

Murders and Clairvoyants

Well-meaning or malicious, 'clairvoyants' can be cruel to the grieving.

Skeptics sometimes find amusing the bizarre claims of clairvoyants, but there are many instances when their antics add to the trauma and heartache of bereaved people. Human tragedy is a fertile ground for clairvoyants, striking relatives and friends at their most vulnerable. Unthinking clairvoyants who offer unsolicited 'visions' that add immeasurably to grief at this time are singularly unfunny.

Family tragedies

Of all human loss, the most difficult for any parent to imagine is the shattering sadness of losing a child. On Australia day 1996, Sarah Spiers, a secretary aged 18, went with friends to a nightclub in the business district of Claremont, a well-to-do suburb halfway between Perth and Fremantle in Western Australia. She knew the area well, having spent her schooldays in an adjoining suburb. Sarah left the club at about 2am and walked to the next street, where phone records show she called a taxi. When the cab arrived she was no sign of her. She has never been seen since.

Initially, police treated her disappearance as a missing person, perhaps a runaway. But her family knew this was not possible. She would never fail to communicate with her loving family, under any circumstances. Sarah had shared a unit with her sister and there was nothing in her background to indicate that she would voluntarily vanish. Her distraught parents searched for Sarah, printing posters and making public pleas for anyone holding her to return her safely.

Just four months later, Jane Rimmer, a 23 year old child care worker who had been to another Claremont nightspot, vanished in the early hours of the morning. Her body was found in bush 40 kilometres south of Perth. Police believed she had been killed within hours of her abduction. Panic set in when 27 year old lawyer Ciara Glennon vanished nine months later from the same strip around midnight. A serial killer was at large, the police said, and would strike again.

All this time Don and Carol Spiers had not given up hope of finding Sarah alive. Don Spiers took time off



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from the shearing team he ran, and the couple moved into their daughters' city apartment. They publicised the phone number in the hope that anyone with information would come forward, and made sure at least one family member was by the phone 24 hours a day.

They got plenty of information, but it was bad information. It came in a torrent from the fevered minds of clairvoyants, around 250 of them. The callers told the desperate Spiers parents of dreams and visions that would lead them to their daughter. The calls placed Don Spiers into an agonising and cruel dilemma. He did not believe in clairvoyants but was compelled to do everything in his power to find Sarah. He felt he had to act on the information because he was concerned that one of the callers might have some factual information to offer but was hiding behind the persona of a clairvoyant.

'They have been a huge torment to myself and my family in giving cryptic clues as to where Sarah might be,' he told the ABC's *Australian Story* in February.

Many of the clues sounded specific, but they were just not specific enough. One clairvoyant told of a house in the inner Perth suburb of Wembley where Sarah was being held against her will. The seer described a house that was in a tree-lined street, with a white picket fence and a For Sale sign at the front. But the vision mysteriously did not include a street name or house number.

Every street in Wembley has street trees. Don Spiers spent hours driving the streets looking for the right house, without success. On another occasion he made the long, sad car trip alone to the old gold mining town of Southern Cross, 250 km east of Perth, where he was to find a man fitting a certain description in a pub. This man held the key. But again he drove home empty handed, frustrated, angry and shattered.

He described a night spent at an isolated reach of Perth's Canning River. "I remember one night, early

days, I was down Salters Point, thrashing around in the swampy areas down there at 11 o'clock at night... walking around, bawling my eyes out and getting nowhere."

A frustrating aspect of this sorry saga is that the callers to the Spiers family were almost certainly acting without malice. They were "only trying to help". A dream or a thought had popped into their heads and they thought the "information" should be passed on. Just why did they give credence to these visions? What were the thought processes that led them to pick up the phone to call a grieving family of strangers when they had nothing of value to offer?

One can only speculate on the influence of trashy television programs and magazine features that give psychics undeserved credibility. The producers of these programs sacrifice truth for ratings and advertising dollars by sucking in gullible viewers. They don't want to spoil the effect by putting the sceptical viewpoint, by pointing out that no-one has ever demonstrated the ability to "see" the unseeable or communicate with the dead. Perhaps these exploitive programs should be required to carry a warning that they are simply magician shows, for entertainment only.

Influencing the psychics who peddled heartache and grief to the Spiers family may have been the long history of con-men and women who have been given prominence in the news media by claiming to have helped police solve serious crimes, usually murder, a guarantee for headlines.

