

James Van Praagh

By Dr. Brady Blevins

Birth: August 23, 1958, Bayside, New York.

Publications and Media: *Ghost Whisperer* (co-executive producer, cancelled May 2010), *Beyond with James Van Praagh* (cancelled January 2003) Television appearances: *The Other Side*, *The View*, *Oprah*, *Larry King Live*, *Dr. Phil*, *A&E Biography*, *Maury Povich*, *20/20*, *The Circle*, and *48 Hours*. Official Website: <http://www.vanpraagh.com>. Books: *Talking to Heaven: A Medium's Message of Life After Death*, *Reaching to Heaven: A Spiritual Journey Through Life & Death*, *Heaven & Earth: Making the Psychic Connection*, *Healing Grief: Reclaiming Life After Any Loss*, *Meditation with James Van Praagh*, *Looking Beyond: A Teen's Guide to the Spiritual World*, *Ghosts Among Us*, *Unfinished Business: What the Dead Can Teach Us about Life*. Van Praagh also offers a number of on-line courses.

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

HISTORY

James Van Praagh was born in Bayside, New York, and the youngest of four children.¹ Raised in the Catholic church, Van Praagh served as an altar boy and entered the seminary at fourteen; but left after one year.² He claims to have had his first “encounter” at the age of eight. While praying to God to reveal Himself, Van Praagh claims an open hand appeared through the ceiling of his room emitting radiant beams of light.³

Van Praagh earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Broadcasting and Communication from San Francisco State University. After completing his degree he moved to Los Angeles and became involved in metaphysics⁴ and psychic phenomenon.⁵ While in Los Angeles he was invited to attend a session with a medium who informed him that he would be doing the same work within two years.⁶

Van Praagh has risen to nation-wide fame in large part to his success as a best-selling author. His popularity soared when he was invited as a guest on the NBC show *The Other Side*. Over the next 10 years he was a guest on shows such as; “*Oprah*, *Larry King Live*, *Dr. Phil*, *A&E Biography*, *Maury Povich*, *20/20*, and *48 Hours*.”⁷ In April of 2002, CBS, working with Van Praagh, produced a movie based on his life called *The Dead Will Tell* and a mini-series based on his life titled: *Living with the Dead* (which was later renamed: *Talking to Heaven*). The fascination with Van Praagh is centered on his self-proclaimed ability to communicate with the deceased. He claims to be “clairsentient” which he says “simply means clear feeling. I feel the emotions and personalities of the deceased.”⁸ He also claims to be clairvoyant but insists that the feeling comes before the seeing.

Van Praagh is also described as a “survival evidence medium;” “meaning that he is able to bridge the gap between two planes of existence, that of the living and that of the dead, by providing evidential proof of life after death via detailed messages.”⁹ Due to his rise in popularity he no longer schedules private appointments; however he is known to have had read many celebrities, heads of state and religious leaders.¹⁰ He is said to have contacted many well-known personalities such as Rock Hudson, Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, Andrew Carnegie, Roy Orbison, Lucille Ball, Liberace, Johnny Carson, Princess Diana, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln and Benjamin Franklin among others.¹¹

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DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES

Mental Mediumship: Van Praagh asserts that “all mediums are psychics,¹² but not all psychics are mediums.”¹³ He states that “a psychic senses energy around the living people or objects. A medium not only senses energy, but is able to interface between the slower vibrations¹⁴ of the physical world and the much faster ones of the spirit world.”¹⁵ He believes he can provide evidential proof that a loved one survived death. By surviving death he asserts that there is more to one’s existence than their life span.¹⁶

Van Praagh defines a medium as a “psychic who has fine-tuned his or her extrasensory perception and can interface with the spirits in other dimensions.”¹⁷ The ability of the medium, according to Van Praagh, extends beyond the five senses (taste, touch, hear, smell, sight) to the sixth sense (psychic ability or intuition). For a medium, this sixth sense is more developed than that of someone who is only a psychic (and not a medium also). A medium has the ability to feel and/or hear thoughts, voices or mental impressions from the spirit world.¹⁸

