

Sunday

READING EAGLE

February 26, 1989

Spectrum

A telling sign



Psychic following grows as seekers peek into past

By Pamela Rohland
Eagle/Times

The notices are scattered throughout the newspaper personals column, squeezed between ads for belly dancers and casino bus trips, pleas from lonely hearts, and prayers to favored saints.

"Psychic advisers," referred to in a less enlightened era as fortunetellers, have taken their trade to the papers, and a once-skeptical public is responding.

Hundreds of local residents — many of them well-educated, well-paid professionals, like an area attorney with a bent toward the metaphysical — are spending between \$20 and \$45 for card and palm readings, psychic healings, and past-life regressions.

Crystals, candles, and "magical herbs" are being snapped up at shops offering psychic paraphernalia in Reading, Muhlenberg Township, and Hummelstown. And a group of residents who call themselves the Berks Channeling Club meet regularly to receive messages from spirit guides.

The New Age, as the metaphysical boom has been dubbed, has dawned in the Pennsylvania heartland.

If the clientele is more upscale these days, psychics, too, have turned into yuppies. One can no longer expect to encounter a dark-haired crone peering into a crystal ball in some musty back room. More often, it will be someone like Sarah Kohler.

A well-dressed and thoroughly practical financial planner by day, Kohler has spent literally thousands of evenings pursuing her double life, studying the metaphysical world and quietly exercising her psychic abilities.

Only recently has she felt comfortable enough to run an ad in the newspaper announcing "Readings by Rachel" — her pseudonym — and she has opened a back room of her cozy Laureldale duplex to strangers eager for news from the beyond.

"Twelve years ago, the movement was stymied," said Kohler, a petite, soft-spoken woman of fortysomething. "People were very secretive, but now they are more open in talking about ghosts and meditation. I knew this would happen; it was predicted years ago."

Reading, she observed, has strong connections with the other world.

"A lot of people are living in this town to work out things from past lives," Kohler said, explaining that the proliferation of drugs, alcoholism, and sexual perversion in Reading is the price we must pay for our mistakes in an earlier lifetime. "There's a lot of negativity in the area; yet there's a lot of positivity, too."



Local shops are doing a booming business selling psychic paraphernalia.

"If someone blindfolded me, flew me in a plane around the world, and dropped me off here, I would know I was in Reading because of its different vibrations."

Kohler, the youngest child of a Rockland Township toolmaker and a factory worker, comes from a long line of the "psychically aware." When her father fell from a building and broke his neck, doctors were sure he would never walk again, Kohler said. Her mother, adamant that he would not spend his life in a wheelchair, massaged his back and legs while she prayed. Eventually, Kohler's father rose to take his first steps.

"She healed him," Kohler said. "A lot of people would call that faith healing, but only God does that and only if it is his will."

Kohler believes she takes after her maternal grandmother, who was often called peculiar because of her uncanny talent for predicting the future. The grandmother died of tuberculosis in her native Germany at the age of 27, never meeting the girl who was to inherit her psychic gift.

Years later, though, Kohler was able to describe her long-dead grandmother and the house in which she had lived thousands of miles away.

"I really feel her around us as we're speaking," Kohler told a visitor.

Although she now talks matter-of-factly about the spiritual presences she feels and sometimes sees in her home, it was not always so. An early brush with skeptical ridicule silenced her for years.

"My first experience came when I was a very small child," she recalled. "I had overslept for school that morning, and I heard this little female voice whisper in my ear, 'Sarah, it's time to get up for school. You're late.'"

"I was so excited, and I went to class and told the nun about my guardian angel waking me up. Well, she just embarrassed me and said I was crazy and cuckoo."

Kohler claims she does not remember any other psychic experiences from the time of that first incident until she was in her 20s, married, and a new mother. As an adult, disturbing visions suddenly flooded into her mind, and Kohler accurately predicted an automobile accident, her grandfather's death, and a neighbor's suicide.

"That was really phenomenal," she said. "That was kind of a scary experience for me at the time because I didn't really know what was wrong with

me, and my husband thought I was ready for the loony bin."

Kohler could not shake the visions; instead, they intensified. Even more frightening were the glimpses of other-worldly figures that haunted her home. The first appeared while she was in the kitchen with her son, Paul, then 3 years old.

