



Talking to the folks in the Spirit World

Amsterdam's modern mediums and the man who trains them in communicating with the 'Spirit World.'

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TM GETTING THE NAME GEORGE. He has a bald head, and is an older man,' says Marieke. Her words are direct, certain. 'You knew him very well, but you weren't at his funeral. You used to have long talks; he was sort of a mentor to you. He would read you a story about a rainbow. He went to the hospital for cancer, but he died of something else.'

It's Wednesday evening, in a studio space in Amsterdam's De Baarsjes neighbourhood. We're sitting across from each other, knees almost touching, nothing between us. Marieke's eyes are closed; her face is peaceful. She could be any hip 40-something, taking a breather in her busy day. She opens her eyes and stares intently at me through her dark-rimmed, no-nonsense glasses.

Marieke is getting some of the details all right, but the truth is far away. The only George I know is alive and well and living in Colorado.

If this were the usual adult education class there would be fallen soufflés to eat or mis-conjugated French verbs to correct. Instead there are dead people to recognize. Welcome to the Paul Jacobs Institute

of Psychic and Mediumistic Development. If you're a psychic/medium in training, this is the place to make your mistakes—and learn from them. The seven students here tonight shelled out €400 for about a year's worth of sessions where they can hone their psychic and mediumistic skills.

Not all of the students have 'come out of the closet' with their studies. Most ask me not to use their real names—at least not their full names. I can only guess why. But some of the more advanced students are further 'out' than others. Where most people have 'marketing coordinator' on their business cards, Tina, a baby boomer from California, is already giving private readings and has a card printed with 'medium'.

Anna, a 33-year-old speech therapist, isn't so bold. She doesn't want her relationship with her dead mother to upset her stepmother, so she keeps her studies quiet for now. Anna's mother has been dead for 21 years—or as they say in the class, she's been in the Spirit World. Tonight, during her own practice reading, Anna gets a vision of a boat. She's produced to give more details. What is the boat

doing? Is it moving or at anchor? What kind of boat is it?

The prodding is done by Paul Jacobs, a slight Englishman in an olive green T-shirt, faded jeans and loafers. He could be 'some guy down the pub,' or he could be one of Britain's more popular psychic/mediums, recently transplanted to Amsterdam. He's both, actually.

Jacobs walks between the pairs of students dispersed around the room. He unfolds Marieke, who sits with arms and legs crossed and tells her to sit up. 'You need a straight line for the energy.'

As he walks around he calls out pointers now and then: 'Let the spirit come alive through you. Express the emotion, anger, frustration, vitality or humour you feel from the communicator. Don't just use a dull, flat monotone voice.' The 'communicator' is the soul sending messages from the Spirit World.

This is the advanced class, so these students already know the basics: how to get information psychically (from a live person) or 'mediumistically' (from a so-called dead person). When they give their

own readings, they know they'll need to use both skills, and will have to give solid evidence to identify any 'contact' they make with the Spirit World. They've been warned over and over again that they have an enormous responsibility to get it right—that they will be held accountable when they, too, finally 'pass over.' And they know that they have to practise and practise, and even then, they won't always succeed.

Marieke isn't put off by the George that I don't seem to recognize. 'In the learning process you keep falling on your ass,' she says. 'It's like trying to walk a thin line between imagination and what you really get. But I know it's there and eventually I'll get it.'

As Jacobs points out, it takes cooperation between the psychic/medium, the communicator and the recipient to make a good reading. So maybe it's not all Marieke's fault.

After two rounds of practice readings, the students analyze the results. 'Did you get some evidence wrong?' asks Jacobs. 'Did you try to figure out why?'

THE OTHER

Then they're on to another gruelling exercise. Although I'm really only here to observe, I'm called into play again. These people have been 'reading' each other and communicating with each other's friends in the Spirit World for almost four months. To them I'm fresh meat—virgin territory.

Jacobs seats me at the front of the class, facing the students. I want to you to get a contact for Nanci. Then I want you to tell me who you have, the relationship to her, a characteristic of the contact's health, two personal or physical characteristics and then something specific: a hobby, an interest, work, an object or a memory.'

