

Meeting a Challenge

Testing a psychic claim results in a nil result



Ian Bryce, as the NSW Skeptics Challenge Coordinator doesn't have to be a rocket scientist but, nonetheless, he is.

A team from Australian Skeptics (Alynda Brown, Richard Saunders, Ian Bryce) participated in a demonstration and preliminary test for the Challenge.

The claim was made by Mr Michael Peterson of Sydney, on behalf of a Mr Bhadra Sen; that he can tell people about themselves, and diagnose illness; has a long record of instantaneous cures for many ailments, including sleepwalking, paralysis and terminal disease and was regularly called to hospitals, to cure patients where normal medicine was powerless.

When I indicated that it is quite common for "psychics" to be able to tell subjects about themselves, and suggested that a book on cold reading might be a good start, Mr Peterson wrote:

I am not so simple minded that I cannot detect a fraud, and your calling someone whom you know nothing about a trickster is offensive and demonstrates a closed mind. Are you afraid that the Skeptics might actually have to write out a cheque? How can anyone prove their ability to your organisation if you are too closed of mind to afford them

the opportunity! IS YOUR ORGANISATION GENUINELY SEEKING PROOF OF THE SUPERNATURAL OR ACTUALLY TRYING NOT TO FIND IT?

How could The Skeptics ignore a challenge like that! But we needed a specific claim, and Mr Peterson suggested:

A way of testing the authenticity of Mr. Sen's ability is to place people before him who he has never met and wait for him to tell them something about themselves which no one could possibly know. These persons could be your panel members. They would be told something very specific and not something general that could apply to many people.

While not totally rigorous, this sounded like a good basis for a demonstration of abilities, and even a preliminary test. It was agreed that if the claims were substantiated, AS would be very interested and would arrange a formal test for the \$100,000.

We had been asked to avoid meat, fish, eggs, cheese and alcohol on the day of the test, which we duly did. At the venue, we were asked to leave all leather objects "in another room."

This was merely through a brick arch about 3 metres wide; it is difficult to see what shielding effect could be provided. In any case there was a wine rack containing about 30 bottles within 2 metres of the test, which evidently posed no problem.

Mr Sen is a Fijian of Indian descent, who has lived in Australia for 20 years. It later transpired that he is Mr Peterson's father in law.

Mr Sen prepared with a little ritual involving two glasses of water, incense sticks, coins, and a statue, which were shaken or passed behind his body in various ways.

He started the reading with Alynda. He asked for her given names and her mother's given names, then rubbed a white stone on her palm to outline the creases in the skin.

Mr Sen proceeded to make many statements about Alynda:

You have a folding pain in your left foot? **No.**

Then in the leg? **No.**

Lower Back? **No**

Upper Back? **No**

I see you nearly drowning? **No.**

In explanation of the misses, Mr Sen objected that Alynda had eaten eggs today, which was throwing off the reading. She said she in fact had eaten nothing.

The reading continued:

You will be married 3 times and have 5 children.

(Alynda: He muttered quietly that I was not married. This would no doubt come as a complete surprise to my husband of 16 years and my 3 children. But then ... he was holding both my hands and there was a conspicuous lack of wedding ring.)

You are a big spender (Alynda was wearing some nice jewellery). **Not so.**

Did you pray today? **No.**

Why not?

To whom should I pray?

Don't you believe in god? **No.**

*You DID nearly drown. **No, our family were all taught to swim very young, and I have never been in difficulty.***

Or accident in car? **No**



Ian Bryce takes a peek into the future with Mr Sen as Alynda Brown and Richard Saunders look on.

*A fall. **Yes many times.***

(Alynda explains: That is the classic cold reading technique. He had finally scored a hit and created a framework where I was expected to project my own image. This is why readings appear to be so real. The memories that are triggered by these suggestions are in fact very real – to the subject of the reading. The cold reader has no idea what image the subject is going to project unless they start talking. At this point he waited for me to expand on the hit, as this is what a believer would certainly do. Unfortunately for him I was uninterested in telling him anything – I wanted to hear what he

had to say. Remember the claim from Mr Peterson?)

...wait for him to tell them something about themselves which no one could possibly know...

(So I waited for him to expand, since I have fallen many times and I had no idea which time he had in mind. In fact as a Judo player I have fallen literally thousands of times but I

very much doubt that this was the type of falling he was talking about.

By this time Mr Sen became a bit frustrated and complained by way of explanation:)

All you can say is no no no.

(I replied that he was asking questions and I was answering them honestly.)

Mr Sen then told us about his well-known medical diagnosis and healing powers. Then tell me what I have, I asked.