Croiset and the Beaumont case

There are many such examples, the most infamous in Australia being the Dutch clairvoyant Gerard Croiset. The horrifying missing persons story that Croiset bought into is still seared into the minds of any Australian old enough to remember as far back as 1966. On Australia Day (the type of coincidence much loved by psychics) two girls, Jane 9, Arnna, 7, and their young brother Grant, 4,

disappeared from Glenelg Beach near Adelaide after a morning of swimming and playing on the beach with a "tall, blond man". No trace of them has ever been found.

Their stricken parents raised the alarm, and a massive search was mounted. The usual crop of clairvoyants with "information" gleaned from dreams, séances and psychic visions bothered the Adelaide police. The followers of Croiset, a self-proclaimed psychic, hired a helicopter to take photographs of the beachfront which were sent to him in Holland, along with press cuttings, prints and other information. Croiset relayed the results of his ever-changing visions back to Adelaide.

His followers dug all over the place – in sandhills, in a blocked drainpipe and in the yard of a children's institution, where a bulldozer was hired to shift tonnes of sand. Skeptics will be unsurprised to learn that nothing was found.

These false hopes added immeasurably to the anxiety and grief of Grant and Nancy Beaumont. All their children had vanished and the psychics were offering false hope as to their location. But failure was not to deter Croiset. In 1967 he travelled to Adelaide, arriving to a celebrity welcome, and the charade continued. He declared himself certain as to the location of the buried children, and armed with a sketch-pad, camera and tape-recorder, set off with his acolytes in pursuit. After two days and a whole series of ever-changing locations, he failed to produce anything.

He then dramatically changed his mind again and declared that the children were buried under new food warehouse that had just been built. The South Australian government resisted strong public pressure to spend \$7000 replacing the floor of the warehouse, but a committee of citizens raised the money. A wall of the factory was knocked down and the floor dug up. Nothing was found. Business was disrupted, thousands of dollars were wasted and false hopes were shattered.

But that, sadly was not the end of

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it. In 1996, 16 years after Gerard Croiset's death, followers of the discredited clairvoyant had another go. At great cost they decided to re-excavate the warehouse site again. Again, no trace of the missing children was found.

Police responses to psychic claims

So-called psychic detectives who allegedly help police solve crimes have been a thriving industry in the United States, their reputations booming after appearances on television talk shows, their claims unquestioned by the hosts. But even in California, the spiritual home of the way-out, the police dismiss such claims.

The Los Angeles police Department issued this statement:

The LAPD has not, does not and will not use psychics in the investigation of crimes, period.

If a psychic offers free information to us over the phone, we will listen to them politely, but we do not take them seriously. It is a waste of time.

A study into the subject by the LAPD's behavioural science services and police psychologist concluded that the hit rate of psychic detectives was statistically no better than chance. The department's public relations department says:

It is important to note that no information that would have been investigatively useful, such as first

and last names, licence plate numbers, apartment house locations etc. was accurately produced by any of the subjects.

The UK's Scotland Yard has the same policy. The Yard's Inspector Edward Ellidon stated:

Scotland Yard never approaches psychics for information. There are no official police psychics in England.

The Yard does not endorse psychics in any way.

There is no recorded instance in England of any psychic solving a criminal case or providing evidence or information that led directly to its solution.

The dramatic claims made by psychics to have "seen" vital clues often fall into the category of retrospective predictions. They are only slightly more sophisticated versions of: "I dreamed about the Melbourne Cup winner – I should have backed it."

Writes Kelly Roberts in *Psychic Investigations: A Clairvoyant's Diary of Assisting Law Enforcement*: "Did he tie her up?" I asked (the police)... did he tie her up with shoe laces?

"They all looked at me, then at one another... they seemed surprised that I knew."

This kind of self-serving tripe can easily tip over into blatant fraud of the kind exposed by Harry Houdini.

There is another category of eerily accurate psychic detective work described by leading US skeptic James Randi.

A man claiming to be a psychic attracted the interest of police when he predicted a serious industrial fire. The accuracy of the detail after the event could only have been provided by the psychic's special powers. But police discovered that he had no need of paranormal powers to produce his visions – he himself was the arsonist.

It was the prospect of just such a claim that led Sarah Spiers' family to sit by the phone to face the agonising prospect of one more misguided psychic call.

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