

GHOSTS AND POLTERGEISTS

Why are we scared of ghosts? Do you know of anyone who has been harmed by a ghost? So why is the automatic reaction to scream? What a fascinating chance to explore beyond what we already know. If you have the good fortune to be in a haunted house, ask them in.

The belief that people's spirits can exist independently of their bodies dates back to ancient times. Ghosts are the souls of those who have died but return to visit the living. This is said to be due to a traumatic death or unfinished business leaving them unsettled in the next world. Although the common image of a ghost is a see-through human, not all apparitions take that form. Some are purely light, some sound, while others have visible non-human forms.

The word 'poltergeist' means 'noisy spirit' and they are usually invisible, their presence being detected by either sounds they make or objects being moved. Poltergeists like to throw objects around and move furniture. They are claimed to be mischievous at times, teasing people. Some can be terrifying, causing children to go into trances and levitate. But when they never seem to actually harm anyone, why is the immediate reaction to scream?

Before we accept that haunting is automatically the result of a ghost, there are a few checks which should be made. Investigations of hauntings in the past have revealed many causes. Unfortunately, they have not led to the invaluable

opportunity to ask the ghost some of the questions about the afterlife which have fascinated humans for centuries. Curiosity, not fear, is the rational response to a ghost.

Before launching forth with questions of the hereafter, it is worth checking a few things first.

Check out the child

Tina Resch was fourteen and living in Columbus, Ohio. Early in 1984 her name was spread around the world when her family became the victim of loud banging, flying telephones and lamps which moved and crashed as a result of the Columbus poltergeist. The adopted Tina used the media coverage to plead for the identity of her biological parents. She was later discovered pulling over a lamp when she thought she was unobserved, by a video camera which had been left running. The reported events were identified as either trickery on her part, exaggerations by investigators or media inventions. In 1994 Tina Resch was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of her three-year-old daughter.

Poltergeists are usually linked to one person who is referred to as the 'focus'. The focus can be found in the vicinity of the flying objects and slamming doors. Commonly the focus is but a child, the 'poor creature' being most often in the eleven-to-sixteen-year-old age group.

It is a sad reflection on the past that it is assumed these children must be genuinely possessed because a child would not be capable of such fraud. If you have any doubts about the capacity of children, especially young teenagers, to be inventive and deceptive, spend just one day in a school. Magic books fascinate kids of that age and most of the quoted evidence resembles well-known magic tricks.

To add to the lack of credit given children, the focus is most often a young girl. As we well know, teenage girls are all sweet, innocent creatures without the merest notion of deception. Or so it was believed in the past. The trust in

the honesty of young girls reflects greatly on the naivety of the believer. Investigators often quote the girls to be embroiled in some kind of stressful family or social situation. In becoming the focus of a poltergeist, suddenly she becomes the centre of attention. A mundane, possibly neglected life suddenly becomes exciting. Isn't this enough motivation? Often it has been shown the child was unhappy with some aspect of the family situation and trying to force a change.

Natural explanations

Let's say we have totally eliminated trickery as a possible cause. Before drawing the conclusion that a ghost has taken up residence, there are a number of simple explanations which should be checked but rarely are. When a ghostly story is recounted as fact, just make sure the teller has checked out a few of the possible alternatives.

Sounds and temperature changes

Temperature changes can cause the expansion and contraction of various materials. The problem arises when the materials expand and contract at different rates. Wood, for example, will change size at a different rate from metal or stone, so wood structures next to metal or stone will cause friction when there are temperature changes. This can lead the adjoining pieces to move in little jumps and a creaking noise is heard. Vibrations can also be generated this way. Old doors, being a combination of wood and iron, have a particular tendency to do this.

In hot weather, the sun on one side of the house will cause that side to heat more rapidly than the cooler side. At night, the cooling down can similarly be more rapid on one side than the other. Noises are more common at night when the most rapid change in temperature occurs.

Sounds of central heating

Central heating is a wonderful source of strange noises. Many ghosts appear after the residents of an old house renovate. Pipes and radiators change size as they heat. The heating ducts will amplify the sounds beautifully and transmit them around the house, giving a variety of apparent sources for the sounds.

Mice scratching, rats nesting and human voices can all be amplified, distorted and transmitted. These are very effective sources of ghostly commotion.

Sounds of wood

It was a dark and stormy night. Or maybe a calm one, as the fog settled. Moisture makes wood expand. Wood is made of fibres and different fibres will expand and contract at different rates, leading to all sorts of squeaks and growls accompanying the drying out as well as the wetting of wood. As wood tends to be laid in planks, there are plenty of adjacent surfaces to rub together and groan.

Sounds and renovations

Where there is new timber against old iron the timber dries out when the heating, for the first time comes on or maybe the old bearings and rafters are taking up a new strain. As they adjust, they will speak volumes about their struggles. Ghostly volumes. Newly exposed beams are a common source of strange sounds.

Sounds and plumbing

Pipes of old made strange noises. They still do. Trapped air pockets and flowing water produce wonderful ghostly serenades. Like heating ducts, the plumbing can act as a transmitter and amplifier of the sound, making it seem like

it comes from unexpected places. Older houses are much more common sites for unearthly noises. The plumbing is much more varied, uneven and possibly leaking, so the chances of a disturbed water flow are much more likely. Renovations can put new pressures on old plumbing, introducing unfamiliar tones.

Radio without the radio

Strange voices and ghostly music can very rarely be heard when there is no radio turned on. Lead strips or other thin bands of metal can act as antennae, picking up the broadcasts. This will occur only when there is a specific relationship between the length of the metal and the broadcast frequency allowing resonance in the metallic strip.