This is more than the usual 'I-was-thinking-about-my-mother-and-she-called-we-must-be-psyhic' phenomenon. This is going to be hard for the students.

Fourteen eyes close and seven faces relax as the students try to connect with someone from the Spirit World who might be hanging around me. Meanwhile, I can study the lines around their mouths, their 14 shoes pointed at me. I feel like I'm five years old and in church, sneaking a peek during the Lord's Prayer. It's almost

stranger than having 14 eyes staring at me. Until they open them and stare at me.

Marieke has given up on George and has a new contact: 'He was a friend, a man, a close friend. He was a writer at a newspaper. He was slim, tall. He died of a heart attack. I see a pipe. He smoked.' (My only dead smoker friend was a customs broker.)

Anna gets somebody else: 'She's not family, but a friend. She died around age 40, not old. She was busy and optimistic. She had a job with a lot of paperwork, going here and going there. Died of a sickness, but not long in the sickbed.' (The only woman this could be was anything but optimistic.)

Maric: 'I have a young boy, blonde and lively. He lived in a sunny place, maybe California. He died in an accident, riding a bicycle. He was really excited about his new paper route. I see a hairy dog.' (I have no idea who he's talking about, but this boy is my favourite contact of the night.)

Finally, there's Tina: 'I have your mother-in-law and she's showing me cookies.' This almost seems like cheating. Several months ago in a private sitting, Tina had

made contact with my late mother-in-law, identifying her through a china figure she'd never seen. The sitting had gone by the book. She'd amazed me with good, strong, detailed evidence that she could not have known about.

Still, that shouldn't get Tina off the hook tonight, and it doesn't. Jacobs sends her back 'up' to find new evidence of the woman she's already 'met.' I watch her face as she grins as if in cosmic argument. Then she opens her eyes and says, 'She showed me roses. And the names Nanci and Chris.' My mother-in-law used to name her rose bushes after her family, including one named after me, and another after Chris, my husband and her son. Enough said.

The people doing the course got interested in Spiritualism for different reasons, but they all share an openness to the idea that there might be 'another world' out there somewhere. For Anna, these classes are just one more step in a search that's included astrology, tarot cards, acupuncture and even a failed visit to a medium. Anna began to study Spiritualism after

making contact with her mother through Jacobs. 'I want to work and practice more, to feel the energy. Doing it relaxes me, like meditation. Plus, I can keep in contact with my mother.'

A hairdresser by day, Marieke says that the four years she's spent with Spiritualism have been like coming home, a phrase used over and over with psychic mediums who have wondered about their experiences throughout their lives. 'I never understood it before.'

'Spirituality has changed the way I look at a flower, at people, at animals. It used to be that people would bug me and I'd say, 'Get off my back.' Now I just can't judge people any more. Love took me over and I see everything in another light. What I do is nothing special. It's an earthly thing, but people have forgotten how to deal with it.' She mentions that she'd like to work with dying people, 'to give them peace and an objective person to talk to'.

It's all beginning to sound like the question and answer session in a beauty pageant. I begin to look for the soundproof booth, as Tina talks about helping autistic children break out of their shell or opening

a centre where people could come to 'relax, find yourself and explore your potential'. It's almost a relief when Mark, one of the few men in the class, says he sometimes uses his training in taverns, perching on recently vacated bar stools to 'read the energy' of the former inhabitant. I knew there had to be a more 'earthly' use for this training.

Jacobs, meanwhile, closes the class with a short speech. 'There's more to this than just giving people a message of help with their lives, just giving them comfort and support from a loved one who's moved on,' he says. 'This experience can change a person's life. We'll only do that by touching the spirit, the essence of the recipient. When they realize that they are more than this physical body, then they will begin to search for an eternal message—not necessarily to become a medium—but to find an expression in their own lives.'

Jacobs, 46, has been a Spiritualist with a capital S since 1983. His early training and mentorship was under Gordon Higginson, president of the Spiritualist Church and its union of churches. Spiritualism is even a recognized religion in the United Kingdom, with more than 400 churches across the country. An offshoot of Modern American Spiritualism, it all started in 1848 when sisters Margareta and Kate Fox made contact with the murdered spirit of Charles B. Rosna through a technique amusingly known as 'tptology': a mode of spirit communication in which spirits lift and tip a table during a seance to produce rapping sounds.

