

# Edgar Cayce

Edgar Cayce (1877-1945) was an American psychic famous for trance readings in which he diagnosed the cause of medical symptoms and prescribed simple and seemingly effective remedies. In other readings, Cayce described past lives, predicted future events and expounded on philosophical, metaphysical and astrological topics. The content of Cayce's readings was a major influence on the development of New Age thought and on public ideas about paranormal phenomena.

## Life

Edgar Cayce was born on 18 March 1877 in a rural area of Kentucky.<sup>[1]</sup>

Cayce's account of how he gained psychic abilities is as follows. At the age of twelve, after he had fulfilled a promise to read the Bible once for every year in his life, he was visited by an angel who asked him to make a wish. He asked that he be enabled to help other people, especially children.<sup>[2]</sup> The next night, having been kept late at school because of spelling difficulties, he slept on his spelling book and found that he knew everything in it the next morning. From then he excelled in school. His first claimed cure was of himself, from a head injury caused by impact from a ball; while sleeping he gave the formula for a poultice which proved effective.

Cayce left school at age sixteen to work, first on his family's farm, then in retail and selling insurance. In March of 1900, Cayce suffered a partial paralysis of the vocal chords which made him unable to speak beyond a whisper, causing him to change his career to photography. In early 1901, he was enabled to speak while under hypnosis; he then performed a psychic reading on himself, aided by Al C Layne, an osteopathy student, and regained his voice.

Cayce began performing readings for Layne's patients. Among them was a five-year-old girl named Aime Dietrich, who had suffered up to twenty convulsions per day from the age of two and seemed cognitively delayed. Cayce diagnosed a spinal injury and recommended osteopathic adjustments, which ended the seizures and returned her to normal cognitive function. The case drew much attention to Cayce, as her father was prominent as the local superintendent of schools.<sup>[3]</sup>

Cayce married Gertrude Evans and eventually had two sons, Hugh Lynn and Edgar Evans; another son lived less than two months. Cayce at this point did not accept payment for his readings; as a means to earn an income he opened a photography studio and gallery with a partner, which ended in disaster when the building burned down.

Cayce became nationally famous after reports of his work by homeopathic doctor Wesley Ketchum appeared in the *New York Times* and other papers. Cayce now wondered whether he should more fully devote himself to readings, and by Biblical divination received what he interpreted as a positive answer. Accordingly in 1910 he joined his father, Ketchum and another partner to form a business, and began doing daily readings in addition to photography.

Gertrude, gravely ill with tuberculosis following the loss of their baby son, recovered gradually with the help of treatments recommended by her husband's readings. Cayce, disillusioned by his partners' unscrupulous behaviour, set up a photography business on his own in Selma, Alabama. Requests for readings continued.

Cayce became involved in oil-drilling in an unsuccessful attempt to raise funds to open a hospital. In 1923 he returned to Selma and set up his psychic reading business. In October of that year he was visited by Arthur Lammers of Dayton, Ohio, who requested readings far beyond medical matters.

Biographer Thomas Sugrue writes:

He had other interests: philosophy, metaphysics, esoteric astrology, psychic phenomena. He asked questions Edgar did not understand – what were the mechanics of the subconscious, what was the difference between spirit and soul, what were the reasons for personality and talent? He mentioned such things as the cabala, the mystery religions of Egypt and Greece, the medieval alchemists, the mystics of Tibet, yoga, Madame Blavatsky and theosophy, the Great White Brotherhood, the Etheric World... ‘What is the real nature of the soul and what is the purpose of this experience on earth? Where do we go from here? What for? Where did we come from? What were we doing before we came here?’<sup>[4]</sup>

Despite initial misgivings, Cayce travelled to Dayton with Lammers to perform readings on this type of question. The topic of reincarnation was introduced in the first reading, as were the notions that horoscopes relate to experiences the soul has had on other planets and that the purpose of the soul is to ‘perfect our individuality’ to be joined to God. Cayce decided to psychically pursue this line of inquiry fully. He moved his family to Dayton and began to give what he called ‘Life Readings’.

According to Cayce’s life reading for himself, he acquired his psychic abilities for two reasons. First, during his history of lives he had once gained great height in soul development but then made errors and slipped downward, and was now being tested by being given a great power. Second, incapacitated by a wound in a battle he had been left for dead, and in the five days it had taken him to die, had taught himself how to elevate his mind beyond his body and its suffering.