Van Praagh asserts that mediumship is divided into two categories: physical mediumship and mental mediumship. Physical mediumship is the use of one’s body to get information from the spirits such as channeling.¹⁹ Van Praagh claims to use the more common “mental mediumship” which uses only the mind to connect to “interface with the spirits in other dimensions.”²⁰ Mental mediumship contains “several distinct” types which he describes:

- “Clairsentience - (clear feeling) Perceive information by way of strong, emphatic feelings and emotions from spirit.
- Clairvoyant - (clear vision) See with the mind’s eye objects, colors, symbols, people, spirits or scenes. These pictures are not visible to the naked eye and usually flash into the medium’s mind.
- Clairaudient - (clear hearing) Perceive sounds or words from sources broadcasting from a spiritual realm.
- Clair empathy - (clear emotion) Sense or ‘feel’ within one’s self the attitude or emotions of another person.
- Clairgustance - (clear tasting) Discern the essence of a substance through taste from spirit.
- Clairscent - (clear smelling). Smell a fragrance or odor coming from the spirit.
- Clairtangency - (clear touching) This ability is commonly known as Psychometry. By holding an object or touching an area you perceive information about the article or its owner or history through the palms of your hands.”²¹

He states that he uses clairsentience and clairvoyance the most. He claims that he is able to achieve the use of these “abilities” by raising his vibrations higher through meditation and the spirits respond by lowering their vibrations allowing his communication.²²

A common thread of Van Praagh is to talk about healing, forgiveness, love, guilt and fear. His books are basically retellings of his readings where the interaction and subsequent “encounter” centers on a spirit seeking forgiveness, releasing the living person from guilt, easing fear and expressing love. He does not work with specific details; instead he asks general leading questions to which his client does more than answer yes or no but supplies him with just enough material so that he can continue to probe under the disguise that a spirit is actually talking to him. This often leads to him making educated guesses based on what the client has told him. For the client this can be a moving experience because they believe (or at least want to believe) that he can communicate with the deceased.

Pantheism: Van Praagh credits his one year in Catholic seminary in developing his beliefs about God. His description of God, however, sounds much more like Pantheism than Catholicism. He explains:

Where does God reside? My answer is: within you. Within the very core of you. God is your essence. God is life itself. I don’t believe that God is a figure in space looking down on us. And while there have been many who have represented the great Light of God in human form, the same *God spark* that was in them is in each one of us...and everyone else has

this same light, too. The difference may be in the degree—some lights are brighter than others, and some lights are very dim.²³

He further explains that not only do all people have this “*God spark*,” but everything from “the lowest creature crawling on the ground” even to the greatest person.²⁴

Eternal Life: Anyone, according to Van Praagh, already has a divine nature. In his book *Reaching to Heaven*, he says; “Each dawn we can move one step closer to comprehending our own divinity.”²⁵ He also believes that one’s heaven is created by their thoughts, words, and deeds they have done while on earth.²⁶ Van Praagh also ascribes to the teachings of reincarnation;²⁷ adding that it is up to the individual when they decide to return. They are able to choose “the right body, the right geographical location, the right parents, etc.”²⁸

CONTROVERSY

There has been a consistent amount of controversy surrounding Van Praagh. One of the more public criticisms occurred a couple of weeks after he visited *The View* in 2008. According to Van Praagh, he told Barbara Walters backstage, “Something is bad with your blood...It’s not moving correctly... you have to watch it. It might not be right now, it could be in the future.”²⁹ It is interesting that he stated it could be in the future because on his website he claims to have no insight into the future.³⁰ Van Praagh had also told Walters that that she had an elevated level of white blood cells. Walters followed up with her doctor, who gave her a clean bill of health, and she made the news of Van Praagh’s fraudulent claim on the show.³¹

