

He sees dead people!

One medium says he can speak with dead relatives and loved ones. Is it real or just a clever parlor trick? by Rose Spinelli



IMPRESSIONABLE ART While Robinette meditates, drawings and words "magically" appear on 3" x 5" cards. Could these people be the author's spirit guides?

A clairvoyant once told me that I have a spirit guide named Tiger Lily. She's my "joy" guide—as in *come on get happy!* During the reading, Tiger Lily reported that she was irritated with me. Apparently she comes to wake me every morning to welcome the day, and what do I do? I "put a pillow over my head." She told the clairvoyant she wanted me to know that if I didn't stop with the doom and gloom she was going to start "getting in my face." This sounded a lot like something my mother might say, but I liked her spunk. For a while, when I felt especially cranky, I'd imagine her as the clairvoyant described her—cute, hip, a "downtown kind

of chick"—hanging out with me.

Later, I took an intuition class to learn to trust my sixth sense. In it, we were told that through meditation, we could get intimate with our spirit guides—it's said we're surrounded by several benevolent beings who watch our backs. They vibrate at a much higher frequency, making them invisible to humans whose frequency is slow and dense, which is why we have bodies and they don't. During one class as I meditated, names started to pop into my head. I put my fledgling intuition skills to work and decided that these were my spirit guides and that I'd assign them duties. Hector was there to take care of my health, Rafael would make sure I always had money, Benjamin was in charge of my creative inspiration, and Saul was my source of wisdom. I pictured Saul with a third eye on his forehead because in the chakra system the third eye is said to be our source of wisdom. I was always sad about not knowing my maternal grandmother so she got added to my roster, too. Those names have since lodged in my mind as my personal nonsecular angels. I share this information because of an event I attended later.

It's a piercingly cold Saturday evening in January. I am one of about 20 people invited by a respected Chicago clairvoyant to meet "precipitation medium" Hoyt Robinette. Robinette drove in from Chesterfield, Indiana, a place described as a "spiritualist enclave," where being a witch is commonplace and psychics abound. Using the help of their own spirit guides, precipitation mediums can effect physical media—in his case, drawings and text that will supposedly spontaneously appear on 3" x 5" index cards bringing insights about our spiritual inner lives. The group is gathered in a comfy room where incense burns and a smiling, stout man of indeterminate age sits waiting for us. Holding pieces of paper onto which we've been asked to write questions for him, we find seats on cushy couches and thick velvety pillows. Our host introduces Robinette, who speaks with a down-home drawl. I want to be wowed with the promise that we're about to enter a portal into another dimension. Instead, Robinette's plainspoken presentation lacks pizzazz. Soon, without fanfare, he pulls out a sealed pack of index cards and asks one of us to open it and make sure they're blank. They are.

He shows us a wicker basket—like the kind that snake charmers use to lure cobras—over which Robinette says he's meditated for many years. Into it he puts crayons, colored pencils and pens, and on top of them he fans out the index cards, replaces the lid and puts the box on a table before him.

To gain our trust, Robinette blindfolds himself, first with cotton gauze and then with layers of duct tape. Our host then collects our questions—the sheets of paper are folded—and gives them to

Robinette, who, holding them at his side, goes around the room and calls out our names (he has no list and we haven't met him). One at a time Robinette responds to our written questions, sometimes turning his head and cocking his ear as though he's listening to someone standing next to him. The messages are usually cryptic to all except the recipient, but I feel like I'm eavesdropping on deeply personal conversations. Some people cry and some seem defensive, but most of us want more—he spends only a few minutes on each person. No one seems confused by what he or she hears.

Someone named Jerry (a dead relative?) implores a woman to "move on." Another woman is told to start her own business even though she's asked him about going back to school. Robinette tells a man that he's held on to some event from the past for long enough. "Do you know what I'm talking about?" Robinette asks. The man, fairly fuming, slowly nods his head. My partner, Peter, a game skeptic, is told that "someone named Mark or Marks says hello." Peter loses his cool for a moment and later he tells me that, not knowing what questions to write on his paper, he had asked if his hero Groucho Marx could say hi. When he gets to me, he says that I should begin "research right away." I'm frustrated because during this session questions aren't really allowed and I'm not sure I know what he means, though I have asked about my writing career. Then he mentions some names. He says that someone named Benjamin is there. So is Saul and Rafael and Tiger Lily.

Then Robinette takes the lid off his snake basket and gives us our cards—he knows the owner of each card because our names are now written on them. Also on the cards are other names. On mine I read Tiger Lily, Hector, Raphael (spelled differently than my spelling). Grandma Ciolino (my mom's mom) is there, too. So is my Aunt Louise, whom I now feel badly for never liking, and someone named Angelique. It's the only name I don't recognize. On the other side is an elaborate, heavily worked drawing. The surface looks like several layers of a waxy substance, like crayon. There are several people on my drawing. In the background, second from the right, is someone who looks exactly like my mother when she was young. I take one look at the dominant figure in the foreground and in a flash I think, could that be Saul, and that spot on his forehead his third eye?

When the party breaks up, I'm wide-eyed and giddy as I look at all the other drawings—all different and all beautiful. But it quickly becomes apparent that nearly everyone else in the room is suspicious. It's a parlor trick, they insist. Maybe these party poopers are right. I decide to get out of there quick—I don't like their negativity. And I think that Tiger Lily, who may or may not exist, and who may or may not be hanging around right then, would be pleased to know, at that moment at least, I am feeling kind of joyful.

Contact Hoyt Robinette at 765-378-3549 or hrobinette@aol.com.

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