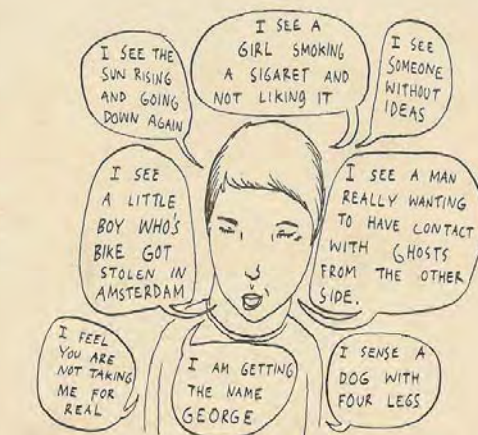
While there are a few Spiritualist centres in Holland, they don't have the official recognition that the British and American Spiritualist churches do. And although Jacobs is an active speaker on the Spiritualist church circuit and a tutor at the Arthur Fınday College (the Spiritualist Union's training centre in Stansted, England) his newly opened institute here in Amsterdam is not officially affiliated with the church.

This is not the New Age movement, popular in America, which sometimes goes so far as to include alien sightings and drumming in the forest. Nor is it an Eastern philosophy. Jacobs and his students are 'modern mediums,' out to prove that the consciousness survives death, that life is eternal.

This is different from orthodox religions where you read in a book or hear from a priest that there's life after death. We're trying to give people factual information that the spirit and the mind survive after death,' says Jacobs.

From his profession you'd think that there would be something otherworldly about him—something spiritual and mysterious. But in fact it wouldn't be hard to mistake him for a businessman or plumber. And yet something about him attracts people with questions or doubts about people they've lost, he says, even when he's not giving sessions in Spiritualism. 'If I go to a bar for a drink on my own, someone will always come stand by me and start telling me about the mother they've lost or that they feel suicidal,' he tells me. 'I don't tell them what I do; they just need someone to listen.'

A few days after Jacobs's class, we return to the studio space for a public demonstra-



tion. These evenings are Jacobs's chance to prove to the outside world that life goes on—and, no doubt, an opportunity to attract new students. So far as he's concerned, tonight it's the 'medium' that's important, not the message: here's a real spiritual twist on Marshall McLuhan. He's not so interested in what the spirits actually say to the recipients; he wants to convince people that communication can be made, that 'the spirit is eternal and that their family and friends are still interested in them'.

Around 30 chairs have been set up, but only 19 people arrive. The registration table and Albert Heijn coffee and cookies could just as well be welcoming us to a financial planning seminar. Contrary to the goal of demonstrating to the 'public,' it seems that each person here already has some sort of connection to Spiritualism, usually through a relative or friend studying with Jacobs or the co-host, Jose Gosschalk, a psychic/medium from Naarden. Nobody seems to have walked in cold off the street, but that doesn't mean they are shells or even believers.

A few people show up in pairs, some in family groups. One young woman wears a T-shirt with 'Divine, divine, divine' emblazoned across the front. By sitting down in the audience, all of them have opened themselves up for contacts from their friends in the Spirit World. It's a 'don't call us, we'll call you' situation, apparently. There's no turning back.

A couple in their late 20s sit down near the rear. She wears an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt and platform shoes; he looks a bit like Keanu Reeves back in his blunt-cut, hair-in-the-face days. We learned that when this 'Keanu' was 12, his grandmother died quite suddenly. He's gone to several mediums, trying to get her to contact him. Last August a medium told him that he would hear from his grandmother 'when the time is right'. He says he hopes that time is tonight.

For 30-something Kim, this is the second of Jacobs's demonstrations. 'I lost two young friends in my life. I want to know they are okay.' At her first demonstration three weeks ago, Jacobs contacted one of

the friends, who'd died in a motorcycle accident. Kim says she has faith that she'll hear from the second friend tonight.

