Bangalore SKEPTIC

Issue No.4

April 2008

Guide to "Cold Reading"

Poem by Dr. Keshav Rao

Halurameshwara - Miracle of a Wishing-Well
Guide to "Cold Reading"

Ray Hyman

There are many people who promote themselves as psychics or clairvoyants, and who claim that their powers enable them to read your character, make contact with dead relatives, or provide insights into your life and your future.

By far the most common method employed by psychics who have been put to the test is called cold reading. This method involves the psychic reading the subject's body language etc, and skilfully extracting information from the subject, which can then be fed back later, convincing the subject that the psychic has told them things they couldn't possibly have known!

The following is our 13 point guide to cold reading - Study them well, then amaze your friends with your new found psychic powers!

1. Remember that the key ingredient of a successful character reading is confidence.

If you look and act as if you believe in what you are doing, you will be able to sell even a bad reading to most subjects. One danger of playing the role of reader is that you may actually begin to believe that you really are divining your subject's true character!

2. Make creative use of the latest statistical abstracts, polls and surveys.

These can provide you with much information about what various subclasses in our society believe, do, want, worry about etc. For example, if you can ascertain a subject's place of origin, educational level, and his/her parents' religion and vocations, you have gained information which should allow you to predict with high probability his/her voting preferences and attitudes to many subjects.

3. Set the stage for your reading.

Profess a modesty about your talents. Make no excessive claims. You will then catch your subject off guard. You are not challenging them to a battle of wits - You can read his/her character, whether he/she believes you or not.

4. Gain the subject's cooperation in advance.

Emphasise that the success of the reading depends as much on the subject's cooperation as on your efforts. (After all, you imply, you already have a successful career at character reading - You are not on trial, your subject is!) State that due to difficulties of language and communication, you may not always convey the meaning you intend. In these cases, the subject must strive to fit the reading to his/her own life. You accomplish two valuable ends with this dodge - Firstly, you have an alibi in case the reading doesn't click; it's the subject's fault, not yours! Secondly, your subject will strive to fit your generalities to his/her specific life circumstances. Later, when the subject recalls the reading, you will be credited with much more detail than you actually provided! This is crucial. Your reading will only succeed to the degree that the subject is made an active participant in the reading. The good reader is the one who, deliberately or unwittingly, forces the subject to search his/her mind to make sense of your statements.
5. Use a gimmick, such as Tarot cards, crystal ball, palm reading etc.

Use of props serves two valuable purposes. Firstly, it lends atmosphere to the reading. Secondly, (and more importantly) it gives you time to formulate your next question/statement. Instead of just sitting there, thinking of something to say, you can be intently studying the cards / crystal ball etc. You may opt to hold hands with your subject - This will help you feel the subject's reactions to your statements. If you are using, say, palmistry (the reading of hands) it will help if you have studied some manuals, and have learned the terminology. This will allow you to more quickly zero in on your subject's chief concerns - "do you wish to concentrate on the heart line or the wealth line?"

6. Have a list of stock phrases at the tip of your tongue.

Even during a cold reading, a liberal sprinkling of stock phrases will add body to the reading and will help you fill in time while you formulate more precise characterisations. Use them to start your readings. Palmistry, tarot and other fortune telling manuals are a key source of good phrases.

7. Keep your eyes open!

Use your other senses as well. Size the subject up by observing his/her clothes, jewellery, mannerisms and speech. Even a crude classification based on these can provide the basis for a good reading. Also, watch carefully for your subject's response to your statements - You will soon learn when you are hitting the mark!

8. Use the technique of fishing.

This is simply a device to get the subject to tell you about his/herself. Then you rephrase what you have been told and feed it back to the subject.

One way of fishing is to phrase each statement as question, then wait for the reply. If the reply or reaction is positive, then you turn the statement into a positive assertion. Often the subject will respond by answering the implied question and then some. Later, the subject will forget that he/she was the source of the information! By making your statements into questions, you also force the subject to search his/her memory to retrieve specific instances to fit your general statement.

9. Learn to be a good listener.

During the course of a reading your client will be bursting to talk about incidents that are brought up. The good reader allows the client to talk at will. On one occasion I observed a tealeaf reader. The client actually spent 75% of the time talking. Afterward when I questioned the client about the reading she vehemently insisted that she had not uttered a single word during the course of the reading. The client praised the reader for having astutely told her what in fact she herself had spoken.