"Paul literally looked right through me and said, 'Hi, man,'" Kohler recounted. "Well, I had something in my hands, and the dish dropped to the floor. I turned around, and out of the corner of my eye I saw this flash of light and the form of a very tall man."

Soon afterward, she began seeing a shadowy man on the staircase leading to the upstairs of their home. When she asked her father who it might be, he guessed that it was her Uncle Bill who had died after falling down a staircase before she was born.

"A month after I began seeing him, I had a bad fall down the steps," Kohler said. "I'm not saying he pushed me, but I felt almost as if he was warning me to be careful."

Kohler admits that her growing involvement in psychic activities hastened the demise of her 11-year marriage. Ghosts and precognition were more than a man firmly grounded in the five senses could swallow.

"When I began predicting things, that's when he realized something was different about me," Kohler said, adding that her ex-husband now seeks her advice.

After the divorce, Kohler immersed herself in her new interest. She joined local psychic groups, read voraciously about metaphysical experiences, and even traveled to Hawaii to study ancient Tibetan teachings of "the mysteries."

She has earned a doctorate of metaphysics from the Universal Life Church, which has its headquarters in California, and is studying for certification as a healer.

"I don't say that I became obsessed with it," Kohler said of her interest in psychic matters. "I felt

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Writer's personal experience

Eagle/Times Staff Writer Pamela Rohland took a trip into her past lives.

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that it was something I should pursue to better understand what I was going through. I came to the full realization that there were other things in life besides getting up, going to work, sleeping, and eating.

"I've spent a lot of time alone in my 12 years of being divorced — I mean years at a time. My son would be with me, but I did no socializing. That's very difficult to do in this world, obviously, because recluses are often thought of as a little peculiar. But I had to have that time alone to study and to meditate and to grow."

The knowledge she gained changed her life.

"It gave me answers to questions I had all my life," Kohler said. "I always compare it to walking into a dark room and flicking on the light switch."

Kohler said she adopted a pseudonym after several strangers told her she looked as if her name should be Rachel. She now believes "Rachel" was the earthly name of the gypsy spirit guide who connects her with the unseen world.

"Rachel is a very spiritually evolved entity who is full of love and light and truth," Kohler said. "I really believe she has come to help me and assist me in my work."

"I feel her around me. I don't get the sense of what she looks like, other than the fact that she has long, very flowing black hair. She must have been with me for a very long time because I've always had this attraction for jewelry. A lot of times I'll get this feeling like I, you know, really wanna put on the glitz. And that's when I feel she's impressing me."

Kohler said she does not grow jittery imagining spirits floating around her. She is not worried because her talent for precognition has shown her when and how she will die. She is not shocked by the notion that she and her son

Paul, now 22, were sister and brother in a past life.

No, what bothers Sarah Kohler most is the people in *this* life. Her newspaper advertisements have attracted callers unsavory enough to prompt her to install a sophisticated security system in her home. And there are the inevitable skeptics who come to test and trick her.

"When I sit down to read someone, it's very serious to me," Kohler said. "It's not a game, and some people treat it that way. But that's OK; that's up to them. That's how they feel comfortable."

"What I do should not be confused with the garden variety card reader. It's not a game, and it's not a joke."

Like a priest or a bartender, Kohler said, she is privy to the secrets of many troubled or lonely people who simply need someone to talk to. She listens to their problems, she said, but is careful to let them make their own decisions.

"I work only with God, not with the devil," Kohler stressed. "I don't do anything magical; there

are no rituals. I help people find the god within them. That's all I do."

She bears no grudges toward those who are unconvinced by her abilities.

"I think people should be cautious; they should be doubting Thomases," Kohler said. "There are charlatans, people who take from the gullible."

"I think it's better to question than to accept everything you are told."

Writer's trip included meeting former selves

By Pamela Rohland
Eagle Times

I entered the candlelit room with a mixture of curiosity, excitement, and apprehension. And why not? It's not every day that I schedule an appointment to meet one of my former selves.

This was my first visit to a psychic, and as a novice, I was a tad worried about some of the finer points of fortunetelling and past-life regression.

Suppose I went into a trance and spilled some of the murky secrets that inhabit the darkened, dripping recesses of my soul? Suppose Sarah Kohler, my tour guide into lives past, present, and future, just looked at me and knew that I had swiped a Nancy Drew mystery from a five-and-dime store when I was in fourth grade?

Suppose I was an orphan in time and didn't have any past lives?

