

THE NAME OF THE DEAD

David P. Abbott

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In the book entitled *Psychics: Facts and Theories*, by Rev. Minot J. Savage, at page 15, the following account will be found:

"Soon I began to hear raps, apparently on the floor, and then in different parts of the room. On this, the lady remarked, simply: 'Evidently there is some one here who wishes to communicate with you. Let us go into the front parlor, where it will be quieter.' This we did, the raps following us, or rather beginning again as soon as we were seated. At her suggestion I then took pencil and paper (which I happened to have in my bag), and sat at one side of a marble-top table, while she sat at the other side in a rocker and some distance away. Then she said: 'As one way of getting at the matter, suppose you do this: You know what friends you have in the spirit world. Write now a list of names—any names you please, real or fictitious, only among them somewhere include the names of some friends in the spirit world who, you think, might like to communicate with you, if such a thing were possible.' I then began. I held a paper so that she could not possibly have seen what I wrote, even though she had not been so far away. I took special pains that no movement or facial expression should betray me. Meantime she sat quietly rocking and talking. As I wrote, perhaps at the eighth or tenth name, I began to write the name of a lady friend who had not been long dead. I had hardly written the first letter before there came three loud distinct raps. Then my hostess said, 'This friend of yours, of course, knows where she died. Write now a list of places, including in it the place of her death, and see if she will recognize it.' This I did, beginning with Vienna, and so on with any that occurred to me. Again I had hardly begun to write the real name, when once more came three raps. And so on, concerning other matters. I speak of these only as specimens.

"Now, I cannot say that in this particular case the raps were not caused by the toe joints of the lady. The thing that puzzles me in this theory, is as to how the toe joints happened to know the name of my friend, where she died, etc., which facts the lady herself did not know, and never had known."

It has been the writer's good fortune to witness practically this same experiment, performed by a very expert medium, Dr. Schlossenger, who was traveling over the country a few years ago.

I was residing at that time in Falls City, Neb., a place of a few thousand population. For two winters I had traveled some as a magician, so when the medium came to town, and began to perform his miracles, certain members of the community suggested having me witness one of his seances, thinking I would be able to discover whether his tests were genuine, or whether they were performed by the aid of trickery. Accordingly, one evening, a prominent physician invited me, with certain relatives and friends, to attend a seance given in his parlors.

When we arrived I was introduced to the medium, an elderly gentleman with a long white beard, and wearing glasses. He appeared to be slightly deaf, as he placed his hand to his ear and had my name repeated. He was introduced to the remainder of the company en masse, the names of the visitors not being given to him.

The medium soon announced that "his mission on this earth was to absolutely prove to humanity the immortality of the soul." He now offered to give some tests to those desiring it, and asked for a small table which was placed in an adjoining room. He invariably held his hand to his ear, to catch what was being said, being apparently quite deaf. He also used this same expedient when listening to the voices of the unseen spirits, and reporting their communications.

My father and another gentleman were selected for the first test, as they were considered very skeptical in such matters. As they retired to a closed room I did not see the experiment, but will give some parts of it as reported to me, farther on. In a short time they returned to the parlor, engaged in a discussion over the matter; and my father remarked, "I do not know how you got your information, but I feel certain it was not from my brother, or he would have given a certain point correctly." The medium then said, "If I will tell you where your father died, and the disease he died of, will you be convinced?" My father replied, "I suppose I will have to be, if you can do that."

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They then retired, and the medium succeeded partially in the experiment; and would have certainly succeeded entirely, had my father followed his instructions. I will describe what was reported to me of this test, farther on.

I now offered myself for a test. I retired to the room with the medium, and incidentally offered him one dollar and fifty cents, the same my father had given him; but he refused the money, saying: "Your father is not convinced, and I will not take any more money."