Another value of listening is that most clients that seek the services of a reader actually want someone to listen to their problems. In addition, many clients have already made up their minds about what choices they are going to make. They merely want support to carry out their decision.

10. Dramatise your reading.

Give back what little information you do have or pick up a little bit at a time. Make it seem more than it is. Build word pictures around each divulgence. Don't be afraid of hamming it up.

11. Always give the impression that you know more than you are saying.

The successful reader, like the family doctor, always acts as if he/she knows much more. Once you have persuaded the subject that you know one item of information that you couldn't possibly
have known (through normal channels) the subject will assume that you know all! At this point, the subject will open up and confide in you.

12. Don't be afraid to flatter your subject at every opportunity.

An occasional subject will protest, but will still lap it up. In such cases, you can add,

13. Remember the Golden Rule - always tell the subject what he/she wants to hear!

Courtesy: Australian Skeptics (http://www.skeptics.com.au/)

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QUOTES ON SKEPTICISM

Atheism in its negation of gods is at the same time the strongest affirmation of man, and through man, the eternal yea to life, purpose, and beauty.

— EMMA GOLDMAN

I feel no need of any faith than my faith in human beings.

— PEARL S BUCK

Like many people, I have no religion, and I am just sitting in a small boat drifting with the tide. I live in the doubts of my duty... ... ... I think there is dignity in this, just to go on working.

— FEDERICO FELLINI

God is a falsehood conceived by man. Like many falsehoods it is useful to some extent. But like all falsehoods, it pollutes life in the long run.

— GORA

The skeptic has no illusions about life, nor a vain belief in the promise of immortality. Since this life here and now is all we can know, our most reasonable option is to live it fully.

— PAUL KURTZ
ALL SUFFER AS SOME ARE HOLY

Holy Ganga plunders all
The greatness of simple water;
The holy religions abuse all
The greatness of simple humans.
Highly holy tragedies are these
For Ganga, humans, and all.
Many cruel miseries everyone suffers,
As religions claim some things are holy,
And each declares itself most holy.

Love suffers as marriage is holy.
Marriage suffers as wedding is holy.
Brides suffer as dowry is holy.
Couple suffers as husband is holy.
Babies suffer as sons are holy.
All suffer as some are holy.

Humans suffer as males are holy.
Cows suffer as cows are holy.
The sick suffer as plagues are holy.
The innocents suffer as temples are holy.
The needy suffer as charity is holy.
All suffer as some are holy.

The present suffers as the past is holy.
People suffer as country is holy.
Purpose suffers as the rituals are holy.
Truth suffers as scriptures are holy.
Knowledge suffers as knowledge is holy.
All suffer as some are holy.

Humanity suffers as religions are holy.
Religion suffers as castes are holy.
God suffers as gods are holy.
Gods suffer as priests are holy.
Poor sinner suffers as rich worship is holy.
Whole mission suffers as muhurta(Instant of time) is holy.
Whole life one suffers, as the birth-time is holy.

While rational humans weep for the victims,
The holy of the holies revel in all glory.
Much more sinister tragedy there is:
Wars are holy, and not so peace.
Many tongues of god have proclaimed these.
Many songs of god have declaimed these.

-Keshava Rao

(Dr.Keshava Rao is a retired computer scientist and a well known Kannada essayist. He is a founding member and treasurer of Vicharavadi Sangha, Bangalore (Bangalore Rationalist Association))
Halurameshwara:
Miracle of a Wishing-Well

T.V. Manoj

A few months back a Kannada television channel telecast a sensational documentary on a Shiva temple (Halurameshwara) at Hosadurga in Chitradurga district. This nondescript temple has, according to the television anchor, a “Wishing-Well” from which pop up everyday articles and eatables such as banana, rice (including well-cooked curd-rice!), flowers, betel leaves, bangles, coconuts etc appropriate to the wishes made by the devotees. The anchor claimed that this miracle had been taking place for decades but nobody had been able to unravel the mystery behind it. A legend, I came to hear later, is that when the wife of
one of Mysore Maharajas did not beget a child even after years of wedlock, she visited the temple and performed a puja. At no time, a miniature replica of a cradle popped up from deep inside the well! Soon the Maharani gave birth to a baby!

