperate for money; however, he became disgusted when people wept and believed they were in touch with the spirit world. Whatever distaste he had for spiritualism was probably flamed into rage after the death of his mother.

Houdini was unabashedly attached to his mother. When she died, he would have given his considerable fortune to hear one word from her. He visited the best known mediums in the world but immediately saw through their flimsy tricks.¹⁴ By the end of his life his performances were divided into three parts: escapes, magic, and exposure of mediums.

Houdini and a fellow magician, Joseph Rinn, devised entertaining ways of

exposing mediums. For example, a group of scientists, police, reporters, and skeptics would be selected to search the magician and tie him to a chair. This group was then blindfolded to simulate the darkness of the seance room while the audience observed. After experiencing every imaginable psychic phenomenon, the committee concluded that natural laws were violated and only psychic explanations were possible unless someone had crept onto the stage. Houdini could then announce to the audience with considerable authority that they should not believe the next time they read about a scientist reporting proof of psychic phenomena.

Houdini worked with several committees investigating paranormal claims. He enlisted the famous American mentalist, Joseph Dunninger, who carried on the fight after he died. He offered \$10,000 of his own money as a challenge to mediums to show any supernatural event that he could not duplicate by ordinary methods. Additionally, he worked with police in cities he visited to bring charges of fraud against mediums.

Most states had laws against fortune telling.¹⁵ Mediums were especially vulnerable if they collected fees. Therefore, they attempted to cloak themselves with religious freedom by establishing "churches," singing hymns, and devising liturgies.¹⁶ Then they could collect "offerings."

Spiritualists hated Houdini. While they tried feeble tricks in the dark seance room, he made elephants vanish under the bright lights of a stage. Still, his friend Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, and many other spiritualists insisted that Houdini was a medium who refused to admit the fact. For once, Houdini felt powerless. He was not prepared to reveal the secrets by which he and other magicians made their honest living. The blind continue to believe.

Psychics

Spiritualism has virtually disappeared; however, interest in psychic phenomena continues under new names, cloaked in contemporary dress. Personal service columns of most city newspapers are filled with advice-givers who use the old tricks, but they usually keep a low profile. When a psychic does interact with a scientist, the same old problems of investigation are repeated.

Hyman identified the Creery sisters as the first subjects of psychic research.¹⁷ These five sisters, ranging in age from ten to seventeen, were the daughters of a Baptist minister of unblemished character. The sisters were purportedly able to communicate with one another by psychic means. For example, one girl could identify an object selected by her sisters while she was out of the room. The scientists investigating the sisters felt that their knowledge of various ways of inadvertent and deliberate signaling somehow made them immune to such errors. They were wrong.

The Creery sisters were eventually caught using a simple code. Secret codes can be devastatingly powerful, as magicians have known for many years.

Robert-Houdin. Robert-Houdin demonstrated the cleverness of mind-reading magic with his 12-year-old son, Emile. Eugene Robert-Houdin is called the

father of modern magic because he elevated conjuring from the street and carnival into respectable entertainment for the sophisticated. He wore fashionable evening dress instead of a costume, and his stage looked like a comfortable parlor. His *Memoirs* provided the inspiration for teenager Ehrich Weiss to change his name to Houdini. Of all the accomplishments of Robert-Houdin, he was most proud of the Second Sight act with Emile.

In their act Robert-Houdin would accept any item handed him from the audience. His blindfolded son would then describe the object in detail and perhaps describe the owner as well.¹⁸ They astounded all of Paris in 1846.

Their act was possible because they learned to communicate through code words cleverly woven into the father's speech. Later Emile was able to describe objects when his father rang a small bell, and no words passed between them. It is generally believed that a code was transmitted to Emile through a telegraph installed in the stool upon which he sat. Houdin was a master of mechanical and electric gadgets.

Robert-Houdin created this act by carefully preparing his son with a series of games. For example, they would go to a toy store and glance at a window display for a few seconds. Then they would walk a few steps and write down everything they could remember. Soon Emile could "often write down forty objects, while I could scarcely reach thirty."¹⁹ He used this photographic memory to fix in his mind the features of the audience before going on stage.