High blood pressure? **No.**

A migrainy thing? **No.**

Tummy trouble? **No.**

Then it will come!

(At the time I was not wearing a wedding ring and I'm often told that I don't look my age. In fact

I'm often mistaken for being in my middle twenties. Menstrual cramps and headaches are common in young women and often settle down after they have had their first child.

When he told me these symptoms I realised that he was giving me the reading of a young(ish) woman in her twenties who has had no children and no commitments.)

You have a dark or red mark on your right side? **No.**

What do you have?

(he asked in frustration. All the family looked at me expectantly. *Whooping cough*, I replied. Mr Sen has not even come close. He then

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declared that whooping cough was a natural disease and he couldn't do anything about that.)

Next test: Ian

Having scored about 15 misses and 1 (generously) hit with Alynda, Mr Sen then gave Ian a reading, starting by examining his right palm.

On being asked for the four names, I asked "***I thought you can tell things about me, what do you think my second name is?***"

I can only read what's in your palm.

*You have back pain? **No, not at present.***

*You are a rich man? **Afraid not.***

*Kidney trouble? **No.***

*Bladder? **No.***

*You have a choking feeling when sleeping, its punishment from god. **No, nothing like that.***

*You have high blood pressure? **No.**
Then you will in the future!*

Oh dear, your life line is very short, you will develop lots of problems after age 40.

I asked:

Can you tell how old I am now?
No.

I am already 53, so that's a worry!

Mr Sen then turned his attention to my left hand. This gave even worse news.

You will have an accident in a few days. Be careful!

(Well if I have since had an accident, I must not have noticed! I did however have a bad headache at the time, which he failed to detect. I count 11 misses and 0 hits.)

Third test: Richard

Turning to Richard, Mr Sen commenced his diagnosis. A summary follows:

*You have tingling in foot? **No.***

Back pain? Not NOW, everyone has it at some time.

Then it has happened, or will hap-

pen!

*You have bad saliva coming out? **No.***

*You hear constant noise in ears? **No.***

Then it's going to happen!

*Three times gonna married? **Not yet; but if you say so.***

*You fall down off an animal? **No.***

*You nearly drown? **No.***

Then be careful!!!

You spend a lot... You are very down to earth. (our Prez????)

*You believe in god? **I neither believe nor disbelieve.***

Your palm here shows some yes, some no.

Alynda was not slow to point out "***He just told you that!***"

For Richard we counted 9 misses and 0 hits.

Follow up

A common theme was the need for each of us to pray to a god. When questioned about which god, Mr Sen advised that they were all the same, but Shiva was the best. We were informed that the Hindu Raman bible is 10,000 years old and hence more authoritative than the 2,000 year old Christian bible.

The readings over, Mr Sen again performed some rituals with trinkets and stubbed out the incense sticks.

All present agreed that there was no evidence today of any supernatural ability.

In the follow-up discussion, Mr Peterson said he could not understand the failure, as Mr Sen is usually very accurate, such as in describing birthmarks and illnesses. Mr Sen himself gave several comments on the poor result:

- you have eaten eggs today (see above);
- it was because we kept saying no, no, no (now that's the truth!);
- because we don't pray to god.

Mr Peterson was already starting to come up with his own explanations:

- there was a barrier between us and Mr Sen ...the well known Skeptic Effect;

- we were not receptive to the vibrations, God, psychic emanations ... whatever.

Evidently he was more accustomed to a type of subject who would give him plenty of feedback, expand upon hits, and pass over misses.

We were able to recognise many examples of cold-reading techniques used by Mr Sen:

- Standard readings for observed gender, age and socio-economic status (eg Alynda).

- Using a generalised tense (eg *Gonna married 3 times, I see you drowning*).

- Waiting for free comments and elaboration.

- Asking that we be more forthcoming in our response (eg *All you say is no no no!*).

- Transforming a MISS into a future HIT (eg *No? then you WILL!*)

- Broadening the predictions when desperate (eg *A migrainy thing, tummy trouble*).

- Rewriting history (eg insisting that the subject DID nearly drown, after she denied it).

- Adjusting a failed prediction (eg to Alynda: *Pain in your foot, leg, lower back, upper back...; and, Nearly drowned, **No**, then car accident*).

- Claiming credit for what the subject just said (eg *You believe in god? **I neither believe nor disbelieve.** Your palm here shows some yes, some no.*).

- Turning a failure into a timely warning (eg to Richard: *You nearly drown? **No**. Then be careful*).

In fact by answering his questions honestly and not prompting him with more information, we were giving him a unique opportunity to demonstrate real paranormal abilities. Under these conditions he scored (at most) ONE "hit" out of about 36 specific statements.