In his readings, Virginia Beach was repeatedly given as the best location for him to work, and he finally moved there with his family, backed financially by wealthy stockbroker Morton Blumenthal. The Association of National Investigators was formed on 6 May 1927, its purpose to engage in psychic research, mostly based on the work of Cayce. The planned hospital was built. In 1929, Blumenthal began construction on Atlantic University, an institution intended to teach the philosophy of Cayce’s readings, but the Great Depression hit and Blumenthal overextended himself. By 1931, the Association, the university and the hospital had all ceased to function.

By contacting hundreds of people who had benefited from his readings, Cayce formed a new organization, the Association for Research and Enlightenment (ARE), incorporated 7 July 1931.<sup>[5]</sup> Led by Hugh Lynn Cayce, the Association decided to grow incrementally rather than rely on a single wealthy donor, and has sustained itself to the present day.

Cayce continued to give readings until the end of his life. The rate increased exponentially in the 1940s: in the twelve months from June 1943 to June 1944 he gave 1,385 readings. He collapsed from strain in August. A reading for himself prescribed rest, but it was not enough; he suffered a stroke in the fall and passed away in January 1945, aged 67.

## Method

For a typical medical reading Cayce lay on a couch and passed quickly into a deep trance, appearing to be asleep. The individual’s name and request for assistance was read to him and he began to speak, a stenographer recording his words verbatim. Initial readings were sometimes followed by ‘check readings’ as treatment progressed.

The official Cayce website gives the number of preserved readings as 14,306.<sup>[6]</sup> In 1971, with processing of the records of the Edgar Cayce readings about 98% complete, they numbered 14,246,<sup>[7]</sup> categorized as follows:

- 8,975 physical readings (for illnesses)

- 2,500 life readings
- 799 business readings
- 667 dream interpretation readings
- 401 readings on mental and spiritual questions
- 223 readings on oil or mineral locations
- 130 readings on spiritual laws, compiled into *The Search for God*
- 116 'work readings' (concerning management of the ARE)
- 76 readings on buried treasure
- 36 readings on historical topics, including 16 on Jesus and 13 on Atlantis
- 35 readings on aura charts
- 28 readings on world affairs
- 12 readings on missing persons
- miscellaneous

Life readings were prompted by a suggestion along these lines:

You will have before you the body of \_\_\_\_ (giving name and place of the individual at birth, the name at birth as given), and you will give the relation of this entity and the universe, and the universal forces, giving the conditions that are as personalities latent, and exhibited, in the present life. Also the former appearances in the earth's plane, giving time, place, name and that in that life which built or retarded the development of the entity, giving the abilities of the present entity and that to which it may attain, and how.

In answer, Cayce referred to planes of consciousness between incarnations, then described up to nine previous incarnations, providing names, dates and locations as well as inclinations, talent and weaknesses affecting the present incarnation.

## Health Advice

For the first two of his four decades of psychic practice, Cayce gave readings only for medical diagnosis and treatment recommendation, at the request of people suffering illnesses or injuries. Even after he began giving other types of readings, medical readings remained his priority.<sup>[8]</sup>

These readings took a holistic approach, as exemplified in his message, 'The body – physically, mentally, spiritually – is one body, yet in the varied conditions as arise within a physical body, these must often be treated as a unit – that is, each element treated as a unit yet in the fullest application they are one'.<sup>[9]</sup> In this he was a major influence on the holistic health movement associated with New Age thought.

Though different patients received different instructions for the same maladies, in some ways Cayce was consistent, often advising a diet of fresh fruits and vegetables supplemented by fish, poultry and lamb, avoidance of white bread, fried foods, sugar, red meat and carbonated drinks. He frequently prescribed spinal manipulation, electrotherapy, hydrotherapy, colonics, enemas, laxatives, castor oil packs and massage. His prescriptions ranged from standard medical procedures of the time to the highly unorthodox, but many anticipated what is now commonly accepted: the benefits of eating locally, regular exercise (especially walking), spinal manipulation, visualization, lowering stress, massage and various methods of detoxification, along with cautions against refined cane sugar, preservatives and aluminum cooking equipment. His recommendation 'keep the pineal gland operating and you won't grow old' has been supported by more recent research linking the pineal gland to the body's aging mechanism. Similarly, Cayce's advice to stay out of direct sunlight between 11am and 2pm to avoid powerful ultraviolet rays has become a standard modern caution.

In a survey of nine doctors who worked with Cayce, all reported high rates of accuracy of diagnosis and efficacy. The Cayce literature contains many case histories; six in Sugrue's biography cover epilepsy, 'intestinal fever', arthritis, scleroderma, 'general debilitation' and eye injury. By examining the preserved correspondence, Sugrue determined these cases were all at least partially successful.

