

How We Are Haunted

A Sermon Delivered on October 25, 2009
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

“Where’er we tread, ‘tis haunted, holy ground.”
-- Lord Byron

Unitarian Universalist Church
309 West Green Street
Urbana, Illinois 61801-3221
(217) 384-8862
www.uuc-urbana.org

Reading: from a letter sent to the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University in 1960:

I do not know whether or not you answer or act as consultant for an individual ‘problem,’ but I know of no one else who might understand, explain (or dismiss) a particular concern, may I presume on your time?

...this is what occurs... ‘Someone’ stands just behind my right shoulder... I know that he is there, though he does not speak. He is dark, gaunt, shadowed... he may be hungry... I feel strangely comfortable in his presence. I feel as though he needs me... Can this be explained?

Reading: by Stacy Horn from *Unbelievable* (p. 1)

Every ghost story begins with a love story, and usually more than one. Once they are untangled, you will always find eternal love, unbearable loss, and unconquerable fear.

Everywhere, every minute, people all over the world are desperately begging God and any other power they can think of to not take someone they love, their child, their husband or wife, mother or father or friend. And finally, at the end, don’t take me.

There is no spot on earth that is free from loss. On this street, or in this room, someone lay down or was put down and was no more. Someone held someone else for the last time here. Rivers and lakes and oceans are full of people who vanished beneath the surface and were never seen again. Wherever you are standing, wherever you call home, someone left the earth there. Everyone we love dies and disappears.

Something more substantial than a memory must survive of all that love. It’s unthinkable that the dead are truly gone and completely gone. And if the dead are not completely gone, we, as every generation that came before, are compelled to look for whatever remains.

Reading: by Michael Ventura from *Shadow Dancing in the U.S.A.*

What has marked you is still marking you. There is a place in us where wounds never heal, and where loves never end. Nobody knows much about this place except that it exists, feeding our dreams and reinforcing and/or haunting our days...

Bloody, half-flayed, partly dead, naked, tortured, my mother really does hang on a hook in my closet, because she hangs on a hook in me. Occasionally I have to take her out and we do a rending dance, tearing each other bloody as we go... and then run for the hills, my dears, for I am in my horror.

One of my several, my insistent, horrors.

We are, every one of us, full of horror...

My closet is full of hooks, full of horrors, and I also love them, my horrors, and I know they love me, and they will always hang there for me, because they are also good for me, they are also on my side, they gave so much to *be* my horrors, they made me strong to survive.

There is much in our new ‘enlightened’ lexicon to suggest that one may move into

a house that doesn't have such a closet. You move into such a house and think everything is fine until after a while you start to hear a distant screaming, and start to smell something funny, and realize slowly that the closet is there, alright, but it's been walled over, and just when you need desperately to open it you find yourself faced with bricks instead of a door.

How We Are Haunted
A Sermon Delivered on October 25, 2009
By
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

Have you ever been inside a haunted house? They are all around us, you know. At least that is what I learned doing a quick Google search on my computer

On "Haunted House.com" I found listings for 73 houses in Illinois alone. There's Shotgun Manor in Sullivan. There's the Asylum of MAD Dreams in Cordova. There's the Dungeon of Decease in Lockport, about which the website says, "It's sick... it's bloody... it's scary as hell." All of these, it seems, are more elaborate versions of the haunted house we used to set up in the church basement for our church school children on Halloween. Most haunted houses are designed as fully immersive entertainment for the adventurous among us.

But there are also other kinds of haunted houses, like "The Haunted Historic Senator Humphrey House" in Orland Park, IL. According to their website, this is truly a haunted location. Paranormal Investigators and publications have documented it as haunted. Not only that, a paranormal practitioner named Edward Shanahan conducts séances there that channel the spirits of the dead. Guests "who feel they can handle it," are invited to sit at the Séance table.

"Bring an item of a loved one who has passed away, and during the night Edward will attempt what he has become known for in the Chicago land area, his Conscious Channeling and he will do this with some individuals items, and it is done in front of as many people that would like to watch," the website says.

* * *

During All Hallow's Eve, or Halloween, the veil separating the world of the living and world of the dead is thinnest. But I think Halloween also blurs the boundaries between other sorts of realms: between the realm of the scary and the realm of the silly. Between fantastic imagination, and actual, earnest intuitions.

Speculations about the nature of ghosts do seem to have a permanent place in the human psyche. You might think that belief in ghosts is a quaint relic of ancient times, when our ancestors imagined ghostly apparitions, and occasionally saw spirits of the dead travel

among the living. You might think that in modern times science has once and for all dispelled any lingering rumors about supernatural and paranormal phenomena. And yet, the more science is able to explain the unexplainable, the more willing we are to believe what seems unbelievable.

According to polls, our belief in the supernatural is increasing. In a Gallup poll conducted in 1978, less than eleven percent of respondents said they believe in ghosts. The most recent poll conducted in 2005 showed that belief in ghosts had tripled, with now one person in three a believer.

* * *

In her book *Unbelievable*, Stacy Horn recounts the efforts of a group of scientists at Duke University, who, between 1930 and 1980, attempted to prove or disprove the existence of paranormal phenomena, using the most rigorous scientific methods they could conceive. Their work touched on ghost stories, poltergeists, and haunted houses, but was always guided by the effort to recreate these unusual events within a laboratory setting.

Their research disproved countless instances in which research subjects assumed supernatural forces were at work. Mediums who allegedly conversed with the spirits of the dead were debunked. Many instances of imagined telepathy were shown to be nothing of the sort. However, they did touch upon certain phenomena that could neither be discounted nor explained.

