A fellow Twitter user recently asked me for my impressions of the *The Dead Files*. The Travel Channel show first aired back in September, 2011, and is now into its third season. Here is the network's glowing blurb:

The Dead Files team approaches every case from their two specific areas of expertise: Steve DiSchiavi is a Homicide Detective and Amy Allan is a Physical Medium. They are a paranormal team like no other, combining their unique, eclectic and often-conflicting skills to solve unexplained paranormal phenomena in haunted locations across America.

Across the internet viewers rave that The Dead Files isn't like other ghost hunting shows in that they don't use EMF readers or record EVPs. Of course, this show is more comparable to *The Long Island Medium*
in that regard, and showcases Amy's alleged skills as a psychic medium, sensitive and empath. Her bio claims that, "Her abilities have been studied and tested by leading parapsychologists." She claims to have been "mentored" by the late William Roll, a parapsychologist and big believer in mediumship. Amy appears to hold a BA in psychology and other qualifications in business. However, she was working as a massage therapist in Denver before she got her TV gig.

Her bio also states that she has "worked with many private investigators and police agencies." There is no proof offered to back up these claims. As we know, there are very few documented cases where psychics have assisted law enforcement agencies and ever fewer where the police thought they were of any use. Even then, their help is never proven to be psychic. A Denver cold case detective once said to local investigators Bryan & Baxter, "I wish we had a phone line that was specifically for psychics to call and leave their tips; and then we'd never answer it." He added, "If someone contacted us with information that led us to a body then that person would become a suspect."

In *The Dead Files*, Amy and Steve travel to a "haunted" location and conduct an investigation – independently. "Each investigator's methods and findings remain hidden from the other team member to preserve the integrity of their findings." Before Amy visits the premises, cameraman Matthew Anderson performs a "cleaning" of the premises to remove any pieces of "leading

information" that could influence Amy's reading. Of course, removing photographs and collectibles doesn't prevent a cold reader from gleaning information. In every episode I spotted overlooked clues, including a cross on the wall. At any rate, she is there because the place is allegedly haunted, and not to read the occupants, as such. Each place is invariably found to be "haunted".

Amy does a walk through of the premises and Matthew films her commentary. In every episode I have watched she asserts immediately, "There's something here". Her repertoire of "feelings" is recycled, and in every show she claims to experience a "choking sensation", and reports the presence of "shadow figures" and "demons" lurking everywhere. Her melodramatic visions are of typical situations that underpin alleged "hauntings", including physical abuse, family arguments, illness and death. Amy ends the investigations by having a sketch artist draw a picture of one of the "ghosts" she saw on the premises. Alternatively, she draws an image of something she saw or felt.

All in all, Amy is a cold reader. It turns out that Matthew could share information with her and influence her readings; it is a little known fact that he is her husband. She could easily conduct hot readings prior to her investigation. Many of the locations are businesses, such as restaurants, hotels and theaters. Several are well-known, including Alcatraz, and the Lizzie Borden House. Some of the "haunted" people are suspicious too. In the first episode the property owner is actor Elvis Restaino, who appeared on TLC's *L.A. Ink* and other reality TV shows.

Steve DiShiavi is a retired NYPD homicide detective. In the show he plays more of a folklorist than a detective. He collects stories from the residents about their experiences, and occasionally speaks with locals and former residents. Then he attempts to find archival information in libraries and government agencies to corroborate the stories. Of course, many of these places are known to have a colorful past. Steve invariably finds an historical event to link tenuously to the alleged hauntings, a natural death, a murder or a mystery. He presents himself as a skeptic, but throughout the series Steve reveals himself to be a biased believer.

Then Amy and Steve convene for the "first time" during the investigation, and do the big "reveal" with those who've experienced the phenomena. Amy's readings are typically vague. Occasionally, they are more specific, and it's possible she was tipped off by the producers, her husband or through some hot reading. Then the artist's sketch is revealed. These are often presented to people who never even saw the "ghost", so they simply take Amy's word that it's an accurate representation. The sketches never resemble photographs of known former occupants. When Amy draws the image herself, it's a picture of a demon or other unidentifiable

creature, or an impression of how she "felt" in the house. If the "spirits" are benign, Amy tells the occupants that the resident ghosts are guardians protecting the house, or if they're "evil spirits" she recommends the place be "cleansed" and "blessed" by a priest or psychic.

The basic formula seems to be that they film Amy's lengthy reading of the house, providing a substantial amount of claims. Hot reading may be involved at times. These claims are then meshed with Steve's findings, and they edit out Amy's misses. It appears that the show is constructed backwards to fit the profile pieced together by Steve. *The Dead Files* is an excellent example of confirmation bias.

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