Edgar Cayce: The Slipping Prophet

James Randi

When all else fails to convince the unbeliever, promoters of the paranormal fall back on the Sleeping Prophet, Edgar Cayce (pronounced Kay-see), who is credited with having given medical diagnoses of far-distant persons, with little or no information available to him, and "life readings" of people, when he was given only their names, describing their former and present lives. He claimed that it was all done while he slept and that he did not remember a word of what he had said while "in trance." The Association for Research and Enlightenment is the result of his wonderful work, and its library, with some 14,000 case histories, is great material with which to regale the credulous. In fact, the rationalizations that Cayce and his supporters gave for his notable failures are prime examples of the art.

Of course Cayce is remembered for his successes, not his failures. Disciples claim many thousands of verified "wins" in which the master psychic correctly diagnosed illnesses and prescribed cures. But *did* he? I refer readers interested in doing some original research to any of the many books about the Sleeping Prophet. It must be said of Cayce's followers that they are quite unashamed of the myriad half-truths, the evasive and garbled language, and the multiple "outs" that Cayce used in his readings. In some cases, these crutches are clearly stated, without any attempt to suppress them. But such is the belief of the zealot, that no matter how damning the evidence of the documents, faith marches on undaunted.

Cayce was fond of expressions like "I feel that" and "perhaps" to avoid positive declarations. It is a common tool in the psychic trade. Many of the letters he received—in fact most—contained specific details about the illnesses on which readings were required; the quest was for a cure.

Excerpted from the new book *Flim-Flam: The Truth About Unicorns, Parapsychology and Other Delusions*, by James Randi (T. Y. Crowell, 1979).

There was nothing to stop Cayce from knowing the contents of the letters and using that information as if it were divine revelation. To one who has been through dozens of similar diagnoses, as I have, the methods are obvious. It is merely a specialized extension of the "cold reading" technique of the fortune-tellers.

His "cures" themselves are pretty funny, as you will see from an example I will quote. He just loved to have his patients boiling the most obscure roots and bark into nasty syrups. Perhaps the therapy was based on nauseating the victim so much that the original illness was forgotten. And it is no surprise that his cures are quite similar to "home remedies" described in the kind of handy medical encyclopedias that the late 1800s produced for the bedsides of every rural home. Beef broth was a favorite remedy with Cayce, for such diverse diseases as gout and leukemia. Who can fault a nice man who prescribes a cup of broth?

But were there actually cures from all this? The case is a hard one to prove, either way. First, the verifications that come back from patients hardly represent the whole. Remember that dead patients cannot complain; and for those who have not been cured, it serves little purpose to write back and grumble. After all, this good man has tried to help them, and just because it didn't work in one case is no reason to knock the process. As for those who wrote and affirmed cures, there is an important factor to consider. I'm sure that you've heard the bit about the man who is found yelling at the top of his lungs in the park. Asked why, he replies that such a procedure keeps rogue elephants away. "But," counters this questioner, "there are no elephants around here for a thousand miles!" "See how well it works?" is the triumphant reply. The point is that just because Cayce prescribed a boiled root drink does not mean that that nostrum achieved the cure reported. Nor can we forget that many of the illnesses described to physicians are totally imaginary or self-terminating ones.

But can the skeptics prove that Cayce's cures are attributable to ordinary causes? It would require a huge expenditure of money to do the necessary research for such a job, and in most cases the information would not be available anyway. Frankly, the vague, evasive, and simplistic diagnoses and cures that Edgar Cayce is credited with hardly need such research. Examination of the record at hand is quite sufficient to deny him sainthood. The large and well-funded organization that bears his name today survives as a result of preferred belief, not because of any adequate proof.

In a revealing book titled *The Outer Limits of Edgar Cayce's Power*, written by E. V. and H. L. Cayce, his notable failures are excused in typical fashion. The authors strongly assure us that the book, though it admits the failures, explains all of them quite satisfactorily. But I'll let you judge for

yourself. Here, with the Cayce verbiage stripped away to the bare facts, is what they give us as an exercise in credulity.

The Hauptmann/Lindbergh case was a big boo-boo of Cayce's. These are the points he developed while in a trance:

1. The baby was removed at 8:30 from the Lindbergh home by one man. Another man took it, and there was a third person in the car.

2. The baby was taken to a small two-story brown house in a mill section near New Haven called Cardova. The house used to be green.