He now took a sheet of paper from a tablet, and drew five straight lines across it, spacing the sheet into six spaces about equal. Next taking my hand, and looking earnestly into my face, he said: "Promise me that if I succeed, you will not make light of this. Promise me, for this is very sacred to me." I did so. He now directed me to write names in the spaces on the sheet, any names I pleased, writing but one name in each space. All the names were to be of living or fictitious persons except one, this one to be the name of some one I had known who was then dead. He said, "Be fair with me, and I will scratch out the dead person's name." These were his exact words, therefore I in no way tried to hide my writing from him, although he stood at a distance and did not appear to watch me. I took a pencil and began writing the names; being unprepared I had to think of the names I wished to write. I desired to select names of persons living at a distance, so that he could in no possible manner know them. While I was writing he talked incessantly, which in spite of myself divided my attention. At the same time he kept urging me to write, and immediately after urging me, would begin talking rapidly on some spiritualistic subject. I remember saying, "You must give me time to think." I thought I used great care, so as to write each name with the same precision, and tried to betray no emotion when writing the dead person's name. I selected the name "Cora Holt" for the dead person's name. This was the name of an aunt who had died in another State.

As soon as I had written the names he asked me to cut them apart into slips, having one name on each slip. Now here I do not remember whether he folded them himself, or had me help, as I was not expecting them to be folded. However, we folded each one into a billet with the writing inside.

He now directed me to place them in a hat, and to hold the hat under the table, take out the billets one at a time, and throw them on the table top. This I did while he stood with his right arm extended toward the table and about one foot above it. After I had thrown a few billets on the table, as I threw the next one, I heard three loud distinct raps. He said, "There, that's the one that is dead. Open it and see if I am right, but do not let me see it. Fold it up again and place it in your pocket." I opened the billet. I did not know what the name would be, as I had mixed them under the table; yet I had a feeling that it was correct. I opened it and sure enough the name was "Cora Holt." I refolded it, placing it in my pocket. I must confess that I felt a momentary creepy feeling pass over me, as my emotions were wrought up to such a pitch by the intense manner in which I had watched all the details of the experiment. I informed him that he was right, but did not tell him the name. He now took my hand in his, and leading me into the parlor, had me state to the company what had just occurred. Now placing his hand on my head, he said: "I will endeavor to give you the name." Closing his eyes, his body trembled or shuddered with a kind of paroxysm, and apparently with a great effort he pronounced the name "Cora Holt." This effort seemed to greatly exhaust him, and coming out of his temporary trance he begged us to excuse him, saying that there were opposing spirits present and he could do no more that night; that he had done all for us that lay within his power. He now took his leave.

This was all very impressive to me at the time, except the raps. It was only afterwards that I thought out the explanation, which I will give farther on. As to the raps, they had the sound as of a pencil tapping loudly on a thin strip of wood, or a ruler, and not the sound of tapping on a table. I had previously known of the mechanical and electrical rappers, supplied by certain conjuring depots, and worn on the person of the medium, or attached to a table. My impression was at the time that possibly he had a rapper in the sleeve of the arm extended over the table, and by directing the attention to the table the sound would appear to come from there. As I was sitting right against the table, I will say that the sound did not appear to me to come from the table, but more nearly from his person.

Referring again to the test given my father, the medium first announced his prices, which he would accept if satisfactory. This was agreed to and paid. He then had my father write names on paper in a manner similar to the way I have described, except he did not request my father to write a dead person's name; instead, he requested him to write, among other names, his mother's maiden name, his wife's maiden name, his father's name, also the names of certain members of his family and of some of his friends, some of whom should be dead. This my father did.

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Among the names written by my father was his mother's maiden name, viz., "Celestina Redexilana Phelps," a name certainly out of the ordinary. He also wrote his wife's maiden name, his father's name, his brother's name, and several other names—six or eight altogether.