It's time to begin. There are no dim lights, no microphones. After a short introduction by Gosschalk, Jacobs is on his feet, pacing back and forth. He zeros in on the back row, directly behind 'Keanu,' who's sitting next to Kim. He says he has three people from the Spirit World waiting to communicate. Everyone in the area sits up. When he approaches man in his 50s, the disappointment shows in the audience members nearby. In his blue T-shirt and khakis, this man could be any suburban guy on his way to Praxis, except that he's stopped off here tonight for a quick chat with the dead.

Jacobs acknowledges that he's met the man once before and then begins in his fast patter: 'Do you have someone in the Spirit World connected to newspapers?' No, the guy says.

'I'm seeing newspapers coming off a printing press. Printing? Can you understand that? I know you were in the music industry. Did you ever meet Freddy Mercury?'

No. 'Or anyone from the Queen group? Because I'm getting a lot of their music.'

No, the guy just listened to them a lot.

'You have an old tin with a lot of memorabilia and things in it that have to do with your life. Have you had it out lately?'

A nod.

'Your mind's been going over the past. You've been sort of pessimistic about what you've achieved. They [the spirits] were with you while you did that. You're wondering if it's all over. But they're saying it's in your hands. There's a lot more you can achieve with your music. There's something in that tin that you can do something with. Something you may have written a long time ago?'

The man is silent, but seems to acquiesce.

'Don't throw it away.'

A little more adamantly, now: 'Will you do something with that?' The man nods nonchalantly.

Jacobs quickly moves to the next row, where he'd passed over the Keanu couple.

'I've a woman here who seems like a grandmother.' Keanu looks at him intently and his friend looks excited. 'She was like a mother to you. You could really talk to her?' He nods. Affirmative.

'You're on the borderline in your career right now. She says you can do it. She's wagging her finger at me. Did she used to waggle her finger at you?' Keanu doesn't seem to understand the term 'waggle.' Jacobs waves his finger back and forth in the air. 'Like this?' Not really. 'Do you have the tendency not to concentrate on what you're doing? Do you lack discipline?' Not really, he says. The young woman next to him nods her head emphatically. 'Well, your grandmother thinks you need to be more disciplined and concentrate on what you're doing. Focus.'

'I'm getting matches. She's lighting matches. Did you like to make fires when you were young?' No. The guy was afraid of fire, he says. 'She's telling you that you're playing with fire and if you don't quit, you're going to get burned.' Keanu looks uncomfortable. 'I'm not going into details here, and I think we both know what she's talking about. But she's telling you to watch out.'

Jacobs jumps to the third contact and questions Kim about drownings and friends. Finally: 'Your friend says to take his sense of adventure into your life, into your relationship.'

Like celestial greeting cards from fathers, friends, mothers-in-law and aunts, the messages pile up as Jacobs hops from one member of the audience to another.

'You're making things worse for yourself than things need to be.'

'You're waiting to hear the results of something. Well, it's going to be positive.'

'Don't take any nonsense or give any ground to the people on earth who are bothering you.'

'Take more gambles. Don't be afraid of things not working out.'

'You're at the stage in your life where it's time to get things right. The time's right now.'

At one point Jacobs chastises a woman for volunteering a detail. 'You're telling me information. I'm supposed to be telling you! He only wants 'yes' or 'no' responses when he is presenting evidence, he says.

Keanu is elated with his grandmother's message. 'I always believed she was with me, but I wanted to know it in words.' After the medium last August told him he'd have to wait, he thought it would be years. 'I was putting up a wall. I was saying "I want! I want!" Tonight I was ready.' His grandmother is his soul mate, he believes. 'She has always been behind me, but this is just another way to know. It's more complete.' He doesn't elaborate on the 'fire' he's been playing with, though.

Kim is pleased that she's now heard from both of her buddies. 'We were all friends on earth. Now I know they're together. It gives me a little bit more strength. I know how to live my life, and I'm not alone.'

Afterwards, people mill around, eager to discuss what they've heard and how they've heard it. Maybe they're basking in the energy, or seduced by the prospect of talking to the dead people in their lives. Jacobs, however, seems more intent on getting to the pub. Maybe tonight he'll just tell people he's a plumber.