

Channelling claims that spirit entities can speak by using the body of a person, the channeller. Some channelled spirits are said to be those of the dead, others are more exotic folk such as Nepalese lamas, Native American shamans, Altantean priests or even Cro-magnon warriors!

Spirits of the dead

People channelling the spirits of the dead are simply a new version of the 18th-century spiritualist medium. In some cases, channellers have been discovered to have extensively researched people to be able to produce seemingly inexplicable details about them, allegedly provided by a recently departed loved one. In other cases, the channellers are practicing what stage magicians everywhere recognise as "cold reading".

James von Prague and John Edward both rely on rapid-fire delivery of generalised questions and statements which are typically used to "home in" on someone in a large audience. Thus throwing a line out such as "does anyone know a John?" is likely to elicit a response from someone (from most people in fact!). Using ambiguous statements such as "do you understand that?" or "does this have meaning for you?" helps provide a spurious sense of accuracy or detail. And people will invariably provide feedback, verbally or non-verbally, which is then built into the patter. There are many books available on "cold reading" which teach how to do this, and it can be very, very compelling and mystifying to those who don't know the basic techniques involved.

Modern ancient spirits

An easier version of channelling which doesn't rely on trying to elicit personal details, is where an allegedly ancient spirit - sometimes one from a different planet - provides pearls of wisdom to an audience seeking enlightenment.

Modern channelling made its first major appearance in 1972 with the publication of *Seth Speaks* by Jane Roberts and Robert Butts, which detailed the wisdom of Seth, an "unseen entity". But the really big boost came in 1987, with the ABC mini-series based on actress Shirley MacLaine's book *Out on a Limb*. This depicted her conversing with spirits through channeller Kevin Ryerson, who claimed to channel "John", a contemporary of Jesus. Like many channelled entities, "John" was not able to speak the language of his own era, but instead sounded like a B-grade Elizabethan. And, like many channelled entities, John made outrageous, but affirming statements (he told MacLaine that she is co-creator of the world with God!).

One of the most famous channellers was J.Z. Knight, who succeeded in taking legal steps to lay claim to her 35,000-year-old Cro-magnon spirit "Ramtha", preventing other channellers from tapping in to this lucrative market. She has been able to charge patrons US\$1,000 a seminar to receive such wisdom as "[we must] open our minds to new frontiers of potential", and has sold tapes, books and accessories as part of the business.

Ramtha, too, has a liking for Elizabethan-accented platitudes, despite having apparently lived in Lemuria and Atlantis. However, "he" fared badly in predicting a series of natural disasters

that didn't happen (California and Florida did not fall into the ocean, and acid rain did not poison New England's water supply). Followers who had shifted house to be safe were not happy with him. Then Knight was served an injunction; she'd been telling followers that Ramtha recommended they buy her Arabian horses, at up to US\$250,000 each. Knight was discovered practicing Ramtha voices, and then Ramtha began making homophobic comments. Small wonder that Ramtha's popularity has waned in recent years.

An example of how easy it is to fool people was the infamous 1988 Australian tour of "Carlos", a 2,000-year-old spirit allegedly channelled by artist José Oliver. The tour was a hoax intended to demonstrate how easy it is to fool people and show how gullible and uncritical the mass media are when covering paranormal or supernatural topics. José was trained by his friend, master magician James "The Amazing" Randi, to perform as a channeller. Carlos developed a large following and, even when the hoax was revealed, many continued to believe in him.

As James Randi noted in an interview with Australia's ABC: "All [José] had to do was look at videotapes of other people speaking in strange voices, and he picked it up right away, and eventually we got it into the Sydney Opera House with a fair audience there, all handling crystals and beads and whatnot, and with charmed looks on their faces, attracted and enthralled by this man out on stage, José Oliver doing the Spirit of Carlos that was 35,000 years old.

"He felt like an awful fool doing it, especially since all of the material that we produced was

spurious. In the press releases we invented magazines, we invented towns and cities and radio stations and TV channels and whatnot, that didn't exist. And one phone call by the media back to the United States would have revealed the whole thing as a hoax."

Deliberate deception?

Cases like "Carlos" show how easy it can be to fool thousands of people, but are the "real" channellers perpetuating a similar kind of hoax?

At face value, it's hard to tell. There are always at least three basic hypotheses to explain any paranormal claim:

- (1) the alleged phenomenon is genuine
- (2) the claimant is perpetrating a deliberate deception
- (3) the claimant is sincere but self-deceived

Skeptics concentrate on looking for evidence which will allow the first hypothesis to be rejected or accepted. Channellers have consistently failed to provide any evidence that can't be more simply explained by mundane methods, such as cold reading. Their wise pronouncements are banal and commonplace. They have no knowledge that isn't available to the person involved (i.e. no inexplicable language skills or answers to arcane questions). Some of their pronouncements are blatantly wrong.

Many channellers have made a good living out of their alleged abilities; some have become very wealthy indeed. For others, the attraction may be the sense of power inherent in gaining a devout following. Just whether deception is involved -

intentional or self-deluding - is for you to decide, but it's what the evidence points to....

Penny Torres was, before her decision to become a channeller, a housewife from Los Angeles. The "wisdom" she offers to her followers is precisely what one would expect from such a source. It was quite disconcerting...to see the blind acceptance the believers gave to Ms Torres' pronouncements on pap and their conviction that what she said was some sort of profound statement about the world.

But then, the same sort of people said the same sort of things about the statements of Carlos and we all know that [magician] James Randi made up Carlos' thoughts to be trite and meaningless but to sound like typical New Age verbiage.

We await the visit of Shirley MacLaine, who at least can act.

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the new zealand Skeptics guide to Channelling

"Richard Heydock, MD, a former fellow of New College in Oxford, was an ingenious and a learned person, but much against the hierarchy of the church of England. He had a device to gain proselytes, by preaching in his dream; which was much noised abroad, and talked of as a miracle.

But King James I being at Salisbury went to hear him. He observed that his harangue was very methodical, and that he did but counterfeit sleep. He surprised the doctor by drawing his sword, and swearing, 'God's waunes, I will cut off his head': at which the doctor startled and pretended to awake; and so the cheat was detected."

John Aubrey (1626-97)