3. Schartest Street is mentioned, also Adams Street, which has had its numbers and name changed.

4. The house is shingled. Three men and one woman are with the child. The woman and one man were actually named.

5. The child's hair has been cut and dyed.

6. Cardova related to manufacturing of leather goods.

7. Red shale and new macadam road on "half-street" and "half-mile" are mentioned.

8. The boy has been moved to Jersey City and is not well.

9. Hauptmann is "only partly guilty." Cayce asks for "no publicity on this case."

Well, that's quite a bunch of facts, is it not? Unfortunately, they are all wrong. True, Adams Street was found, and it had been named only a few weeks previously. But this information was available to Cayce during one of his rare waking periods. Besides, Adams Street proved a dud. Said Cayce when confronted with the facts: "I've always had my doubts about anything very authentic in such matters." Well, so have I, Ed, more than ever before after examining your record. But we should give the disciples (and Cayce) a chance to rationalize this one, so here goes with a list of their excuses: (1) The readings picked up the mental plans of *others* who had *also* planned a kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. (Poor psychic aim.) (2) Thought patterns of others involved have distorted the readings. (3) Mental static was very heavy.

No wonder Cayce asked for no publicity. It was a real fiasco, and he had psychic egg on his face. But these excuses are accepted as quite legitimate by the believers—to this day.

But there are more surprises for us. Cayce even gave diagnoses of cases when the "patients" were *dead*! How could that be? Surely, dead is a very serious symptom, and should be detectable. But we have failed to take into account the ingenuity of the breed, as we will now see in two examples.

Cayce gave a reading on a Monday for Theodoria Alosio, a child who died of leukemia on Sunday, the day before. He gave a long and typical diagnosis, with a long and complicated cure involving diet. An example of the "reading" will suffice to show just how lucid and informative it is: "And

this depends upon whether one of the things as intended to be done today is done or isn't done, see?" No, Eddie, I'm afraid I don't see at all.

The defendant deserves a chance at alibis, however, and we'll take a look at these in the case of the leukemia victim, which was diagnosed by Edgar Cayce with a lady aide, "conducted" by her cousin, recording the details. These are the alibis: (1) The person who sought the reading was not related to the child. (2) Only the child's mother had "an open mind." (3) The doctor in charge was not told about the reading. (How about the *coroner?* Yet what could either of them have done for the child even if they had known? The child was *dead*!) (4) There was "conflict between the recorder and her cousin at the time of the reading." (5) The steno recording the details was thinking about *another* little girl at the time. (6) The reading was given in reverse order, the physical check preceding the prescription. (Then, I ask, why didn't the great psychic detect *death* and skip the prescription?) (7) Cayce had been given a newspaper clipping for the week before, and had given a reading for *that* date. (8) The reading was given *on the condition*, not on the child herself. (9) Reading was given on "the period of seeking," not on the moment at hand. (10) In Cayce's own deathless words: "If the proper consideration is given all facts and factors concerning each character of information sought, as has been given oft, the information answers that which is sought at the time in relationships to the conditions that exist in those forms through which the impressions are made for tangibility or for observation in the minds of others." (11) The reading given can be useful "for the next case." (12) Nothing can be done except as God wills it. (Poor God, left holding the bag again.) (13) The desire of the party was for a spectacular cure. (14) Leukemia is the focus of the subconscious, rather than the child. (15) The attitudes, desires, purposes, and motives of the patient and the person conducting the reading had a bad influence.

Is that enough rationalization for one big boo-boo? Apparently it is, for the Cayce folks have accepted it. But let me regale you with one more example of Cayce's medical prowess. For another *dead patient*, Cayce prescribed the following noxious mixture: Boil together some wild cherry bark, sarsaparilla root, wild ginger, Indian turnip, wild ginseng, prickly ash bark, buchu leaves, and mandrake root. Add grain alcohol and tolu balsam to the mess, and give it—during waking periods was specified—for 10 days. I've consulted my own (nonpsychic) physician, and he commented that such a mixture just *might* raise the dead. And note the preponderance of "wild" ingredients. How basic and natural it all sounds.

Rationalization time again. Say the disciples about this case: (1) No definite appointment was made for this reading. (2) The conductor of the reading held the letter—written while the patient was alive—in her hand

during the reading. (3) The patient herself did not request the reading, thus a lack of direct need from her. (4) Cayce was emotionally upset that day.

I am reminded of the old story wherein the lady at the funeral calls out, "Give him some chicken soup!" Told that such a remedy would not help at this late stage, she correctly replies "Well, it couldn't *hurt*." More grist for the believer's mill.

In a valiant attempt to prove Cayce's batting average in his "readings," the authors of *The Outer Limits of Edgar Cayce's Power* did a jolly bit of research at the association's library at Virginia Beach. They selected, at random, 150 cases from the files, and tabulated them. Their findings, they reported, showed *more than 85 percent successes* for Cayce, verified by actual reports of the cured patients! Quite impressive, if true, and certainly indicative of some marvelous psychic powers. But again, as you might have suspected, close examination shows a somewhat different conclusion.

They listed them thusly:

No reports made	74	50%	(actually 49.3%)
Negative reports made	11	7%	(actually 7.3%)
Positive reports made	65	43%	(actually 43.3%)
	150	100%	100.0%

Then, they reasoned, since the "no reports" portion was impossible to judge, this got discarded, and the final table looks like this:

Negative reports	11/76	14.4% (actually 14.5%)
Positive reports	65/76	85.5%

So the results are rather remarkable, by *their* figuring. If I hear cries of "Unfair!" about now, I fully concur. And I object as well to the specialized terminology they use to describe the 11 negative reports. They are not called "failures" or even "errors"—they are referred to as "considered inadequate."