Recently I got a chance to visit this temple. I was in Chitradurga as part of my official duty. As I have a passion for traveling, I make use of the evenings and holidays during my official tours to visit nearby tourist locations and historically important places. When I asked Pradeep, my colleague in our Chitradurga office, about the places of interest in and around the town, he first listed a series of well-trodden tourist locations such as Chitradurga fort (a magnificent structure indeed), Chandravalli caves, Jogimati Hill Station, etc. In addition, he also happened to mention, perhaps knowing my special interest in things called “miracles”, this temple at Hosadurga and its miraculous wishing-well. It was he who first told me about the television documentary. He also offered to take us (myself and Ravishankar, my colleague from Bangalore) to the temple. Seeing a golden chance to see a “miracle” in person, we grabbed the opportunity.

On 16 December 2007, a Saturday, we left Chitradurga in the early hours. Hosadurga, a small panchayat town, is only a three hour journey (by car) from here. When we reached Hosadurga, Balraj, our colleague, was waiting for us. Being a resident of Hosadurga and a very good host, he was to take us to the temple. After having a delicious breakfast at his house, we left the town.

An idol representing tortoise incarnation (Kurma avatar) of Vishnu at the Gavirangapura temple

Since all the three of my colleagues are persons with a religious bend of mind, they decided to visit first yet another prominent temple in the nearby village called Gavirangapura. The temple’s presiding deity is a tortoise (Kurma avatar of Maha Vishnu). This is one of the only two temples (in the whole of India) where the tortoise incarnation of Vishnu is worshipped, the other one being located somewhere in Andhra Pradesh. Here, in this temple, a garish wall-painting done possibly by a local artist, attracted my attention. The painting is of a goddess and
she is depicted with the body of a cow and the head of a woman. But in his enthusiasm to be a little realistic, the artist painted the woman with her breasts, forgetting in the meanwhile that the body of the cow was already shown with its udders – the beast now effectively has three mammary glands!

We are side-tracking; it is now time for us to get back to our main topic – Halurameshwara and its Wishing-well. We left Gavirangapura at about 1.45 pm. We finished our lunch at a road-side restaurant (dhaba) at Hosadurga. When we reached Halurameshwara, it was about 4 O’clock in the evening. We could see a number of vehicles parked outside the temple compound. This temple attracts devotees from various parts of Karnataka, including Bangalore, if one goes by the number plates of the devotees’ vehicles. “Miracle” indeed is a flourishing business here.

The temple has two structures – the main and the bigger one at the entrance of the temple compound and the smaller one at the back. The wishing-well is inside the smaller structure. Except for two aged women and a temple priest, there was nobody in the main temple at the time of our visit. The centre of attraction undoubtedly was the wishing-well around which we could see a crowd of men and women – young and old – assembled. Everybody was waiting for their turn to witness and be part of the miracle.

To witness the miracle, one has to buy a coupon from the office and hand it over to the gatekeeper of the well. The coupons were numbered and the devotees would be called in serial order (unless, of course, you are a VIP) to offer the puja. Balraj bought a coupon for us and we waited for our turn. Since the crowd was reasonably big (though not a huge crowd), I decided to take a walk around the temple as it would take a minimum of one hour for our turn to come.

The well/pond inside the temple is connected to a tank outside. The water coming out of the temple was off-white in colour because of the offerings made to the idol. As part of the puja/offering, the priest breaks the coconuts brought by the devotees and the coconut milk is poured into the well. Pieces of coconut and bananas are also dropped in the well. I could also notice a woman washing some dirty linen on the steps of the tank outside. As a result of all these, the water inside the tank also is off-white in colour. This whitish tinge of the water in this tank could possibly be the reason why the temple itself is called halu-rameshwara (Halu, in Kannada, is milk). After taking a walk around, I got back to the entrance of the temple. By now the crowd had become thinner and I could position myself (after a bit of jostling, of course) next to the door which would give me a reasonably good view of the happenings inside.

