

John Edward

By James K. Walker

Date of Birth: October 19, 1969

Publications and Media: *Crossing Over* (number 1 rated television program on the Sci Fi cable network). Official Website: www.johnedward.net. Books: *One Last Time*, *Crossing Over*, and a novel, *What if God Were the Sun?* Newsletter: *Bridges*. Audio: *Developing Your Own Psychic Powers*.

Practices: Divination, Psychic Mediumship, a.k.a. Communication with the Dead (necromancy), Spiritism.

INTRODUCTION

John Edward's *Crossing Over*, the top-rated television program on the Sci Fi cable network "crossed over" from cable to broadcast syndication in 2001. The move gave the popular but controversial psychic¹ a nation-wide audience potentially reaching 98% of US homes.² On his entertaining and wildly popular program, Edward allegedly communicates with the dead friends and relatives of his studio audience. Communication with the dead, or psychic mediumship, is an occult practice that has seen a remarkable rise in popularity in recent years. Other well-known mediums currently contacting the dead include James Van Praagh, Sylvia Browne, Rosemary Altea, and George Anderson. Edward and his contemporaries have authored several best-selling books and have been featured on scores of network programs including *Larry King Live*, *Roseanne*, *Sally*, and *Entertainment Tonight*.

Edward seems to be able to tune into remarkable details such as the name of the deceased, their manner of death, and identify important mementos, or articles of clothing. The reading is usually culminated by touching messages from the deceased that often are extremely emotional. Edward believes that he is doing a great service by bringing some closure, healing, and acceptance for his clients and studio audience who have lost loved ones. Critics, however, have charged Edward with fraud and claim that he is taking advantage of human grief.

What is a proper Christian understanding of this practice? It is important to become familiar with Edward's background, explore possible explanations for this phenomenon from a Christian worldview, and to consider the biblical teachings concerning the practice of communication with the dead.

HISTORY

John Edward was born John Edward McGee Jr.³ in 1969 in Queens, New York to Jack and Perinda McGee. After his parents divorce, his mother seemed to have a powerful impact on Edward's spiritual life. She was intensely interested in spiritual matters – especially those involving psychics. Although her husband protested, she would host psychic "house parties" in her home. Initially a skeptic, Edward described her as "a psychic junkie." In his early teens Edward complained that his mother was wasting her money on psychics, "I thought she was looney."⁴ At the age of 15, however, Edward became a believer. He finally participated in a psychic reading himself "just to humor" his cousin and was surprised by the accuracy of the reading. The psychic, Lydia, claimed to be able to introduce the skeptical Edward to the idea of spirit guides saying, "You have

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highly evolved spiritual guides, and they are ready to work with you.... I was sent here to introduce you to their world to open you to your future.”⁵

After the session, Edward began experimenting with psychic card readings. He then visited the occult section of the local library and “began to read everything I could get my hands on, absorbing what I could about psychic phenomena, spiritualism, and metaphysics.”⁶ He discovered that although he had been critical of psychics, he had unknowingly been manifesting psychic powers from the time he was a young child. Almost immediately, Edward enrolled in a psychic institute but quickly learned that he was already too advanced for the classes and he was encouraged to start working psychic fairs.⁷

It was while still a young teenager working the psychic fairs, that Edward claims to have caught the first visual glimpses of his spirit guides. Then, in what Edward describes as a major turning point in his life, an attempted “past life regression” went in “an unplanned direction.” Edward was supposed to have traveled back to a previous life he had experienced in an earlier incarnation through a past life regression – a practice he describes as “a cross between hypnosis, meditation, and time travel.” Instead of reaching an alleged previous life, Edward claims to have made his first actual meeting with his spirit guides. He explains, “Let’s just say that on the way to my past lives, we stopped off for a meet-and-greet with my spirit guides – The Boys, as they were destined to become known.”⁸

By the late 1980s, Edward had studied and/or participated in many of the practices made popular by the New Age spirituality of that day. He was involved with tarot card reading, numerology, meditation, belief in reincarnation, Native American spirit guides, past life regression, aura readings, precognition, out-of-body experiences, and guided imagery.⁹ Like many involved in New Age spirituality, eventually Edward began to see God as an impersonal power. When referring to God, he often prefers terms like “the universe,” “energy,” or “that force.” Affirming his belief in God he said, “It’s the energy from that force that I think allows us to create *this* energy.”¹⁰

Edward’s early interest in general psychic readings quickly focused on contacting the dead – a practice by which he allegedly “crosses over” to contact dead spirits, usually deceased family members of his clients. “The Boys,” Edward’s spirit guides, are said to aid in this communication which usually comes through in a series of enigmatic clues such as partial names or vague descriptions that the client may interpret to identify a deceased loved one. Once identified by the client, Edward is usually able to relay very clear messages – almost always messages of comfort, affirmation, and reassurance.

