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Ghost Of A Chance
by
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In modern times, Halloween serves two important social functions. Next to Christmas, Halloween is America's most important consumer holiday. Not only are vast amounts of money spent on goods, but children are introduced to the idea of donning work clothes (costumes) and participating in a routine work ritual (trick or treat) to obtain their share of industrial output. The harder they work, the more they get. I know I learned to do my job by trick-or-treating.

The second important function of modern Halloween is to allow people a legitimate opportunity to escape their mundane lives and become someone else, or to otherwise live out a fantasy in a socially acceptable way. There are many outlets in the modern world to stimulate imagination and to simulate fantasy lives that help stave off the effects of alienation--Mardi Gras, motorcycle rallies like Sturgis, community theater, NASCAR, NFL, fraternal organizations, reenactments, video games, mystery dinners, ghost hunting, etc., etc.

For Halloween, kids get the candy; adults get to let off some steam; retailers get rich. Everybody wins!

In ancient times--most know the story--All Hallows Eve was one of many pagan rituals celebrating the harvest and honoring our departed ancestors who have returned to seek resolution to their earthly lives. Incidentally, the word *pagan* is a Latin word that refers to someone who lives in the country--we might use the word *bumpkin* in the same context.

Early Christians associated the term *pagan* with devil worship both out of ignorance (they called every non-Christian a devil worshiper) and to help give them an advantage over competing religions. But pagans who were willing to adopt the new religion were reluctant to give up their cherished beliefs and practices (just in case). So some pagan celebrations, like Halloween, were tolerated by the Church, while others, like Christmas (Yuletide celebration), were incorporated into the liturgy (which is why Christmas is celebrated in December even though Jesus was probably born in April). One practice that pagans absolutely refused to give up was worshiping the patron god of the village. Canny Christian priests encouraged them to give up Bacchus or Thor (for example), and adopt a patron Christian saint instead--usually this saint was a martyr.

Ghosts are associated with Halloween because of its original purpose of honoring ancestors who had returned from the dead. The word ghost comes from the German word *geist*, which does not mean the same thing as the English word *ghost*. Geist refers to a characteristic, like the spirit of an Age. Americans use the word ghost to refer to any number of "things". A ghost can be a spirit, an entity, a noise, a light where no light should be, a bump in the night, an apparition, or other phenomena. A *poltergeist*, or noisy ghost, is no longer thought to be an entity. It is now considered a result of a particular person's unconscious telekinetic ability mixed with emotional states.

TV shows on paranormal investigation have revealed the wide range of possibilities for paranormal phenomena. They can appear as cold spots, fluctuations in magnetic or electrical fields, splotches in photographs, voices recorded on machines that were not heard when the recording was made, shadows on video recordings, depictions on thermal imaging devices, etc. Confronted with this sort of evidence, saying "I don't believe in ghosts" is the equivalent of saying "I don't believe in the chair I'm sitting on." On the other hand, one may legitimately question the explanations offered for these phenomena; the truth is, no one knows.

With so many meanings for the word, no one can explain what a ghost is. Educated people are reserved in their judgement. Those who are absolutely sure that there are no ghosts are as poorly educated as those who are dead sure (pun intended) that this blob of light in the photograph is the soul of a dead person. All of these are theories; there is no positive knowledge about the supernatural. The only thing we can *prove* is that we cannot know.

For example, the concept of the soul as the essence of a person which transcends from the body to some other place at death has come to us from Plato. It was one of many Platonic ideas incorporated into Church doctrine. Do we trust Plato to have gotten it right? Perhaps. That is why all of this is belief, and not knowledge.

Still, there are things that do go bump in the night, even if we don't know for sure what they are. This summer, we were able to investigate the Birdcage Theater in Tombstone, the Fargo Mansion in Wisconsin, the Mason House in Iowa, the Copper Queen in Bisbee, and the Thayer House in Minnesota--all reported to be haunted. The first three turned up nothing unusual. The other two produced results.

The Copper Queen is said to have three resident ghosts: a tall, dark man, a woman prostitute who is thought to have killed herself because of a faithless lover, and a child named Billy. The tall, dark man roams the hallways, and is seen as a dark shadow. The woman is said to pull the covers off men's feet at night, and indeed TAPS caught video of the sheets sliding mysteriously off an investigator's feet while he slept. Billy is never seen, but he is thought to move jewelry and toys around. One guest reported a stuffed animal missing, which mysteriously reappeared several hours later.

Moments after I turned on the digital recorders, they picked up the voice of what sounds like a little boy that we did not hear at the time. There was no one else in that wing of the building on that floor. It is a Type B EVP (electronic voice phenomenon)--clearly a voice, but you cannot make out what is being said. There are four distinct syllables with a voice inflection that indicates a complete phrase shaped as a child's question--something like "can we play now?" but that isn't it.

At the Thayer House, I left an electromagnetic detection meter on next to a digital recorder. About two in the morning, it began beeping with a very low level reading--it was reminiscent of a dog barking. I got out of bed and moved over to where the recorder was positioned. I asked if anyone was in the room. Beep! "That was very good," I said, "can you do that again?" Beep, beep! "Can you do it again?" Beep, beep, beep, beep, etc. I had a nice little exchange with something intelligent enough to respond.

During a preinvestigation interview one time, a woman asked me if I have drawn any conclusions from my fifty years of paranormal study. I have drawn three conclusions, I told her: First, there are things in the universe that we are just too limited to be able to explain. Second, there are special individuals who seem to know things the rest of us do not know--like how to communicate with unseen spirits (but there are not many of these, and they do not advertise themselves). Third, we will never know anything for sure while we live on earth.