A formal attempt to assess the accuracy of Cayce's medical readings was performed by his sons Edgar Evans Cayce and Hugh Lynn Cayce in a 1971 book, *The Outer Limits of Edgar Cayce's Power*, addressing criticisms that Cayce claimed his powers were unlimited. The pair randomly chose 150 medical readings from 14,000 recorded readings and examined those for which reports of their accuracy were available, estimating a success rate of about 85%,<sup>[10]</sup> which compares well with conventional medicine. They also highlighted the failures, from sick individuals for whom he could not give a reading because no words came from him while he was asleep, to failed attempts at finding treasure, discerning where oil wells should be drilled, finding missing persons, reading for the dead and other assays.

Cayce is recorded as having demonstrated clairvoyance in locating doctors and medicines. In reading he sometimes gave the name and address of a doctor that neither he nor the patient had previously heard of. In one instance, Cayce recommended the use of 'black sulphur', but the patient's pharmacist was unfamiliar with this and provided regular sulphur instead. A check reading noted that the patient was not progressing because of this substitution, and Cayce wired the name of a pharmacy that had just brought it onto the market. The patient was cured.<sup>[11]</sup>

Cayce's readings emphasize the importance of mental and emotional influence on both disease and healing. He held that we have free will over our health by way of 'attitude', which can be altered more easily than emotions, which he conceived as physical. Cayce's philosophy also views healing as coming from within and yet sourced in the divine.

## Meridian Institute

The most rigorous research on Cayces' medical readings has been carried out by medical doctor Eric Mein and colleagues at the Meridian Institute, founded in 1997. In a statement of purpose, the institute states that its goal is to 'expand the meeting ground between science and spirit' through study and testing based on the Cayce readings, which 'have never been fully researched in a modern, scientific manner that would provide data acceptable to all healthcare professionals and agencies. It is our intention to conduct research in a manner acceptable to the modern healthcare community'.<sup>[12]</sup> Papers generated by this research can be found [here](#) and have been published in both conventional and alternative medical journals. Books by members of the Institute, along with biographies of Cayce, can be found [here](#). Current Meridian projects are listed [here](#).

## Influence and Legacy

Edgar Cayce was a major influence in what would later be called New Age thought. Mitch Horowitz writes: 'In readings that dealt with spiritual and esoteric topics – along with the more familiar readings that focused on holistic remedies, massage, meditation, and natural foods – there began to emerge the range of subjects that formed the parameters of therapeutic New Age spirituality in the later twentieth century'.<sup>[13]</sup>

Popularizations of Cayce's readings began in 1950 with Gina Cerminara's work on Cayce's reincarnation readings *Many Mansions*.<sup>[14]</sup> Cayce's posthumous fame also grew in the wake of the highly publicized Bridey Murphy case in the later 1950s. In the late 1960s, Jess Stearn's *Edgar Cayce: The Sleeping Prophet* became a bestseller, while Hugh Lynn Cayce expanded ARE, marketing instructional guides based on the readings. Channeling – a term coined by Cayce – became the

source of many popular spiritual works in the 1960s and 1970s.

In his history of the New Age movement, Michael York notes that while Cayce eschewed occultism as 'the use of the mind's powers without respect to purposes' (for the well-being of others), 'he has laid the foundation in America for much of the present belief in the supernatural and the existence of many different spirit realms or dimensions ... he acknowledges telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, astral projection, and communication with dead relatives, spirit guides or even archangels'.<sup>[15]</sup> York notes Cayce's readings are expressive of 'New Age Christianity' or 'Christian New Age', as he was a devout Christian, but notes that his teaching differs from traditional Christianity in that it incorporates reincarnation. 'This alone', York writes, 'allows God to be truly equable and provides man opportunities for constructive self-development ... there is no evil force, but only a product of rebellion ... all souls will eventually be saved and brought into oneness with the One Force'.<sup>[16]</sup>

Reincarnation researcher [James G Matlock](#) notes that Cayce's past-life readings and teachings have had a profound impact on New Age ideas about reincarnation, including cementing a strong association of reincarnation with karma, and promoting the concept of the Akashic Records, as he claimed to have derived all information on his clients' past lives from them.<sup>[17]</sup>

ARE now consists of hundreds of open study groups worldwide, which eschew ritual and dogma for seekership, working to become one with God on an individual basis.<sup>[18]</sup> ARE now has offices throughout the USA offering resources for learning about Cayce's readings and teachings from [its website](#).