Initially Edward’s psychic readings were more hobby than vocation but by 1995 Edward claims that his “spirit guides were pushing” him to transition towards a profession in the field. That year at the age of 25, Edward quit his jobs in a large hospital and as weekend ballroom dance instructor. On that year’s income tax return, he wrote “psychic medium” as his occupation, a profession he describes as “a peculiar blend of spiritualism and entrepreneurship.”¹¹

Soon Edward’s career began to blossom. He was giving private readings at \$200 per session and holding larger meetings in rented hotel conference rooms. He also began to gain popularity as an occasional guest on several talk radio programs in New York, Dallas, and other major markets.

There were also a number of major missteps along the road to success.¹² Early on things were so bad Edward asked, “So why is it a flop – and why is everything I touch a financial disaster?” A tougher question might be: As a psychic, why did he not see these problems coming?¹³ Edward, however, eventually did have the success that he had hoped for and predicted. Two of his books eventually became best-sellers and his syndicated television program *Crossing Over*, is now seen five nights a week in major markets nationwide on a variety of FOX, NBC, CBS, UPN, and WB affiliates.¹⁴

In an often dramatic and entertaining manner, Edward, Browne and Van Prague have had remarkable success in our postmodern culture. These individuals have raised curiosity about the possibility of communication with the dead on a cultural level, or perhaps reflected and amplified an interest that was already there.

COLD READING?

Edward and his contemporaries appear to be able to discern amazing tidbits and facts about the audience's deceased loved-ones. They claim to hear from the dead who give them obscure clues such as vague relationships ("I see an older male figure"), partial names, syllables, or consonants in what some critics have called spiritual charades.¹⁵

What is really happening? Skeptics have often accused Edward of primarily using a technique known as cold reading. Former professional magician and debunker of the paranormal, James Randi defines cold reading as occurring when "the performer is faced with an audience that is entirely strange to him, he uses this tried-and-true method of guessing names, relationships, events, and situations that might relate to audience members."¹⁶ Cold reading is differentiated from "hot reading" where the practitioner has covertly gleaned information about a client in advance.

Randi describes some of the principles of cold reading as suggesting common names (or in Edward's case often just syllables or consonants), asking questions that call for the client's interpretation (i.e., "I see him laughing now.... Why is that?), and the liberal use of vague qualifiers called "try-ons."¹⁷ In an essay on cold reading, Ray Hyman clearly explains the basic principles including some of the "stock spiels" and proven techniques for "fishing." He also notes, "When you see how easy it is to convince a person that you can read his character on sight, you will better appreciate why fortunetellers and psychologists are frequently lulled into placing credence in techniques which have not been validated by acceptable scientific methods."¹⁸ While cold reading can be easily learned some people seem to be born naturals. It is possible that some even practice cold reading without realizing it and mistakenly think they have some supernatural gift.¹⁹

Edward has also been accused of performing hot readings. A *TIME* magazine article reported on a member of the studio audience who was read by Edward who later became suspicious. Michael O'Neill claimed that before the program was taped, he and the rest of the studio audience were asked to fill out cards with their names, family tree, and other details. After the audience was directed to pre-assigned seating, there was a technical delay of more than an hour. O'Neal suggested that family conversations during the delay could have been picked up by "the microphones strategically placed around the auditorium." He also accused the show's producers of deceitful postproduction editing such as cutting out many of Edward's misses and splicing in clips of him nodding yes into places that he remembered disagreeing.²⁰

This was a damaging charge for Edward and potentially devastating to the show. There were even reports of competing program producers faxing copies of the *TIME* article to TV stations to discourage them from carrying the program.²¹ Distressed by the accusations, Edward devoted eight pages of his next book to chastise the magazine and the article's author, Leon Jaroff, while defending himself from the allegations and offering alternative explanations for O'Neal's observations.²²

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

If Edward is faking spirit manifestations, he is potentially doing great harm to his clients by turning their sorrow into profit and potentially damaging the natural grieving process.²³ But what if he is not faking? It is possible that Edward has tapped into a spiritual manifestation that is *real* but not *true*. Even if he is having a real, supernatural, spiritual experience this would not prove the phenomena is harmless or from God. The Scriptures warn of demons, "seducing spirits" and "doctrines of devils" (1 Timothy 4:1).