Apart from the light from the oil-lamps and the dim sun light seeping in through the door (the temple does not have any windows), there was no light inside. Because of this, the visibility inside the temple was poor. I could notice electric bulbs inside the temple, but they were either switched off or there was no current. The well (it is more like a small pond) is rectangular in shape. The source of water here is possibly a natural spring inside the
the well. A two to two and a half feet wide marble stone pavement is done on all four sides of the well. And the walls of the temple are built so close to the pavement that there is not enough space to move around the well freely. Nor is one permitted to do so. One has to climb down a few steps to reach the water level in the well. An idol is kept on a stone beam laid across the well. Flowers, bananas, betel leaves etc are also piled up on the beam next to the idol. A priest was sitting on the stone paving on the left. A man in his early twenties was standing in the water on the right. The devotee is asked to perform a puja to the idol. He is then asked to sit on the pavement at the rear-right corner of the pond and pray for his wishes to be fulfilled. (In the meantime a new number is being called out and the exercise is repeated). I was expecting that the article would pop up on its own from inside. I could observe nothing of those sorts. (Ravishankar, however, told me later that he had noticed a single instance of a piece of banana popping up even when the water was left undisturbed for some time). Instead, the man standing in the pond stirs the water violently with his hand, searches for something, then picks up a torn betel leaf and a piece of crushed banana from somewhere in the pond and hands them over to the devotee. He also does not fail to interpret the “meaning” of the miraculous gift – it is an indication that all the wishes of the devotee would be fulfilled in the near future!

At present a new coupon number is being called out and the owner of the coupon shoves his way to the temple. He hands over a coconut, a few ripe bananas and a bunch of flowers to the priest, who keeps the bananas and the flowers on the pavement on his left and then breaks the coconut smashing it on the pavement. Coconut milk and pieces of coconut fall into the well.

*Devotees waiting for their turn to witness the miracle*
A view of the Wishing Well, the idol, and the prominent players involved.
This exercise was repeated with a few more devotees, each one getting betel leaves, flowers, or pieces of crushed (rotten) banana. None of them got a cradle or any other items which would unambiguously symbolize their wishes without the need of an interpreter. Perhaps, one needs to be part of a royal family for the divinity to come out with an unequivocal message! The entire drama was so irksome that I lost interest, yet I decided to wait for our turn to come.

A devotee performs a puja. One could also notice flowers, betel leaves, banana etc lying on the beam placed across the well

We decided that Balraj would be offering the puja and I would be accepting the miraculous prasad. Our coupon number was called out, Balraj did the puja with all the required devotion, and I went to the rear side of the well to accept the prasad. But it seems we made a mistake. The gatekeeper boy announced that we would not be given the gift, as the denomination of the coupon we had bought was not sufficient for the gift to pop up! It was enough only to perform a mere puja. Unaware of the hike in tariff, Balraj had bought a coupon of lower denomination! I was getting a bit disappointed as I was about to lose a golden chance to observe the drama from close quarters. But Balraj, an accomplished marketing professional and a local heavyweight, was not the one to give up so easily. He asked me to wait and demanded the man, the prasad-picker: “Hey, look, we are local persons, get the prasad!” Realizing the futility of arguing with Balraj, he bends, stirs the water and, lo, picks up a fully peeled and crushed banana! Persistence pays! While handing over the banana, he told me to take that home and perform a puja to fulfill my wishes! This divine interpreter did not have a clue that my wish had just been fulfilled – a pseudo-miracle had just a moment ago got exposed!
Where is the “miracle”?

Try as I may, I could not see any miracle in the whole drama enacted in the temple. What I could see was a bunch of con-men swindling the unsuspecting (in fact, extremely credulous) devotees, who refused to use even an iota of their brain cells. Had these devotees asked themselves a few simple questions, they would not have fallen prey to these day-light robbers and wasted their time and money. Given the above narrative, any rational person would have asked:

1. Why did the omnipotent and omnipresent god decide to manifest himself/herself/itself through a miracle specifically at this place and nowhere else?

2. How authentic is the information related to the visit of the Mysore Maharani to this temple? Is it a mere urban legend?

3. If one assumes that this information related to the Maharani’s visit is correct, one should ask: What made the temple deity to bring forth a miniature cradle in response to a Maharani’s wishes, whereas the lay persons have to satisfy with flowers, betel leaves and rotten bananas? Why does the god have a preference for the Maharani over laypersons? Would it not have been a better and convenient (for the Maharani at least) miracle, had a baby itself popped up from the well?!