## Parapsychological Investigations

No formal investigations of Edgar Cayce's abilities were ever completed by parapsychologists. Cayce took the opportunity to visit JB Rhine's laboratory when his son entered Duke University, finding Rhine receptive to the idea of testing. However, Cayce was unwilling to take part in Rhine's card guessing experiments, which he felt did not correspond with his ability.<sup>[19]</sup>

In 1936, Rhine sent Lucian H Warner to visit Cayce as an investigator. Warner spent a week with Cayce, witnessing readings and having some done for himself. As a result of his enthusiastic report, Rhine secured a reading for his young daughter, but his interest waned when he found the diagnosis did not fit her condition.<sup>[20]</sup>

Warner then asked Cayce to carry out a series of readings for parapsychologist [Gardner Murphy](#). Two readings were given but Warner became ill and the investigation was never completed.<sup>[21]</sup>

## Criticisms

As a high-profile psychic, Cayce along with the claims associated with him have frequently been the target of criticism by sceptics.

In a general critique, Dale Beyerstein listed points which he held against uncritical acceptance of Cayce's ability: that for the first nine years of readings Cayce was accompanied by a mentor with medical knowledge (Al C Layne); that there is no record of what information was available to Cayce prior to the readings; that no control groups were used; that patients' memories are unreliable measures; and that doctors corroborating the cures may have been unconventional doctors.<sup>[22]</sup>

Leading sceptic [Martin Gardner](#) writes:

Sugrue [Cayce's biographer] emphasizes the fact that Cayce was a simple, untutored man who

could not possibly have possessed the information he gave during his trances, but a far more reasonable supposition is that he absorbed large quantities of knowledge from reading and contacts with friends – knowledge he may have consciously forgotten ... Most of Cayce's early trances were given with the aid of an osteopath who asked him questions while he was asleep ... Over and over again he would find spinal lesions of one sort or another as the cause.

Gardner points out that Cayce used fairly technical osteopathic language in his readings, but also criticizes him for prescribing folk remedies.<sup>[23]</sup>

Sceptical writers note that Cayce sometimes performed medical readings for people who were deceased at the time of the readings. Karen Stollznaw writes, 'Cayce wasn't able to cure his own cousin, or his own son who died as a baby'.<sup>[24]</sup>

[James Randi](#), who was convinced that Cayce was a fraud, writes:

Many of the letters he received – in fact, most – contained specific details about the illness for which the readings were required, and there was nothing to stop Cayce from knowing the contents of the letters and presenting that information as if it were a divine revelation. To one who has been through dozens of similar diagnoses, as I have, the methods are obvious. It is merely a specialized version of the 'generalization' technique of fortune-tellers.<sup>[25]</sup>

In fact, many successful readings were not accompanied by letters or other information.<sup>[26]</sup>

Cayce is criticized for making dramatic prophecies that failed to come true:

- California would slide into the ocean.
- New York City would be destroyed in a cataclysm.
- the US would discover a death ray used on Atlantis in 1958.
- China would be converted to Christianity by 1968.

*Skeptic's Dictionary* author Robert Todd Carroll blames Cayce for seeding 'some of the sillier notions about Atlantis' including the existence of a Great Crystal that focused energy, allowing the Atlanteans to do fantastical things until out of greed they adjusted it too high, destroying their own continent.<sup>[27]</sup>

Sceptic Michael Shermer writes, 'Cayce was fantasy-prone from his youth, often talking with angels and receiving visions of his dead grandfather'.<sup>[28]</sup>

A substantive critique of Cayce's readings on past lives comes from religion researcher J Gordon Melton, who argues that they are to be taken symbolically rather than accepted as genuine past-life cases, based on his statistical analysis. Melton found that the times and cultures in which the past lives in the readings were set are mostly limited to the small number commonly known to Americans of his time, also that an unrealistic number of Cayce's patients had been royalty or nobility (as many as half in some periods, and many associated with an Egyptian priest named Ra Ta, supposedly Cayce's previous incarnation). Melton also suggests that the same cultures, periods and occupations were often accompanied by similar karmic analyses and instructions, and that some readings were repeated verbatim to different people.

Melton finds elements of Theosophy in these readings, and traces the roots of Cayce's Essene-related readings to two occult bestsellers of the time.<sup>[29]</sup> Matlock adds that two frequent locales for past lives in Cayce's readings, the mythical Atlantis and ancient Egypt, figured largely in the Theosophical rendering of human history, and the lengths of time between lives in the readings matched the Theosophical opinion held in Cayce's time.<sup>[30]</sup>

Cayce was accurate in at least some of his past-life readings. Parapsychologist Stephan Schwartz points out that more than one reading includes reference to a community of Essenes living in a place Schwartz recognized as corresponding with the archaeological site of Qumran on the West Bank. In one reading, Cayce told the client she had been a woman in this Essene community who had taught astrology, contradicting contemporary academic opinion, which held that the Essenes were exclusively male and had no interest in astrology. However, both these elements were confirmed as accurate following the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other excavations at the site in the late 1940s, more than ten years after the readings were given.<sup>[31]</sup>

## Videos

Edgar Cayce-related videos can be found in quantity on YouTube. For a categorized collection see [here](#).

