As research for an upcoming presentation a group of us decided to try cold reading some strangers. On our first day, skeptic Mathew Baxter became “psychic medium” Mathias. He chose to tackle the hardest clients of all: psychics. Wearing more rings than Ringo Starr and an eye of Horus pendant, he visited Spirit Wise, a metaphysical bookstore in Denver. Connie, the owner of the store and her friend Tim agreed to have readings from Mathias. Both work as “professional” psychics.

Connie set up a reading room for us downstairs. This was a cozy setting of couches complete with props, including a lemon-scented candle and an enormous amethyst cathedral geode. The geode was shaped like the hooded Mother Mary, and was an excellent example of pareidolia.

His first reading was with Connie, and Mathias began by talking about the room. “When I came downstairs I had several impressions very quickly, but the strongest one was that I could sense a lot of children in the room.” Connie encouraged him by nodding, so he continued. “I can sense the presence of a lot of children and a lot of laughter. This was a play area. I certainly had that feeling. It was uplifting to walk into.” This was a hit. As Connie explained, “We used to have a children’s circle that met here every Saturday. There were 30 or 40 little kids down here. It was a ball.” Matthew later explained that he could tell from the layout of the building that the business had once been a house, and he assumed that the downstairs room had been a play area of some kind.

Taking a tip from the TV psychics, Mathias then said that there was a stern woman “pushing herself to the front of the line. She’s quite a handful!” Connie laughed, so Mathias knew he was on the right path. “She had this disapproving air, but it masked her pride for you.” Connie nodded, and obviously believed Mathias was referring to her mother. “She is telling me that… did you once go to a salon and have an unfortunate experience?” This was another hit. Connie laughed nervously in agreement. “I was having a facial and the beautician dripped glycolic acid into my eye!” Matthew later said that most people have had a bad haircut or a bad salon service, and he guessed that this would be true for Connie too; and it was.

Then Mathias tried one of the oldest cold reading tricks in the book. “Now she’s talking about some item of jewelry.” Of course, there’s a reason why this is the oldest trick in the book – it works. Connie began twisting the gold ring she was wearing on the ring finger of her right hand. “This was my mother’s wedding ring. She wore it for 40 years. When she was dying we took it off her hand before it got cold and I put it on. I have worn it ever since. It has never gotten cold.”

Overall, Connie’s feedback for Mathias was glowing. “You’re good. You have lots of good stuff to say, and you have a great energy field.” She told him that he would become famous some day, and she’d be proud to have known him. She lives for quirky moments like this. “Every day I open the store and think it’s going to be a grand adventure, and poof! Here you are!”

Next up for a reading was Tim. He was more po-faced, and not wanting to give anything away. However, he told us beforehand that he was an “Energy Healer”, so we knew he was a believer. Mathias tried the same line on Tim that he used on Connie, where he had a bet each way. “I see a stern figure who has a disapproving air.” Tim nodded at this. “But he is bursting with pride on the other side.” Tim agreed, and was obviously thinking of his father. Mathias continued, “I don’t know how to say this, but in this other person’s opinion, did you have a phase of promiscuity?” This was a hit. Tim laughed, “I’ve had my party years for sure!” He looked it too, with his long hair and beer belly.

Mathias continued, “He said the words ‘sheep shears’ to me. I’m not sure what that means.” Tim revealed that his father had once threatened to take a set of sheep shears to his head to chop off his long locks! Mathias stayed with this theme of the ne’er-do-well son. “He’s saying to me, ‘When are you going to grow up? When are you going to get a real job?’” Tim nodded like a bobble-headed toy. Clearly, he had heard all of this before.

“You’ve had some reservations about your career, and there have been several crossroads.” Of course, the experience of career crises resonates with most people. Mathias continued reading Tim’s visual clues. “This is the tough part with readings like this. You’re sitting in front of me and it’d be easy to say, ‘You have long hair so you’re a musician’. But I’m feeling that you really *are* a musician.” This was another hit! Tim is a musician who hates his day job that leaves him with no time for a band. He’s attending night school to attain the skills for that “real job”. As Tim added, “I play guitar. I had a band but we didn’t all have the same vision. I want to start a new band and I’m kind of looking for those people.” Mathias told him what he wanted to hear. “You will start a band, and these people will be on *your* page this time.” As a musician himself, Mathias/Matthew spoke from personal experience, “But there will be a drummer problem.” Tim laughed, “There’s *always* a drummer problem!”

Like Connie’s feedback, Tim’s comments about the reading were also positive. “It was good. It

felt natural and it wasn’t like you were trying to coach answers out of me or trying to draw words out.” Tim then had a heart-to-heart with Mathias about the psychic industry, psychic reader to psychic reader. “You know how it is,” he complained. “It’s hard. You’re trying to make a living on something that’s almost imaginary.”

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