When the medium had the billets taken out of the hat he said, "You have there the name of your mother; the name is something like 'Celestia (not Celestina) Roxalena (not Redexilana) Phelps,'" thus giving wrong pronunciations to the first two names. However, when my father opened it, sure enough it was his mother's maiden name. My father now took another billet which had written thereon his father's name. This the medium gave correctly, stating that this was his father's name. The next billet had written thereon the name of my father's brother; the name was James Asahel Abbott." The medium then said: "Your brother James is here, and he says to tell you that he is happy and that you are making a great mistake not to believe."

Now this brother had always been called by his second name and not by the name of James. My father said, "If you are my brother, give me your full name." The medium replied, "James Ash—a—bell Abbott," giving an entirely wrong pronunciation of the second name. This it was, with some other error, that led to the discussion they had on returning to the parlor, and in which my father remarked, "If you get your information from the dead, they should be able to pronounce their own names correctly."

My father, not being familiar with the methods of trickery, could not with exactness give all the minute details of the test as I would have wished; and as I never had an opportunity to see this experiment myself, I can only surmise the means employed in its production.

The second experiment with my father had been an effort to tell the disease of which my grandfather died, also the place where he died. The medium required my father to write on the usual ruled paper, a name of a disease and also a name of a place, in each space, that is, one disease and one place in each space. He remarked in giving directions, "Like New York measles, Philadelphia smallpox, etc." He required, however, that my father write IN THE SAME SPACE the correct disease, and also the correct place of his father's death. The remainder of the spaces were to contain the names of any disease or any place he might choose.

This my father did, writing in one space "Sacramento dysentery." This was the correct disease, but the city was the place of my grandfather's burial, and not the place of his death, the latter being a village called "Hangtown." The medium quickly gave dysentery as the disease, and Sacramento as the place of my grandfather's death. It was plain that had my father written the village where his father died, instead of his burial place, the medium would have succeeded.

This, however, proved beyond a doubt that the medium obtained his information FROM THE WRITING, and not from the spirits of the dead.

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After thinking the matter over, I decided that, while I was uncertain as to the manner in which Dr. Schlossenger had performed all of these experiments, I could reproduce two of them with certainty as often as he did. I immediately made the trial and found I could succeed fully nine times out of ten on an average. I might state that the doctor also failed about one time in ten on an average; nevertheless, the people of the community were greatly excited, talking of his miracles, in groups on the streets, for some days. The medium was coining money, yet I found a few cases where he failed totally. The failures were seldom mentioned; it was the successes that excited the people.

The method I use in reproducing the first test given me, is to so direct the attention of the subjects before the writing, by my discourse, as to cause them to select unconsciously the name of the dead person in advance. This is easily managed with a little practice in talking, and still they will never guess that it is done on purpose.

Now, as they begin to write, they will naturally pause before writing each name, to think of a name to write. The pause may be but slight, yet there is some pause. Of course, when they write the selected name, no pause will be necessary; and if hurried properly at that time they will make none. This is the object of the incessant talking during the experiment. If left to themselves, the subjects will, in about one half of the cases, write the selected name in the third space from the top. In about half of the remaining cases the selected name will be written in the fourth space from the top. This is especially true if in your instructions you direct the subject to "mix the dead person's name somewhere in among the others where you cannot know where it is." In the remaining cases the subjects are liable to write the selected name anywhere, generally first or last. Now my object is to so manipulate my subjects as to cause them to write the selected name when I want them to do so. This is done by continuous

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talking, and distracting their attention until the proper moment. I choose the third space, since this, being the one they are most liable to choose of their own accord, is the easiest to force. Just as they begin to write the first name, before they make a mark, I say suddenly, "Now be sure and select names of living persons that I could not possibly know." This is almost certain to insure a pause, and the name of a living person to be written first. I continue my talking in a natural manner, taking the attention to a great extent from the writing, and nearly always observing another pause just before writing the second name. When the second name is almost finished I exclaim suddenly, "Now write as rapidly as possible!" If the subjects have been properly impressed with the seriousness of the experiment, they will almost invariably, on finishing the second name (in obedience to my command "to be as rapid as possible," and in their desire to please me), hurry into the name already in their minds, thus writing the selected name in the third place. If such is the case they will now most surely pause to think of a fourth name. If so, I am certain that I now know the selected name. However, if they should rapidly pass into the fourth name, it is then uncertain whether the selected name is in the third or fourth space. This, however, seldom happens if worked in an expert manner.