He also spent hours with his father learning the names of coins of every country, the characters of foreign alphabets, the artifacts of museums, the instruments of surgery, and the events of history. Emile's memory elevated the mind-reading act into a miracle.

Project Alpha. Scientists have continually misunderstood the ways they can be hoaxed, and the warnings by magicians have been ignored. James Randi recently made a bold attack against sloppy psychic research through a program he named Project Alpha. Before telling the story, it may be helpful to introduce this complex man. Randi began his career as a magician and escape artist, duplicating some of Houdini's dangerous stunts. For example, he stayed under water for two hours in a small metal casket to break Houdini's record. By remaining calm, only a small amount of oxygen is needed, and no psychic abilities or suspended animation is necessary.

In 1964 Randi put up \$10,000 for any person who could demonstrate a paranormal power under satisfactory observational conditions. Of the 650 persons who have applied, only 54 ever made it past the preliminaries, and he still has his money. For a wonderful example of how the true believer rationalizes failure, read his report on water dowsing.²⁰ Ten years ago he helped found the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, which now publishes a fascinating journal called the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

The Project Alpha story began shortly after 1979 when noted engineer James McDonnell (of McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft) awarded a \$500,000 grant to Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, for the establishment of a psychical research laboratory.²¹ Physics professor Peter R. Phillips, with a decade of interest in parapsychology, was named director. Over 300 applicants contacted this lab and volunteered to be tested. Two teenage students were eventually selected as the only subjects to be studied.

These two boys were young magicians who agreed that if ever asked directly by an experimenter if they were using tricks, they would say, "Yes, and we were sent here by James Randi."

Before the boys were ever seen at the lab, Randi sent project director Phillips a list of eleven "caveats" concerning cautions that should be taken to avoid fraud. He carefully warned of ways that research conditions could be altered. He recommended that a conjurer be present at experiments and graciously offered his own services at his own expense. During the three-year period of the experiments, Randi continued to offer his attendance at experimental sessions but was rejected.

Meanwhile the two boys became the darlings of the psi world; their pictures appeared in national newspapers. Undetected during experiments, they swindled tests in every imaginable way to make it appear they had powers from beyond. They switched tags on spoons that had been weighed and measured. They picked the staples out of "sealed" envelopes. They communicated to each other with simple codes during mind-reading tests. They opened "sealed" tubes by piercing hot needles through the corks or by remelting the sealing wax. They crept into the lab at night through a window surreptitiously left open. (Phillips kept the padlock key around his neck to ensure "absolute" security.)

They complained about "bad vibes" when television recording equipment interfered with their chicanery, stating they had experienced electric shocks in childhood when discovering their psychic power.

Eventually this deliberately perpetrated hoax was revealed. At a news conference one of the boys demonstrated the psychic bending of a spoon while reporters watched in amazement. One asked incredulously, "How do you do that?" The simple reply was, "I cheat."

Parapsychologists were crushed. Walter Uphoff, a determined believer, rationalized that the two boys really had psychic powers all along but were now lying. Some regretfully said these deceivers put parapsychology back 100 years, while others offered the notion that it put parapsychology *ahead* 100 years.

The ability of magicians and charlatans to confound scientists does not, of course, demonstrate that psychic phenomena are a hoax. But parapsychology (a term coined by J.B. Rhine) falls short of other sciences because it lacks replicability and an accumulating body of knowledge. Two recent evaluations of systematic lines of parapsychological research demonstrate an impressive array of experimental design problems that are neither esoteric nor subtle.²² Parapsychologists have yet to provide adequately designed and replicated studies for our serious consideration.

Faith healers

It is little wonder that Randi became involved in the investigation of faith-healers. He had witnessed the sorry efforts of the Philippine psychic surgeons as they used sleight-of-hand tricks to steal the health and money from the desperate. Would the popular faith healers in the United States demonstrate the miracles for which he searched?