"Oh dear, I hope not," Sarah said during one of our early telephone conversations.

A FINANCIAL planner by day, Sarah spends many evenings and weekends exercising her psychic powers by guiding dozens of troubled clients through this mortal coil. Sometimes she uses channeling — a practice of tuning into spirit guides — to tell them about their pasts and futures. Other times, she gives them the full treatment, the highlight of which is a past-life regression.

Launched into vogue by actress and psychic guru Shirley MacLaine, the PLR is a process in which subjects are put into an altered state of consciousness — something like a light state of meditation — and are guided backward in time, presumably meeting up with themselves somewhere along the way.

In the interest of journalistic nosiness, I decided to undergo the process to see for myself what a growing number of people in Berks County and across the country are shelling out their hard-earned money for.

Although I have hatched a healthy streak of skepticism in the 30 years of my present life, I reminded myself that it's much easier to dismiss or scoff at something we don't understand than to consider it with an open mind.

I WAS TIRED and grouchy when Sarah led me into the cozy back room of her Laureldale duplex, and not really as interested in going through with the regression as I had been a few days earlier.

I plopped into a cushioned chair and looked around. A small lamp glowed in the corner of the shadowy room. A white candle, for "protection," flickered on the round table where we were sitting. At Sarah's side were lovely, hand-sized chunks of amethyst and rose quartz, believed to have a calming



Sarah Kohler
spiritual tour guide

and energizing effect on the timid.

Sarah herself was reassuring. A petite, articulate woman of 42, she did not exude mystery like cheap perfume. The crystal necklace resting on her soft, expensive sweater was the only clue that she was not a loan officer or a college professor. If a yuppie ever needed a psychic, I thought Sarah would do nicely.

"I felt your apprehension this week," she told me as I was taking off my coat.

I HAD NOT seen or spoken to Sarah since our first interview a week before and had deliberately revealed very little about myself, so this announcement gave me a start. I decided that the strain of the past few days showed on my face and made no comment.

Seated at the table, Sarah directed me to shuffle the deck of playing cards she would use to read my fate, and lay them in three piles in front of her. She then took several cards from the deck, many of which happened to be hearts.

Even dropouts from Cardreading 101 could predict what message this would hold.

"You have a lot of love around you," Sarah said. "You're really a humanitarian in many ways, and you have a great love for people."

"You're not as openly expressive as you would like to be. However, I do feel that in time this is going to change greatly for you, and it's going to have a great impact on you."

WELL, IT sounded good so far. I smiled and pulled some cards from the pile, as she asked.

For the next 20 minutes, Sarah turned over the cards and offered me a potpourri of information. Sometimes she spoke rapidly, as if reading the message from an invisible cue card. At other times, she paused and peered over my left

shoulder as if listening to someone unseen behind me.

Many of the things Sarah said could be classified as general information or bits of ego-stroking that I was all too pleased to believe about myself. I am strong-willed and not easily influenced by those around me, she said. My husband loves me very much, and our marriage will flourish over the years. I have great achievements in store for me, beginning when I am 33. I will have a fruitful and happy future.

Good, glad to hear it.

SHE WARNED ME to be careful when I'm traveling, because my car might break down. I filed this bit of forewarning under the category of motherly advice or plain common sense.

The reading would have been pretty mundane, except for two things.

Sarah described a colleague at work, pointing out his age and appearance, before giving a curiously accurate analysis of his personality. She claimed she rarely reads the paper and has never met this man; later he said he did not know her.

When Sarah told me that my husband, George Landis, also an EagleTimes reporter, had been my brother in a past life, I stifled a laugh. She looked solemn as she explained that he and I had fought together as soldiers in a battle hundreds of years ago in a country she could not name.

Although I did not die in the battle, he was unable to protect me from danger, and George has carried this guilt into his present life.

SHE SAID GEORGE worries that he is shortchanging me in some way and does not provide enough for me. In fact, that is a remark my husband often makes to me privately. I chalked up his feelings to a heavy but unavoidable financial burden of his, which takes a toll on our budget.

"How do you know that?" I asked in amazement.

"Because that's what they're telling me," Sarah answered, referring to her spirit guides.

After the reading, Sarah led me to a sofa where I was to lie, nestled under a blanket, during my past-life regression.

