

## BOOK REVIEW

**Spirit Voices: The First Live Conversation between Worlds** by Mark L. Cowden. Anomalist Books, 2011. 184 pp. \$14.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1933665542.

The author of *Spirit Voices*, Mark L. Cowden, is, according to the biography on his website, an author, entertainment journalist, and TV paranormal investigator. He has been studying paranormal accounts in the UK and Ireland for more than 10 years, and he has worked as a paranormal forensic specialist for the paranormal TV show *Northern Ireland's Greatest Haunts* (Cowden no date).

*Spirit Voices* chronicles Cowden's personal experiences with ostensible ghostly encounters, instrumental transcommunication (ITC), and electronic voice phenomena (EVP). The author starts his story by describing a series of unusual events he experienced at a converted Mill in Belfast, Ireland, and continues through his time with a paranormal investigation team, his recurring role on a reality television ghost-hunting program, and finally culminates with a description of what the author describes as the first-ever documented case of a living person having a live two-way conversation with the spirit world with cameras rolling.

It is worth noting here that, as a recurring theme throughout the book, Cowden stresses the need for investigators to pursue their own spiritual paths and that the incorporation of spirituality into the investigation process is essential for success. To assist readers along this path, the book includes a short Appendix with suggestions for one's personal spiritual development and includes basic information on meditation, visualization, and dowsing.

While the book is mainly a chronological account of Cowden's experiences, he also takes us on a couple of side trips to provide some insights into his approach and process. Specifically:

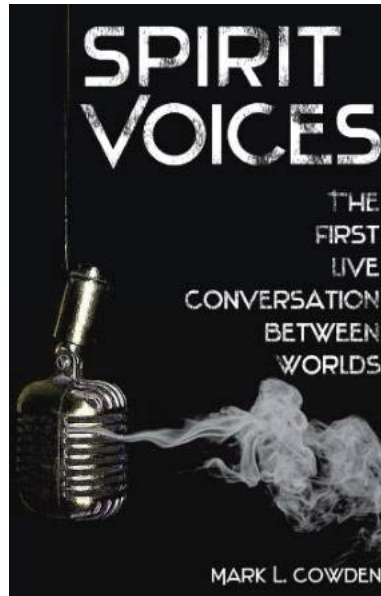
In Chapter 2: A Moral Dilemma, Cowden discusses how he reconciles his belief in God and his personal spirituality with the unfavorable views of spirit communication held by most religions. He concludes that direct spirit communication, which could promote self-enlightenment and a personal relationship with God, potentially undermines the controlling interests of institutionalized religion. He also dismisses any allegation that engaging in spirit communication could be considered a sin.

In Chapter 5: The Paranormal Investigation Group, Cowden takes some time to critique the current state of paranormal investigation teams. He cites their overall lack of training and credibility, and compares their organizational structures to what might be found on a fictional starship. He also, justifiably, raises concerns about the potential hazards of untrained teams intervening in the personal lives of paranormal experiencers, noting that many paranormal experiences may be coupled with psychological issues that these teams are ill-equipped to handle. [For a more complete, albeit irreverent, discussion of this topic, I suggest *Paranormal Pandemic* (Ohlde & Mullaly 2014).] Despite his clear reservations about paranormal investigative teams, Cowden eventually joins one that he feels is more credible than others he has encountered based on a number of factors including the professional appearance of the group's website. He was also impressed by their focus on only investigating public locations and historical sites and not private homes.

In Chapter 10: The ITC Orchestra, Cowden describes a rather novel EVP recording method. He starts this Chapter with an interesting observation, and one that I have found in my own research, which is that there may not be a one-size-fits-all approach to ITC. Different operators may obtain different results with different types of equipment based on their own personal strengths, weaknesses, and belief systems. In addition, the author points out the need to understand that the communicating personalities may also have different abilities and limitations that could affect their abilities to interact with the recording equipment being used. To address this, the author suggests using one's own personal spiritual insight or intuition to best match the recording technique to the operator, the location, and the intended target personality. In considering limitations of ITC and EVP recording, the author hypothesizes that some EVP may be present in high-end and low-end audio frequencies—those just on the edge of human perception. The author's solution to this problem is to incorporate both a violin and a cello to act as "natural amplifiers" (p. 134). This arrangement is what the author refers to as the "ITC Orchestra." Of course, this approach is predicated on the unverified assumption that EVP is actually an acoustic phenomena and not the result of direct interaction with the recording equipment. Unfortunately, the author states that he "won't go into the exact setup" (p. 135) but does provide a brief description of how the ITC Orchestra is typically deployed. No specific details are included about the recording hardware or software used in the process nor any details provided as to how the resulting recordings are analyzed for the presence of EVP. This omission of detail by the author effectively makes any replication of the processes difficult if not impossible. In addition, based on the description

that is provided, the process seems to be lacking any specific controls that might help prevent the recording of extraneous sounds. The author concedes that the procedure may not guarantee successful EVP recording but maintains the conviction that “the more spiritually involved the operator, the greater chance of success” (p. 136).

In the next chapter the author describes a successful recording session with the ITC Orchestra (again, without any specific details of the equipment, setup, or procedures) at Prehen House, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century mansion in Northern Ireland. In this case, the author concludes that some of the recorded voices are of conversation that took place in the mansion sometime in the past. The author then provides the following commentary:



Science has no interest in the human spirit or indeed the paranormal, but I have witnessed and recorded these phenomena on a number of occasions, as have hundreds of other people. As far as I'm concerned, paranormal occurrences have already been proven. They have happened too many times in history in front of too many witnesses to be discounted. The proof has been taken out of the hands of science. The rest of us will simply accept that and move on. (p. 143)

This broad statement about what science is and isn't interested in is simply untrue. With this single paragraph, the author unfairly dismisses more than 100 years of general psychical and parapsychological research, not to mention the specific research that has been conducted on ITC/EVP. Those interested in a comprehensive review of the state of EVP/ITC research are encouraged to read the Leary and Butler (2015) chapter in *Parapsychology: A Handbook for the 21st Century*.

I'll speculate that the author's disinterest in the scientific method may explain the lack of details provided when it comes to specific procedures or equipment. These omissions are unfortunate. The author may have developed a system that could be profoundly useful both for researchers and for those who might benefit emotionally or spiritually from meaningful after-death communications. By withholding this information, the author is

forcing anyone with a sincere interest in the field to recreate his processes with little meaningful guidance.

The final chapter describes a real-time, 40-minute EVP conversation recorded during the filming of an episode of a paranormal TV show. While the author claims that this recording session provides proof of spirit communication, the lack of a detailed description makes it difficult to assess its authenticity, so any further discussion of it in this Review would be of little value.

In his book *Is There an Afterlife? A Comprehensive Overview of the Evidence*, David Fontana (2005) notes that ITC research has been criticized because (a) conversations may not be collected under controlled conditions by independent observers and (b) full details of experimental protocols may not be provided in reports of the phenomena. While the author of *Spirit Voices* provides some interesting examples and approaches to EVP/ITC, unfortunately he does little to address these criticisms, thus making this book's overall contribution to the field limited.

**MARK BOCCUZZI**

mark@windbridge.org

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