

Heavenly encounters

By MICHELLE BEARDEN
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TAMPA

Talking about her young husband's death wasn't the hard part for Dinah Harrison Arnette.

But it was difficult to explain his spiritual presence in her life to other people. "Things that can't be explained leave people uneasy," says the Tampa woman. "But I'm definitely seeing more openness about belief in angels and the afterlife. Too many people are experiencing it to ignore it."

When Patrick Harrison died in a truck-train collision in Tampa at age 26 in 1978, his young widow had no expectation of seeing or hearing him again. But over the years, she says, he has appeared to her, giving her emotional and financial guidance, even saving her life once.

The daughter of a fundamentalist preacher, Arnette wasn't inclined to accept what was happening. But once she did, it was like "a miracle from God."

"Just knowing he was still protecting me was healing," she says. "It gave me the courage to go on."

The woman who once kept silent about her heavenly encounters has become bold about her beliefs. She has been featured on "The Phil Donahue Show" and in newspaper articles and has self-published "Never Alone" (\$13, available at Waldenbooks). She has even developed a Web site, www.dmariepress.com.

True to the book's title, Arnette is not alone these days.

For seven weeks, James Van Praagh's "Talking to Heaven: A Medium's Message of Life After Death" (Dutton, \$23) has topped The New York Times' nonfiction best-seller list. He has been on the television circuit — Oprah Winfrey, Larry King, "Inside Edition" — and profiled in People magazine.

Van Praagh, who lives in Los Angeles, is no stranger to spiritualism. Reared a Catholic, this former altar boy says he began having clairvoyant experiences at age 8, when he saw an "illuminated hand of God" after praying for proof of a supreme being.

That "glowing white hand" left a lasting imprint on Van Praagh.

"What I began to understand was that there was so much more to life than I had been taught and what I could see through my physical eyes," he said during a recent visit to Tampa.

Van Praagh, a graduate of San Francisco State University and an aspiring screenwriter, was doing clerical work for the William Morris Agency and Paramount Studios in Hollywood when a friend took him to see a medium in 1992.

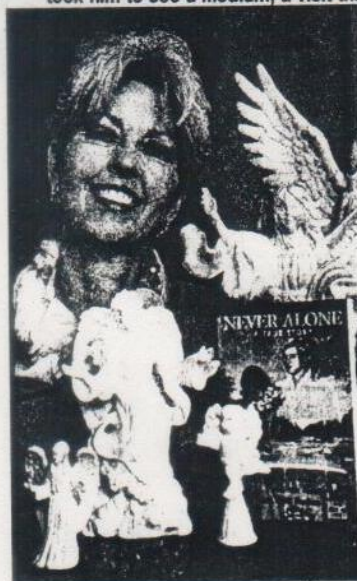
"The spirits said, 'We'll take care of you if you'll do our work,'" he recalls. He heeded the call and quit his job, becoming a full-time medium and taking on celebrity clients. Among them: actor Cindy Williams and the late Audrey Meadows, who believed he helped her communicate with her late husband, Jackie Gleason.

Fame came quickly, helped by a booking on NBC's "The Other Side" — a show on the supernatural — and a contract for "Talking to Heaven." Now he is in such de-



PHIL SHEFFIELD/Tribune photo

James Van Praagh's book "Talking to Heaven" is a best seller. Van Praagh, right, says he began having clairvoyant experiences at age 8. He was an aspiring screenwriter working in Hollywood in 1992 when a friend took him to see a medium, a visit that changed his life.



JIM REED/Tribune photo

Dinah Harrison Arnette's young husband died 20 years ago, but she believes he still communicates with her.

Some people believe all it takes is intuition, quiet space and a listening ear to communicate with loved ones who have "passed over."



PHIL SHEFFIELD/Tribune photo

8 Michelle Bearden will report on communicating with the dead in her "Keeping the Faith" segment Wednesday on Newschannel 8's 5 p.m. newscast.

mand on the lecture circuit that he has suspended his private practice, in which he commanded \$250 for a 90-minute session.

"Every medium is a psychic, but not every psychic is a medium," Van Praagh says. He says he has honed his intuition for years.

Two-thirds of his book is devoted to his personal story and a collection of connections he has made to those in the beyond. The last third provides six steps on how to embrace grief and overcome pain. He also gives tips on how to develop one's intuition, which could open doors to afterlife communication.

"Anyone can learn to do it," he insists. "We're all transmitting stations, constantly receiving and giving out signals. I'm just someone who was born with a little higher antennae."

Whatever he's got, it's something people want to hear. When a loved one dies suddenly and there's no closure, it

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James Van Praagh on communicating with the dead

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can prolong the grieving process. In sessions with clients — both private and televised — Van Praagh “receives” messages from the dead, even providing physical descriptions and personal information known only to the two parties.

The “love bond” between people allows him to make the connection between the living and the dead, he says. But he doesn’t predict the future. That would interfere with free will and karma, he says.

ALTHOUGH THOUSANDS are buying both his book and his abilities, many skeptics are not.

After viewing a tape of his December appearance on “The Larry King Show” provided by the Tribune, Gary Posner of the Tampa Bay Skeptics wasn’t impressed.

“His technique of obtaining information from the client and then claiming to have received it from the ‘departed’ was apparent,” Pos-

ner says. For example, Van Praagh asked King if his deceased father had been a smoker. Only after King said yes did Van Praagh claim to vividly see the father puffing away on a cigarette.

Posner says he has a test that would convince him of Van Praagh’s genuineness or “expose him just as quickly.” He suggests: Have a series of strangers ask Van Praagh to communicate with a departed relative, such as a father. When the medium says things like, “Your father is standing right next to you, holding a book, and he wants you to know that he’s fine and with your grandparents,” ask him the name of the father and grandparents.

“If he can hear them speaking about all sorts of other matters, he certainly ought to be able to hear their names clearly enough,” Posner says.

His group’s \$1,000 prize — open to anyone claiming verifiable scientific proof of ESP, UFOs, astrology or any paranormal phe-

nomenon — remains up for grabs.

THAT’S ONE PRIZE Van Praagh won’t seek.

“They don’t have tools to measure this sort of thing,” he says. “It’s not on a piece of paper, it’s not in a machine, it’s not under a microscope. So science can’t accept it.”

Although he has distanced himself from traditional denominations, he believes strongly in God. He calls Jesus one of the “greatest mediums of all time,” referring to his ability to manipulate molecules and hear voices.

Organized religion is threatened by claims of communicating with the dead, he contends.

“This work gives responsibility back to the individual. They don’t have to go to church to pray because God is within. People are finding that past belief systems no longer fit for them. This opens up a whole new world.”

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