But we need to look into these figures even further, as did the two writers we are quoting. They tell us that 46 of these 150 persons *were present* at the readings; and of those remaining who were not present, 35 did not give any information in their letters appealing for help. Thus, 69 persons of the 150 *did* give information to Cayce. Now, you and I would

agree, I'm sure, that prophet Edgar Cayce, with the patient present, has a much greater chance of telling something about the illness involved, as well as about many other factors that can surely be worked into the "reading" as evidential. So in a total of 115 (46 + 69) of the 150 cases, it was possible to make excellent statements about them, and probably get a "positive" report thereby. That's a big 76.6 percent, friends.

Another point: Why did the 74 cases *make no report?* Remember, they almost *had* to be believers in Cayce to ask for a reading. It was their lives they were dealing with. Does anyone seriously think they would respond with a negative report? *Or fail to send in grateful thanks and affirmation for a success?* Not very likely! So, we may safely assume that the majority of the 74 "no report" cases were *not* successes—pardon me, were "considered inadequate."

Even if we are exceedingly liberal with these folks and give them 50 percent of the 74 "no reports" as "positives," their 85.5 percent suddenly shrinks to 68 percent. But I refuse to do that, because I maintain that my argument on the probable reasons behind the "no reports" is correct. They are stuck with a bad analysis: and to make it worse, in their book they proceed to multiply this sample of just over *one percent* of the data by 100 to arrive at totally misrepresentative figures.

My own (admittedly amateur) analysis says that only 23.3 percent of the sample has any hope of being demonstrably positive at all; and knowing the criteria and the quality of the data, that small percentage shrinks even further.

Before we leave the Sleeping Prophet to his permanent nap, it would be well to deal with one other of his supposed powers, one which is always thrown up in discussions as a heavy proof of his abilities. There is one field—locating buried treasure—that would seem to be safe against most fraud or second-guessing. After all, if a "psychic" can locate long-lost or long-secreted treasure, fakery seems impossible. In his attempts at this miracle, Cayce took no chances. He called in Henry Gross, the famous dowser who put his forked stick to work along with Cayce's powers to find purported millions in jewels and coins buried along the seashore. It was a little like setting out to sea in a leaky boat, then at the last minute throwing in some cast-iron life-belts.

Presumably, Edgar Cayce dozed while Henry Gross dowsed, wearing out several sticks in the process. They dug up tons of mud, sand, and gravel, looked under rocks, and in general disturbed the landscape something awful. No treasure. Weeks of work gave them only blisters. How could such a powerful team of psychic plus dowser fail to locate the prize? Rely on the alibi-manufacturers to come up with something suitable: (1) The psychic impressions were picked up from the spirits of departed

Indians and pirates, and such undependable types are known to want to play jokes on the living. (2) Maybe the treasure *was* there, but had been removed. Cayce was reading in the past again. (3) There were doubts, fears, and cross-purposes at work among the seekers. (4) Were the directions Cayce gave based on readings from "true" North, or compass North? (5) Was the information given to Cayce meant for digging *now*, or another time? Perhaps in the *future*?

Well, there it is. The matter of Edgar Cayce boils down to a vague mass of garbled data, interpreted by true believers who have a heavy interest in the acceptance of the claims. Put to the test, Cayce was found to be bereft of real powers. His reputation today rests upon poor and deceptive reporting of the claims made by him and his followers, and such claims do not stand up to examination. Read the literature, with these comments in mind, and the conclusion is inescapable. It just ain't so. •

Something more amusing than truth

My point is that, despite all this extravagant frenzy for the truth, there is something in the human mind that turns instinctively to fiction, and that even journalists succumb to it. A German philosopher, Dr. Hans Vaihinger, has put the thing into a formal theory, and you will find it expounded at length in his book, The Philosophy of As If. *It is a sheer impossiblity, says Dr. Vaihinger, for human beings to think exclusively in terms of the truth. For one thing, the stock of indubitable truths is too scanty. For another thing, there is the instinctive aversion to them that I have mentioned. All of our thinking, according to Vaihinger, is in terms of assumptions, many of them plainly not true. Into our most solemn and serious reflections fictions enter—and three times out of four they quickly crowd out all the facts....*

What ails the truth is that it is mainly uncomfortable, and often dull. The human mind seeks something more amusing, and more caressing.

—H. L. Mencken, *The Chicago Tribune*, July 25, 1926 (Also in Mencken's *The Bathtub Hoax and Other Blasts & Bravos*, New York: Knopf, 1958), a response to the credulous acceptance of a fictitious history of the American bathtub Mencken had written as a spoof in 1917.