Maybe the most striking instance was a series of experiments with a young man named Hubert Pearce in the early 1930s. Pearce was a seminary student in his twenties, son of a plumber from Clarendon, Arkansas, initially simply one of the many individuals involved in a study.

The experiment researchers developed involved a deck of twenty-five cards. The deck contained five sets of five cards each with a distinct symbol, either a circle, a square, a cross, wavy lines, or a star.

Sitting across from Pearce, the researcher would draw a card and place it face down on the table. Like countless research subjects before him, Pearce would be asked to guess the symbol on the card. According to the laws of chance, random guessing would produce five correct answers for each deck of twenty-five cards.

But Pearce did much better. He consistently guessed ten cards correctly, and sometimes even all twenty-five in a row. Statistically speaking, Pearce was telepathic. In order to protect themselves from charges of fraud, they set up a screen between Pearce and the researcher. Nevertheless Pearce continued to beat the odds with his guesses. They moved Pearce into a different room, and then even into a different building on campus altogether, synchronizing their watches, so that researchers could draw cards from the deck, place them face down on the table without looking at them, and Pearce could make guesses at the same time, one every 60 seconds.

There were other individuals who occasionally displayed telepathic abilities in similar tests. However these abilities generally weren't sustained over time. Pearce demonstrated amazing abilities over a course of several years. Up until one day he called to cancel his appointment. That day his girl friend had broken off their relationship. He was heartbroken, and in no mood for experiments. When he returned to the lab later, he would never score as high as he had earlier. Up to that point Pearce had participated in 1,850 trials in all. The odds of achieving his collected scores through random guessing alone would be one in an octillion - that's a one followed by 27 zeros, or a billion-billion-billions to one.

As thought-provoking as findings such as these were, they were not sufficient to persuade the larger scientific community that telepathy or paranormal phenomena actually exist. Subtle and rare, extra sensory perceptions seem to be a matter of both mind and heart.

* * *

In 1945 the researchers at Duke University received a letter from a recent widow. She wrote,

“Two weeks ago I received word that my husband, an army doctor, had been killed in Germany. Since then I have read several books on psychical research, including your *New Frontiers of the Mind*... I wish to write... asking about mediums of good character... My husband and I had been married only fourteen months, but we felt somehow as if we had known each other always. It seems, even now, preposterous that he will not return and that we shall not go on with a life where every obstacle existed only for the joy of overcoming it together.”

* * *

Stacy Horn tells us, every ghost story begins with a love story. “Everyone we love dies and disappears.” And yet,

“something more substantial than a memory must survive of all that love. It's unthinkable that the dead are truly gone and completely gone. And if the dead are not completely gone, we, as every generation that came before, are compelled to look for whatever remains.”

* * *

Among Native Americans, the Ghost Dance is a religious observance that has existed for centuries, through which participants invoke the spirits of their ancestors. Some believed the Ghost Dance would allow dead relatives to return, and the world would be renewed and restored to peace.

The Ghost Dance took on special meaning in 1890, a time when the great Indian tribes on this continent had been all but eradicated by European settlers and their descendents. That year, in the face of rising pressure from the government to relocate to ever smaller

reservations, the Ghost Dance became a unifying ritual and part of a religious revival among the Lakota tribe.

The dance was a desperate attempt to restore the spirit of tribal people who had been persecuted and oppressed by U.S. government forces for generations. The government however feared the Ghost Dance was a war dance, and the beginning of what might become a violent uprising of the Lakota. Thus in December of 1890 the Lakota who were en route to Pine Ridge reservation were surrounded by the 7th Cavalry Regiment, under the command of Colonel James W. Forsyth.

I remember visiting the memorial for the Wounded Knee Massacre in Batesland, South Dakota, a few years ago. It is the site of the last major clash between Native Americans and U.S. troops. More than a hundred Indians were ruthlessly killed that icy December morning, most of them women and children.

As I walked up the barren hill, I wondered whether the earth itself remembers the events that took place there more than a century earlier. And I wonder how the ghosts of those who died tragically that day, the victims of violence, continue to haunt us. They haunt us to this day, as some of us gather in Assembly Hall to watch the retired U of I Chief Illiniwek dance to the delight of sports fans. They haunt us as others stand outside Assembly Hall protesting this tradition that is considered deeply disrespectful and offensive to the vast majority of the Native Americans at the U of I, and is sharply criticized by the faculty of the American Indian Studies Department.

* * *

The ghosts that haunt us cannot easily be pinned down. They may walk the rooms of our childhood, they may linger in our bedroom closets, they may live within the recesses of our mind.

Our ghosts are travelers between the world we know and the world we once knew. They provide us the opportunity to see connections too easily overlooked, to remember powerful moments too easily forgotten. They help us grab hold of experiences as yet unresolved, that we might work to bring peace to mind and heart, and healing to a wounded world.

Our ghosts are trying to tell us something. They are whispering to us, leading us toward understanding that lies beyond the firm grasp of reason.

The ghosts of guilt, of regret, of grief. They are all pointing us toward the deeds we wish we could have done differently. They point us toward opportunities we wish we had seized and yet allowed to slip by. They point us toward the love that preceded loss.

The ghosts that haunt us are stubborn reminders that we can do better, that we can seize the day, that we can prove our love persists.

May we dare to listen to those still, small voices
Too easily drowned out by the noise and clamor of our busy lives.
May we heed their entreaties, embracing the fullness of our past,
That we might move into the future unafraid.
Amen.