Randi concluded they used the same tricks as spiritualists, psychics, charlatans, quacks, and cold readers.²³ One healer has specifically denied that he conducts an ESP act or magic show. But Randi concluded differently. This man is, "to put it bluntly, doing a magic act disguised as religious miracles."²⁴ For example, sometimes he "calls out" names of people, specifying their ailments, identifying their physician, and supplying details of their lives. He might say, "You're coming out of a door. I want to say a number ending in nine. [Person nods affirmatively.] Is it 2409?"

He has made a hit. To convince the audience that he received this information from God he asks, "Any way I could have known all this?" or "Have you told anybody here?" There are, however, many ways of getting information about people. For example, a faith healer may request that people write their requests to him before he comes to town for a meeting. Information can be gathered by the healer's assistants before the meeting begins; a telephone book can provide additional information once names are gathered. Indeed, Randi verified these methods were used by capturing crib notes from plastic trash bags.

The assistant of one healer was observed sending hand signals, but another had entered the electronic age. By monitoring for transmissions, Randi's technicians were able to discover the wife of one healer transmitting messages to her husband via an "invisible" hearing aid. She had circulated among the audience to glean names, information, and expectations from participants.

The faith healers Randi visited had a variety of techniques to convince their audience that genuine healings occurred. One healer traveled with wheelchairs available for those who walked in using canes. He could then have them leave their wheelchair, giving his television audience the impression of healing the lame. An old "leg-stretching" trick was used in another case.²⁵ Information given about a patient's medical condition was not always consistent with the facts. Some of the people reported in promotional magazines were ringers, and some cases were just made up.

One healer claimed to have attended UCLA and Midstates Bible College. UCLA had no record that he ever attended there and Midstates apparently does not exist, even though he claims it granted him a Doctor of Divinity degree. "Facts and figures are invented and hyperbolized with little fear that anyone will discover the truth or care to correct them."²⁶

Discussions of faith healing usually focus on the persuasive style of the healer and the receptiveness of the audience. The findings of Randi raise the specter of deliberate hoax on the part of faith healers. We now know that some are charlatans who deceive for their own purposes. The motivations are undoubtedly complex, but large amounts of money are available in this business. Their religious status helps them avoid income tax, and they need not account for the money they collect.

Any healer could, presumably, take \$10,000 of Randi's money by demonstrating a cure under conditions of acceptable observation. But I predict that no one will ever try. They will, I believe, offer the excuse given by charlatans and the self-deceived, namely that a miracle will not occur if doubters are present. This has been called the "shyness effect."

Healers will appeal to the same principle. Endorsing this absurd notion logically backs one into the idea that God will not heal anyone observed under conditions that prevent trickery and false attribution.

Mainline Christian denominations have founded institutions of higher education and medical centers. The enormous cost and effort underlines the importance that each individual must learn and live within the moral and scientific "laws," including the natural laws of health and medicine. Faith healers flaunt shortcuts and endanger people, including thousands of children in dozens of sects. Medically treatable infectious diseases have killed many of these children in the past few years.²⁷

Modern medicine has not solved the problems created by chronic diseases that assail so many. Trends of specialization serve to further the distance between doctor and patient. People naturally are open for any possibility in this situation. Do faith healers have the answers the suffering need? After careful follow-up of people who attended meetings of one healer, one investigator wondered how any good the healer was doing could possibly outweigh the misery she was causing.²⁸ It is understandable that some faith healers may be ignorant about the nature of disease and the natural course of illness. But ignorance is a poor excuse, and fraud is unconscionable.

The National Council Against Health Fraud suggests certain guidelines to prevent exploitation in faith healing.²⁹ Services should be offered free of charge, including refusal of donations. Healings should never be done in public, especially where people are forced to demonstrate their faith in the healing by discontinuing important medication, removing supportive braces, or some other potentially damaging act. Further, people should be psychologically prepared to cope with any failure that may occur, especially to prevent the despair of interpreting this as a rejection by God.

Believers should know that even rugged Randi was emotionally touched by what he saw at the meetings he attended. After one meeting he wanted to interview the parents of a crippled child near the front whom the healer avoided. As they left in tears, comforting one another, Randi could not bring himself to intrude. The view of the magician is sometimes a sorry one.

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