In rare cases the subject cannot be manipulated by the performer, in which case it is purely guesswork; even in such cases, however, I stand one chance in six of succeeding; and if I make a second trial on failing (not uncommon with mediums), I stand one chance in three of succeeding.

It is hardly worth while to say that as I fold the billets, I fold the third one slightly different from the rest, so that while it will not attract attention, I can see at a glance what it is when thrown on the table. I memorize the name; also, if in doubt, I fold a second choice in a still different manner for a second trial. Frequently I memorize more of the names, folding so I can pick them out. Then, after giving the dead person's name with proper effect, I pick up the others, hold them to my head and call out the names. The effect of this on a subject is very impressive.

With a little practice the above test can be given with very small chance of failure; and in the event of making a failure it can be explained by the statement that "there are opposing spirits present," or some similar excuse. If one has other tests at his command, it is well, in the event of failure, to announce that he will try something else, and then give another test. As these experiments are always tried alone with one or, at most, two subjects, a failure attracts little notice.

Now I cannot say positively that Dr. Schlossenger performed this experiment in exactly this same manner; but I do have a recollection of his hurrying me along in my writing at some stage of its progress. I also know that I can succeed as often as he did. I will add further that a few days later I prepared six names in advance, and, with my wife, had a sitting with the medium; this time, although I paid him, he failed utterly. He tried in every way and had me write additional names. This time I guarded the points in the above explanation, yet no matter how he tried, he made an utter failure. All tricks require certain conditions, and this is why it is not safe to repeat the same trick for the same person. There is too much danger that the subject may notice the sameness of the modus operandi.

Referring to the second test which was given by the medium to my father, I will state that when the subjects are writing the cities and diseases, they will naturally pause after writing the city, to think of a disease to go with it. Of course, when writing the correct ones, which are already in mind, no pause will be necessary. Also advantage may be taken of the fact that a small per cent of persons die of smallpox or measles. If in giving the directions one says, "Write like this: 'Philadelphia smallpox, New York measles,'" and the subject writes smallpox or measles in the list, it is safe to eliminate that from the case. This is especially true if written in connection with some large city, the name of which occurs readily to the mind. It is safe also to eliminate Philadelphia or New York if these should be written, providing you mentioned these names in the directions, and that the test is not being given in their section of the country. A small per cent of the people of a country die in any two places of prominence. Yet these places will be written readily by most subjects if they are suggested, or at least other places of equal prominence will be written. If an unusual place or disease should be written, it is almost certain these are the ones.

It can readily be seen how expert one can become at this by continuous practice, such as a medium has many times a day; how one can learn to take advantage of every little point, and use it with telling effect on unsuspecting strangers, who do not know what is going to happen, or what to look for.

I have been told that Dr. Schlossenger had a very sharp eye, although wearing glasses; and that the glasses were probably to make the subject think it impossible for him to read writing when they were moved out of

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position and placed on the forehead, as they were during the tests. It has also been suggested that his poor hearing was feigned, to enable him to hear remarks made about himself in his presence. I have suspected that his memory had become trained to a high degree of accuracy, enabling him to give his tests with such marvelous success, as he did with nearly all wherever he went. That he does not use one set of principles only in his tricks, I am certain, but has many more at his command which he uses continually. However, I can only vaguely guess at them from having seen his tests but once.

Now, I do not say that this was the method employed by the lady with Rev. Savage, given in the account at the beginning of this chapter. But as the experiments are practically the same, it is safe to conclude that the methods used are the same, or nearly so. If the test were genuine in the case of the lady mentioned, it was probably genuine in the case of Dr. Schlossenger. On the other hand, if it were trickery in one case, it probably was in both.