This is all the more germane considering Edward's repeated claims to be in regular contact with spirits he calls "the Boys." Christians are cautioned not to believe every spirit, but to test the spirit because of the false prophets in the world (1 John 4:1).

The Bible contains strong admonitions against necromancy. A necromancer is one who seeks or enquires of the dead. This occult practice was one of many prohibited by the Law of Moses. Deuteronomy 18: 10-11 states:

There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer.

In the New Testament, Jesus sheds light on the true condition of those who are dead – both lost and saved. In Luke 16:20-31, he tells of a rich man who has died and is in torment requesting that someone from the dead (righteous Lazarus) go to warn his five lost brothers of their impending fate. Jesus teaches that the Scriptures (the Law and Moses) are the proper way for them to learn spiritual truths. He explained that the request for communication with the dead would not be accepted and that the five brothers would not believe even though one rose from the dead (which Jesus actually did). This passage clearly illustrates the impossibility of the dead imparting spiritual insights to those who are alive.

God gave clear warnings against consulting psychics and communication with the dead in the Scriptures. He gave this warning in part to protect His people from fraud and possible demonic influence. This advice is still as relevant today as when the Scriptures were first written.

Notes

- ¹ For a history and overview of psychics in general, see James Walker, "Psychics" *Profile*, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. Arlington, Texas, 1997, www.watchman.org/profile/psychicspro.htm.
- ² Brian Lowry, "'Crossing Over' on 180 stations," *Chicago Tribune*, August 21, 2001, www.chicagotribune.com/features/lifestyle/chi-0108210013aug21.story.
- ³ He later legally shortened his name. See John Edward, *Crossing Over* (New York: Princess Books, 2002), 35-36.
- ⁴ John Edward, *One Last Time* (New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1999) paperback edition, 8-9.
- ⁵ *Crossing Over*, 38-39.
- ⁶ *One Last Time*, 12.
- ⁷ *Crossing Over*, 40.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 41-42. In his earlier book, however, Edward states that the express purpose of the meeting was to be introduced to spirit guides saying: "I called Shelley and asked her if she would lead me through a meditation to introduce me to my spirit guides.... I needed to meet them. We started with a 'guided visualization,' which is something like hypnosis.... I found I had five guides plus a master guide" (*One Last Time*, 25).
- ⁹ *One Last Time*, 24, 26; *Crossing Over*, xxi, 5, 65. Edward was also greatly influenced by Sandi Anastasi, whom he identifies as the owner of "Starchild Books, a New Age store in Florida" (*Ibid.*, 24).
- ¹⁰ *Crossing Over*, xi, 21.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 22-27.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 27. Edward addresses the question explaining that his spirit guides were teaching him a lesson through these and other failures that he should never put making money above the work of helping people.
- ¹⁴ For a partial listing of stations see Edward's website: www.johnedward.net/television.htm (accessed 2003).
- ¹⁵ As a possible sign of his near celebrity status, Edward had the dubious honor of being spoofed on *Saturday Night Live*, October 13, 2001. For a transcript see <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/01/01cjohnedwards.phtml> (accessed 2003).
- ¹⁶ James Randi, *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes of the Occult and Supernatural* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1995), 50-52.
- ¹⁷ Examples include, "I feel that...., Possibly...., It might be that...., Why do I feel that...." *Ibid.*, 236.
- ¹⁸ Joe Nickell; Barry Karr; and Tom Genoni, *The Outer Edge: Classical Investigations of the Paranormal* (Amherst, New York: The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (SCICOP), 1996), 71.
- ¹⁹ See "Closed Medium (also *shut-eye medium*)," *An Encyclopedia of Claims, Frauds, and Hoaxes*, 50.
- ²⁰ Leon Jaroff, "Talking to the Dead," *Time*, March 5, 2001.
- ²¹ Brian Lowry, "A Medium to Channel the Dead," *Los Angeles Times*, August 14, 2001.
- ²² *Crossing Over*, 245-53.
- ²³ Korem also points out the related emotional and psychological dangers inherent in psychic practices. An unhealthy dependency on psychics can impair one's capacity for making the simplest decisions. Psychics, in turn, can easily use their influence to control and take advantage of their clients. See Dan Korem, *Powers: Testing the Psychic & Supernatural* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 27-30.



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