



Talking with the Dead?

John Edward Revisited



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By James Randi

Back in 2000, when “psychic” John Edward was a hot media number, an editor at TV Guide sent me a 2-hour videotape of some of his shows, with the request that I examine them to find examples of his “cold reading” techniques. This was to provide input for an article they were doing on him. Now, this was a task of considerable difficulty for me, since what actually got to be broadcast was of course the edited version of any audience session, and subtleties of technique – not to mention omission – are easily lost in editing. My contact at TV Guide suggested I look over the entire tape to find examples I could use. As I told him, that could possibly lead to data-searching, a trap into which so many parapsychologists have fallen; I said that I would take the very first episode on the tape, and analyze that. And I did.

Let’s examine this item, the “Crossing Over” show of December 19th, 2000. Edward began the session with a warning to the audience that he couldn’t meet their specific expectations, a technique that excused in advance what actually turned out to be a rather bad guessing game. Remember, every member of his audience, self-selected to consist of persons who sincerely want to make a connection with the spirit of a deceased relative or friend, sits and waits for a comment from Edward, an initial, name, suggestion, relationship, or situation that they can in some way relate either to their lives or to the life of the deceased. They search frantically for that connection which Edward is constantly urging them to make. Here are the first 50 seconds of that show:

John Edward: The person that’s coming through back here, they’re telling me to acknowledge I have a male figure who’s coming through and he’s coming through with a younger male. So I have a father figure who’s coming through, coming through with a person that would be below him and it’s like there’s some sort of connection between October, or the 10th of a month having some type of meaning, and there’s a feeling of somebody either working in transit, being involved with busses or trains, there’s something like “transit” feeling that comes up with that, because they’re showing me somebody with a transit connection, so I don’t know

exactly where this goes. [He points into the audience.] It's like I'm in the back, two rows back there. Do you understand this? [He points to a man, 70 years or so in age, who has indicated his interest.]

Just to bring a bit of clarity to this drivel, here it is again, the redundancies and the "stuffing" removed. It's about a quarter of the original size, and much clearer:

A male father figure with a younger male, a connection between October, or the 10th of a month, and somebody working in transit, involved with busses or trains. [He points into the audience.] Two rows back. Do you understand?

This was delivered rapidly, with no pauses, not providing any opportunity for a denial. The question, "Do you understand this?" is a cold-reading technique; of course these simple words are understood, but affirmation of that fact can – and does – appear to indicate that all the items in this rambling sequence are being accepted by the victim, not just "understood."

The chap "two rows back" indicated that he wanted to hear more of this:

Man: Yes.

JE: Okay. Your dad passed?

Man: Yes.

JE: Okay. And is there a younger male for him who's crossed over, like his son or a younger brother?

Man: My son.

JE: Okay. Your dad and your son are coming through together. There's a "D" connection that comes up around this, that either means that your dad is the "D," your son is the "D," there's someone with a "D" connection around this. You understand that?

Again, the "Do you understand" ploy, even though the victim denies any suggested connection. And the identification of the father with "his son or a younger brother" is wrong. It turns out to be the victim's son.

Man: Not a "D."

JE: Okay, keep thinking about it.

We have here another common cold-reading move, in which the victim is told to continue to try to come up with a connection, and the implication is that Edward

will return to the guess and further develop it. And he does, though the victim's wife supplies the connection, as someone frequently does, trying to help the scam artist:

Man: [interrupts when his wife whispers to him]... mother-in-law.

JE: Who's passed?

Man: [nods yes.]

JE: Okay.

Man: Dottie.

JE: That's a "D"!

Next, following this clutch-at-a-straw, Edward reminded the man, in a quick recap, what he'd told him. He said he'd "brought through" his dad, and a "younger male," plus the month of October, and the 10th of any month (either of which he then suggested to the man might mark a birthday or anniversary, but neither did), and insisted that at least the number "10" was "marking" something or someone, extending the field now to include "an uncle or uncle-in-law." Still no connection. He then asked if the family consisted of three children, or perhaps one child "and two others." Both those guesses were also met with a blank stare and denial. But remember, in the case of his "bringing through" the father, Edward didn't give a name or even a correct initial, though he tried! The "younger man" he had introduced, he guessed was either the man's brother or his uncle, but it wasn't; it was his son.

Note, too, the gimmick of instant correction used by Edward: he guessed the wrong relationship here, but as soon as the man corrected his guess for him, he incorporated it immediately by saying, "Your dad and your son..." All that long attempt to connect the transit industry with the man or with the deceased – 9 seconds out of the 20 seconds of "fishing," – also failed, and though Edward, before leaving the man and moving on, tried the "transit" reference once more, it was a total washout and was then ignored. The month of October, or the 10th of any month – giving him 42 days out of the year! – didn't fit any angle, and Edward didn't find anyone with a "D" name until the man's wife suggested her own mother, who up until then had not even been mentioned. Edward accepted it eagerly as fitting the "D" guess.