4. Why does the temple assistant who picks up the prasad from the well frequently stir up the water? Why does he not leave it alone?

5. Why did the god decide to bring up a banana for me, an unbeliever, after my friend Balraj demanded (almost threatened) to have one?

How to investigate this miracle scientifically?

To have a proper investigation of this “miracle” the cooperation of the temple
authorities is a must, which is impossible to come by. Assuming that permission is granted, how should one go ahead?

1. Clean up the well and its surrounding thoroughly.

2. Find out the source of the water.

3. Do not allow the temple authorities from coming near the well when a devotee performs the puja.

4. Do not allow the devotees to drop anything inside the well as part of their puja.

5. Allow the prasad to pop up on its own without any kind of interventions from the temple authorities, devotees, or anybody else.

After these precautions are taken, if a banana or a betel leaf still pops up, one can reasonably assume that a miracle does occur.

A rational explanation of the “miracle”

In the absence of an investigation as detailed above, the only rational explanation possible is this: the temple authorities are conning the devotees!

1. The temple authorities can dump whatever they want to inside the well before the devotees are given access to it.

2. It is also possible for the temple priest (who sits on the right side of the idol) to clandestinely drop bananas, betel leaves, flowers, etc into the well at regular intervals or whenever he wants to.

3. The articles kept next to the idol on the stone beam can also be dropped into the well unnoticed by the devotees.

4. The devotees themselves may be dropping some articles when they conduct the puja.

5. The articles thus dropped inside the well may pop up under pressure from the upward stream of the water spring inside the well.

6. The frequent stirring of the water also helps to bring up the articles dumped in the well.

7. The man, who hands over the articles to the devotees, picks up the items not only from the reasonably visible part of the pond but even from the dark corners of the well, including from the surface of the water just below where the temple priest sits. This enables him to fool the masses easily.

My experience in this temple only reinforces my conviction that there are no miracles in this world, only conmen and credulous believers.

Photos: B.R. Ravishankar
Peddling "Islamic Miracle Medicines" and other paraphernalias - Baba Budanagiri, Chickamaglur, 16 March 2008.

"STICK NO BILLS". Perhaps the notice is not applicable to godmen and women - a poster found near Mumbai VT station on 25 March.
Tools for Skeptical Thinking

Carl Sagan

Carl Sagan's famous essay, *The Fine Art of Baloney Detection*, more or less encapsulates the basic tenets of Skeptical Thinking. The present article is an extract from the essay. The full text can be found in one of Sagan's best-sellers *The Demonhaunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*.

- Wherever possible there must be independent confirmation of the "facts."
- Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.
- Arguments from authority carry little weight—"authorities" have made mistakes in the past. They will do so again in the future. Perhaps a better way to say it is that in science there are no authorities; at most, there are experts.
- Spin more than one hypothesis. If there's something to be explained, think of all the different ways in which it could be explained. Then think of tests by which you might systematically disprove each of the alternatives. What survives, the hypothesis that resists disproof in this Darwinian selection among "multiple working hypotheses," has a much better chance of being the right answer than if you had simply run with the first idea that caught your fancy.
- Try not to get overly attached to a hypothesis just because it's yours. It's only a way station in the pursuit of knowledge. Ask yourself why you like the idea. Compare it fairly with the alternatives. See if you can find reasons for rejecting it. If you don't, others will.
- Quantify. If whatever it is you're explaining has some measure, some numerical quantity attached to it, you'll be much better able to discriminate among competing hypotheses. What is vague and qualitative is open to many explanations. Of course there are truths to be sought in the many qualitative issues we are obliged to confront, but finding them is more challenging.
- If there's a chain of argument, every link in the chain must work (including the premise)—not just most of them.
- Occam's Razor. This convenient rule-of-thumb urges us when faced with two hypotheses that explain the data equally well to choose the simpler.
- Always ask whether the hypothesis can be, at least in principle, falsified. Propositions that are untestable, unfalsifiable are not worth much. You must be able to check assertions out. Inveterate skeptics must be given the chance to follow your reasoning, to duplicate your experiments and see if they get the same result.