Two years later when Walters had heart surgery he claimed he was right and that she owed him an apology. He stated; “Many people don’t understand about how a clairvoyant works. People think it is very linear,” he said. “If I say to you this is going to happen, it might not happen tomorrow, it might happen 3 years from now. It is an inexact science... and I think that Barbara took it very literally.”³² The problem with his claim is that he was too specific in saying white blood cells. Her problem was with her heart not with the white blood cell count. Also, many of his skeptics have pointed out that the prediction of an elderly lady having health problems is not too far of a stretch of one’s imagination.³³

Van Praagh’s skeptics have accused him of using a technique called “cold reading.”³⁴ A cold reading occurs when a medium is faced with a crowd of strangers and begins asking general questions to the crowd. He poses general questions until someone from the crowd answers affirmative. Then using whatever information he gains from their answer is what he will use to decide what else he “hears” or “feels” from the spirits. The problem for Van Praagh and other mediums is when they make television appearances and are not able to edit their appearance. This happened to Van Praagh when visiting the Australian television show *The Circle*. The show gave Van Praagh about five minutes to perform a reading for the audience; however he failed miserably.³⁵

One may wonder if anyone has ever challenged Van Praagh or his contemporaries in what seems to be a very questionable ability. On September 9, 2011 DJ Grothe of James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) issued a million dollar challenge to Van Praagh. A month later another challenge letter was issued and (and received) sent certified mail to Van Praagh.³⁶ He has yet to respond to the challenge.

Another renowned debunker of the paranormal, Michael Shermer, was asked by an ABC affiliate in Seattle to come and do a “reading” on an employee in their office. Van Praagh had already given the employee a reading and now Shermer would have the same opportunity; however the employee would know that he is not a psychic or medium but a skeptic. Despite the fact the employee knew he was a skeptic, Shermer had 7 hits and 12 misses compared to Van Praagh who also had 7 hits but 29 misses.³⁷ Shermer proved using some of Van Praagh’s own lines, that using the law of averages anyone can ask general questions and deduce information based on the answers.

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

It is possible that he could be making a connection to a spirit but it is not a spirit of a client’s family or friend; instead it would be a deceiving (or demonic) spirit. Once a person is deceased they do not have the ability to come back to earth. The Bible warns about demons

who are “seducing spirits” and teach “doctrines of devils” (1 Tim. 4:1). In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus described how a rich man died and in torment asked that righteous Lazarus be allowed to come back and witness to his five unbelieving brothers. In the passage Jesus explains that the deceased cannot travel back and forth to earth. He also explained that communication with the dead would not change the five brothers’ minds. Jesus taught that it was impossible for the dead to impart spiritual insights or truths to those who are living. The only way a person can learn spiritual truth is through the Scripture.

How should a believer respond to psychics and mediums such as Van Praagh? The Bible teaches that the believer is to test the spirits (1 John 4:1) and avoid mediums (Lev. 19:31). Satan works through “all power and signs and lying wonders” (2 Thess. 2:9), therefore, mediums like Van Praagh should be avoided and their work counted for what it is. Furthermore, Van Praagh and those like him, who claim to be able to communicate with the dead and claim psychic powers should be put to the biblical test for a prophet (Deut. 18:20-22). The true prophet is accurate 100% of the time not 7 out of 36.³⁸ Finally, Scripture warns believers in Deuteronomy 18:10-12 to have nothing to do with this type of activity. What Van Praagh does is described as “an abomination unto the Lord” (Deut. 18:12); therefore, believers must take notice, avoid these activities and warn those who do not know of this danger.