KM Wehrstein

## Literature

Association for Research and Enlightenment (n.d.a). [Edgar Cayce's Life Chronology, 1877-1945](#). [Web page.]

Association for Research and Enlightenment (n.d.b). [Edgar Cayce Readings Overview](#). [Web page.]

Beyerstein, D. (1996). Edgar Cayce: the 'Prophet' who 'Slept' His Way to the Top. *Skeptical Inquirer*, January-February, 32-7.

Birnes, W.J., & Martin, J. (2011). *The Haunting of Twentieth-Century America: From the Nazis to the New Millennium*. New York: Tom Doherty and Associates.

Carroll, R.T. (2010). [Edgar Cayce \(1877-1945\)](#). *The Skeptic's Dictionary*. [Web page.]

Cayce, E.E. & Cayce, H.L. (1971, 2004). *The Outer Limits of Edgar Cayce's Power: The Cases That Baffled the Legendary Psychic*. ARE Press; New York: Paraview.

Cerminara, G. (1950). *Many Mansions*. New York: William Morrow.

Gardner, M. (1957). *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. USA: Dover.

Johnson, K.P. (1998). *Edgar Cayce in Context: The Readings: Truth and Fiction*. Albany, New York, USA: State University of New York Press.

Matlock, J.G. (2019). *Signs of Reincarnation: Exploring Beliefs, Cases and Theory*. Lanham, Maryland, United States: Rowman and Littlefield.

Melton, J.G. (1994). [Edgar Cayce and Reincarnation: Past life Readings as Religious Symbology](#). *Syzygy: Journal of Alternative Religion and Culture*, 3(1-2).

Randi, J. (1982). *FLIM-FLAM! Psychics, ESP, Unicorns and Other Delusions*. Amherst, New York, USA: Prometheus Books.

Schwartz, S.A. (2005). *The Secret Vaults of Time: Psychic Archaeology and the Quest for Man's Beginnings*. Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: Hampton Roads. Originally published by Grosset & Dunlap in 1978.

Shermer, M. (1997). *Why People Believe Weird Things: Pseudoscience, Superstition, and Other Confusions of Our Time*. New York: Holt.

Stearn, J. (1967). *Edgar Cayce: The Sleeping Prophet*. Toronto: Bantam.

Stollznow, K. (2014). *Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sugrue, T. (1945). *There is a River: The Story of Edgar Cayce*. New York: Penguin Kindle Edition, 2015. [Originally published by Henry Holt & Co.]

York, M. (1995). *The Emerging Network: A Sociology of the New Age and Neo-Pagan Movements*. Lanham, Maryland, USA, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

## Endnotes

### Footnotes

- 1.^ Association for Research and Enlightenment (n.d.a).
- 2.^ Sugrue (1945), 40. All information in this section is drawn from this webpage except where otherwise noted.
- 3.^ Johnson (1998), 19.
- 4.^ Sugrue (1945), 224.
- 5.^ Association for Research and Enlightenment (n.d.a).
- 6.^ Association for Research and Enlightenment (n.d.b).
- 7.^ Cayce & Cayce (1971), 13. All information in this section is drawn from this work except where otherwise noted.
- 8.^ Johnson (1998), 13. All information in this section is drawn from this work except where otherwise noted.
- 9.^ Cited in Johnson (1998), 13.
- 10.^ Cayce & Cayce (1971), 24.
- 11.^ Johnson (1998).
- 12.^ See <https://www.meridianinstitute.com/purpose/> .
- 13.^ Sugrue (1945), 7.
- 14.^ Cerminara (1950).
- 15.^ York (1995), 60.
- 16.^ York (1995), 61.
- 17.^ Matlock (2019), 96-7.
- 18.^ York (1995), 62.
- 19.^ Birnes (2011), 157.
- 20.^ Sugrue (1945), 320-21.
- 21.^ Sugrue (1945), 321.
- 22.^ Beyerstein (1996).
- 23.^ Gardner (1957), 217-18.
- 24.^ Stollznow (2014), 103.
- 25.^ Randi (1982), 189.
- 26.^ Johnson (1998), 24.
- 27.^ Carroll (2010).
- 28.^ Shermer (1997) 67.
- 29.^ Melton (1994).
- 30.^ Matlock (2019), 82.



31.^ Schwartz (2005), 170-71.

© Psi Encyclopedia