This was a resounding failure as a reading, but the subject of all this guesswork was reduced to sobs and tears by the experience, and the audience was impressed.

Here are the total guesses made for the first subject of the Oct. 19/00 "Crossing Over" show. Edward tries to get him to identify with these 23 guesses, all rattled off inside of 50 seconds, about one guess every two seconds:

Response

(1) There is a male figure?	Yes
(2) There is also a younger male figure?	Yes
(3) There is significance to the month of October?	No
(4) There is significance to the 10th of any month?	No
(5) There is a transit industry connection?	No
(6) Busses are involved?	No
(7) Trains are involved?	No
(8) Your father is deceased?	Yes
(9) The younger man is your brother?	No
(10) The younger man is your uncle?	No
(11) There is a "D" connection?	No
(12) Your son is the "D"?	No
(13) Your father is the "D"?	No
(14) Can you identify with any "D" person in your life?	No
(15) The 10th of a month — any month — is a birthday?	No
(16) The 10th of a month — any month — is an anniversary?	No
(17) There's a birthday — of anyone — in October?	No
(18) There's an anniversary — of anyone — in October?	No
(19) The number 10 "marks something"? Anything?	No
(20) An uncle is "connected" with the number 10?	No
(21) An uncle-in-law is "connected" with the number 10?	No
(22) Your family has three children?	No
(23) Your family consists of one child and two others?	No

RESULT: 3 right 20 wrong

Guess #1 has a 50/50 chance of being right. But notice: the way that Edward conducts these sessions, he can also apply any and all guesses to anyone in the audience – there were about 40 persons – who might choose to indicate a "hit" for them, by a gesture. Friends, family, co-workers and acquaintances, living and dead, all are eligible to fit any guess. Guesses #1 and #2 are definite hits. Then it goes downhill.

Guesses #3 & #4 ask the subject to identify with some 42 days out of 365, to connect with any and all birthdays, anniversaries, or dates of decease – any event – of anyone, since Edward only says "There is significance" to one of these dates.

Guesses #5, #6 & #7 are very wide, involving all possibilities in commuting, vacations, accidents, daily routine, the neighborhood, or occupation, and again, everyone in the audience is also eligible to identify with this guess.

Guess #8 is asked as a question, though Edward – and everyone else – is quite safe in this guess, since nonagenarians are very, very, rare.

Guesses #9 & #10 are simply the usual rapid stabs at correlation, and are immediately ignored by the audience as trivial – when they miss. But they're not trivial, since if they'd been correct, they would have amplified the value of this otherwise dismal reading.

Guesses #11, #12, #13, & #14 are "stabs" at a letter that could represent anything. A person (living or dead), friends, family, acquaintances, a first or last name or initial, a city or town, a company, a title, an object, would all be eligible. But Edward misses. It's astonishing that he receives a "no" on #14!

Guesses #15, #16, #17 & #18 offer very wide possibilities. From all the persons this man knows of, it's inescapable that one or more of them have to have something that can be identified with one of these guesses. But the victim fails to think of any.

Guess #19 is also very wide, for the same reasons. The number 10 must be related to "something"... #20 and #21 are wild stabs which simply fail.

Guesses #22 & #23 are two more "stabs" made in hopes of salvaging this fiasco, but they fail to hit. When #22 is denied, Edward modifies it to a wider scope in #23 (note: as he does with guesses #20 and #21, too) but he still misses. He says,

I don't know if this is your son... being either one of three, or three people in the family, where there's two of them, then there's one.

This could have been a "hit" in several different ways, if (1) there were three people at one time, (2) there are now three people, or (3) there once were two people, and one of them died or simply moved away, and (4) it might also apply to anyone other than the son. The statement presents many possible scenarios for the subject to choose from. All fail. Note, too, the "I don't know if..." approach, which is quite true, because he doesn't know! This form of address also invites a response from the victim, a hint that a choice, a correction, or a clarification should be made so the statement will "fit."

At this point, Edward gives up and switches quickly to another subject.

What struck me about this reading was that at the conclusion, the victim was smiling through his tears in evident satisfaction, thanking Edward for the revelations he'd received. There were only 3 of 23 guesses that emerged as correct, and each was less than spectacular, yet this man was not fazed or disappointed one bit. How can Edward ever fail, when he has such victims to feed on?

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