SHE EXTINGUISHED the lamp and left the candle burning. Turning on some music that sounded like chimes and rushing waves, she guided me through relaxation exercises that left me feeling limp and peaceful.

While lying there smiling foolishly, I felt something warm being whooshed back and forth over me. Fearing I'd break the spell, I kept my eyes closed.

Later, Sarah showed me a wand with a crystal on one end that she uses before a regression

“In my mind I saw a large white house with pillars that I knew was on a Southern plantation. People in long dresses and coats were having what seemed to be a party on a spreading, immaculately clipped lawn.”

— A scene from Pam Roland's regression

to encourage a positive energy flow.

When I had relaxed enough, she told me in a soft voice to imagine being embraced by a warm white light that carried me back in time. In a few moments, she asked me where I had stopped.

I NEED NOT have worried about spilling dark secrets while in a trance. I was in a relaxed state, something like that hazy point between wakefulness and sleep. I knew what I was saying and I felt in control, but freer from inhibitions than usual.

A picture, like a silent movie, had effortlessly popped into my mind. I was not straining to imagine anything; I did not struggle to concoct details. I simply watched the scene as it unfolded.

In my mind I saw a large white house with pillars that I knew was on a Southern plantation. People in long dresses and coats were having what seemed to be a party on a spreading, immaculately clipped lawn.

Sarah asked me what year it was. Strange as it sounds, the numbers 1864 flashed across the picture like a movie credit.

SARAH ASKED me how old I was, and somehow I sensed that I was a young woman, perhaps in my early 20s. When she wondered if I recognized myself among the partygoers, I realized that I was not with them but was standing off to the side watching the festivities.

Sarah suggested I advance 10 years from that point, and this time, again with no imaginative toil on my part, the setting changed. I had gotten out of a carriage and walked into a house beside a tall, thin man in a brown coat and hat.

Without exchanging a word or a glance, we walked into a shadowy foyer, where I took off the cape I was wearing. I noticed a staircase of dark wood that led to the rooms upstairs. I told Sarah this was my house. When she asked if I liked the man I was with, I stumbled.

I waffled: "Ah, I guess so. Yes, he's all right. We're friendly."

When she asked who he was, I was more definite.

"My husband," I said.

THE MARRIAGE evidently was not a happy one.

Again, Sarah suggested I advance in time, this time skipping over 20 years. The next time a picture flashed in my mind, I laughed out loud.

"I'm fat!" I cried in surprise.

In my present life, I'm 5'3" and have always been on the skinny side, but somewhere in the past, I was a case for Weight Watchers. This time I appeared as a fat old lady with gray hair pulled back in a bun. I was sitting in a sunny room reading a book; my knitting was on a table nearby. I was wearing a long blue flowered dress with lace around the collar and cuffs.

I KNEW THAT my husband was gone, and I was content and unconcerned about my appearance. I watched myself getting up from my chair and waddling toward the kitchen. There I met a tall, thin young woman with brown hair who was peeling potatoes.

"Do you know who she is?" Sarah asked.

"She's my daughter," I said.

"I think her name is Betty."

Fast-forwarding 10 more years I saw myself, still the fat old lady,

lying under a patchwork quilt in a sunny upstairs bedroom of my daughter's house. She was in the room with me and a young man, whom I could not identify, was holding my hand. I knew I was going to die, but I wasn't upset because I felt that I had lived a good life.

"Go six months into the future," Sarah ordered. "Are you still there?"

"No," I said.

WHEN SARAH HAD brought me back to full wakefulness, I was in a bubbly mood, more energetic than an hour before — and demanding.

"How do I know it wasn't just my imagination?" I persisted. "How can I tell if that was real?"

Sarah said that some people who had past-life regressions have been able to dig into historical records and document proof of their former existence. Lacking that, she said with a smile that imagination is often the starting point for reality.

This answer will hardly satisfy hard-core realists, prove-it-to-me-or-I-won't-believe-it types. It did not satisfy me.

But I did not feel cheated or disappointed by my experience. Sarah did not put on a performance for my benefit, and she seemed sincere in her beliefs.

My past life was pretty dull compared with some people who, like my colleagues at work, announce that they were once Egyptian queens or lived on the lost island of Atlantis. Still, it seems to have been an ordinary and mostly happy life, which is not such a bad deal.

Since my visit with Sarah, people have asked me if I've turned into a believer in the psychic world. Well, I don't know. But it's fun to wonder.