Notes

- 1 “Early Life,” James Van Praagh, <http://www.vanpraagh.com/index.php?p=EarlyLife> (accessed August 8, 2012).
- 2 Ibid., and *Talking to Heaven: A Medium’s Message of Life After Death* (Dutton, Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York, 1997. Large Print Ed.) 28.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Metaphysics is a broad term that examines the philosophy concerning the fundamental understanding of the nature of reality and being; this includes ontology, cosmology, and often epistemology.
- 5 Psychic phenomena, is a term that includes practices or “abilities” such as ESP, telepathy, telekinesis, channeling, remote viewing, and premonitions.
- 6 “Realizing the Gift,” James Van Praagh, <http://www.vanpraagh.com/index.php?p=TheGift> (accessed August 8, 2012).
- 7 “His Abilities,” James Van Praagh, <http://www.vanpraagh.com/index.php?p=Abilities> (accessed August 8, 2012).
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 “James Van Praagh,” Amazon.com, <http://www.amazon.com/James-Van-Praagh/e/B000APO9NO> (accessed Aug. 17, 2012).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 A separate Profile has been published on psychics: James Walker, “Psychics” *Profile Notebook*, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. (Arlington, Texas: 1997-2012). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org.
- 13 “Realizing the Gift.”
- 14 Vibration rates work under the idea that energy is composed of molecules in vibration; and in the physical realm the vibration of the molecules are slow but at a constant speed. Thus everything appears solid and dense. Linked to the New Age movement’s belief that ultimate reality is energy; it is believed by Van Praagh and other mediums that in the spiritual realm molecules vibrate at a much higher rate. He claims to raise his vibrations to a higher rate and as they shift and change he can sense the presence of the spirits and thus communicate the feelings and emotions from the spirits.
- 15 “Realizing the Gift.”
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 “What is a Medium?” James Van Praagh, <http://www.vanpraagh.com/index.php?p=WhatIs> (accessed August 8, 2012).
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 A separate Profile has been published on channeling: Rick Branch, “Channeling,” *Profile Notebook*, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. (Arlington, Texas: 1997-2012). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org.
- 20 “What is a Medium?”
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 *Talking to Heaven*, 39.
- 24 Ibid, 38-34.
- 25 *Reaching to Heaven: A Spiritual Journey Through Life and Death* (Dutton, Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York, 1999), xii.
- 26 *Talking to Heaven*, 40.
- 27 A separate 4 page Profile has been published on reincarnation: Eric Pement, “Psychics” *Profile Notebook*, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. (Arlington, Texas: 1997-2012). A complete Profile Notebook (over 400 pages) is available at www.watchman.org.
- 28 *Growing Up In Heaven: The Eternal Connection Between Parent and Child*, (HarperOne/HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2011) 125.
- 29 “James Van Praagh on Barbara Walters: ‘She Owes Me an Apology,’” May 12, 2010, *Access Hollywood*, http://www.accesshollywood.com/james-van-praagh-on-barbara-walters-she-owes-me-an-apology_article_32255.
- 30 “Realizing the Gift”
- 31 *The View*, original airdate unknown. Walter’s comments can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4B8tD0ey8k> (accessed August 9, 2012).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 “Did a psychic predict Barbra Walters’ Health Problems? No.” *Depleted Cranium*, May 14, 2010, <http://depletedcranium.com/did-a-psychic-predict-barbra-walters-health-problems-no/>.
- 34 For more information on cold readings see, James Walker, “John Edwards” *Profile Notebook*, Watchman Fellowship, Inc. Arlington, Texas, 2003, <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/john-edward/>.
- 35 To view Van Praagh’s failed attempt at a cold reading visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t07UzTcApMI> (accessed August 9, 2012).
- 36 Review the challenge at <http://www.randi.org/site/index.php/jref-news/1454-an-open-letter-to-james-van-praagh-what-are-you-hiding-from.html> (accessed August 10, 2012). JREF also provides proof of their ability to pay the million dollars by providing a financial report on their web site (<http://www.randi.org/site/images/stories/evercore.pdf>).
- 37 Michael Shermer, “Does James Van Praagh talk to the Dead? Nope! Fraud! 0 Part 5,” *Holysmoke.org*, <http://www.holysmoke.org/praaagh5.htm> (accessed August 8, 2011).
- 38 “Does James Van Praagh talk to the Dead?”



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