Opening doors and windows

As new woods dry out or new structures settle, doors and windows can open by themselves as locks and levers become finer in their settings. As the ground settles after some movement, the slight change in the building structure can reset the door and window latches until they are poised so finely that it takes but a breath of wind or a vibration from a human walking past to open them. New underground pipes or any small structural modification can be enough to trigger this change.

Moving and falling objects

A change in a building's structure can cause previously level shelves and mantelpieces to become slightly sloped. Over time, objects creep down the slope, the movement usually unnoticed by the residents until the day they move that last millimetre and crash to the ground. The replaced vase continues to slip from the shelf. Auntie Vera gave you the vase and then passed to the other side. Is she trying to tell you something?

Images in windows

A newly cleaned window leads to reflections which are not usually present. Distortions in peripheral vision can lead to signs of movement which can't be detected when looking directly at the glass.

A slight repositioning of a mirror, a car parked in an unusual spot or a piece of broken glass reflecting light can lead to reflections in windows which haven't been seen before. The human imagination makes patterns and the human face, especially when shrouded in a loose hood, is a very simple shape. So faces appear at windows.

Swamp gas

If your ghost is an external one, then various atmospheric effects can feed the illusion. One of the most famous is swamp gas. Methane, CH_4 , and phosphine, PH_3 , are released by decaying matter in swamps and marshes. Occasionally the combustible swamp gas ignites spontaneously or as a result of electrical storm activity. This leads to luminous glows hovering over the swamp. These effects are known by various names including *ignis fatuus* (foolish fire), jack-o-lanterns or will-o-the-wisps. Sometimes they are called ghosts.

Car headlights

You would be surprised how often moving ghosts are the reflection or distorted vision of car headlights, often far away. These may be refracted or dispersed by fog or reflected by windows or mirrors within the house or nearby buildings.

Animals

Many ghostly phenomena have been investigated and the culprits identified as innocents from the animal world. Possums in the roof, cats, dogs and rats are the most frequent

offenders. One common story, taken as evidence of a ghost, tells of the dog or cat stopping at the same stair or spot in a room every time. When investigated this particular spot is often beneath a nest in the roof. Small quantities of possum or rat piddle which has dropped to the floor will attract the cat or dog on every passing. Such a lure will also draw them to places in the wall, or cupboards, cellars or other locations which can be interpreted as the exact place the poor servant girl was brutally murdered.

Sounds of screaming or whispering, calling or murmuring conversation are often quoted as evidence of the haunting of a house. How many people can identify the many calls of the night animals of the location in question, especially if they go to investigate in an unfamiliar location? Possums produce a guttural hiss, among their many calls, rabbits squeal when caught by a fox, and night birds howl and coo. Hunting birds will land on roofs and bash their prey to kill it. Thuds and thumps are heard which have never been heard before.

The calls of some frogs sound like human conversation. Even experienced bird watchers have been known to be scared witless by the piercing scream of a woman being murdered, when hearing the rare call of the Australian barking owl. Every country has its animal screamers.

Very few people sit silently and listen to the night sounds, and even fewer can identify them. Unfamiliar sounds are far more likely to be the result of a uncommon animal or an inexperienced listener than of a supernatural source.

Hallucinations

Hallucinations, whether auditory or visual, are vividly real to the person experiencing them. Brain scans have indicated that when having a hallucination the same area of the brain is illuminated as when hearing or seeing real images. Many ghosts can be explained by hallucinations. Sadly, it is only when more than one person has seen or heard the ghost that this explanation can be eliminated.

The cynical view

In 1974 the murder of a man, his wife and four of their children started a money-making spree which profited none of those in the house at the time. Ronald DeFeo murdered his parents and four of his siblings, using as his defence the excuse that the evil spirits made him do it. He was indicted for murder.

George and Kathy Lutz moved into the house in Amityville, New York, a town now synonymous with horror. They stayed only 28 days before fleeing the house, unable to stand the foul stench and ghostly rappings, green slime and demonic forces.

Jason Anson told their story in the book *The Amityville Horror*, which was published with the bold claim 'A True Story' on the cover. It was a bestseller. The subsequent film was a box office hit, as was *Amityville II*.

Meanwhile William Weber, the lawyer who had defended DeFeo, was preparing his own book about the trial. After meeting the Lutzes, he was keen to include their stories of supernatural horrors in his book. In an interview with the Associated Press, distributed on 26 July 1979, he told of how the whole story was created by George and himself over 'many bottles of wine'. Weber sued the Lutzes and the Lutzes unsuccessfully sued Weber. Judge Jack B. Weinstein concluded: 'It appears to me that to a large extent the book is a work of fiction'.

The subsequent owners of the house, Jan and Barbara Cromarty, sued Anson, the Lutzes and the book's publishers over loss of privacy. They expressed no doubt that the story was a hoax. They won their case.

Father Ralph Pecararo was portrayed as Father Mancuso in the book, and sued the Lutzes and the publishers for loss of privacy and distortion of the truth about his role. In fact, he had never attempted to exorcise demons, had a mysterious car accident or been afflicted by blisters. He had never set foot in the house. He won his case, too.

Final word should go to the man who owned the house

when the movie renewed interest in the story. Frank Burch said the real horror was the hordes of tourists.

There can be many motivations for ghost stories. It seems that fear, when we know it is harmless, is something many people enjoy. Hence the tradition of ghost stories around the campfire or late at night. So valuable is this love of fear and horror that it has led to many a profitable venture. How many tourist attractions are there which exist and generate income purely on their ghostly premise? And just how much money can change hands when there is a decent horror story to be told?