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Scarin' up trouble: Explanations for things that go bump in the night vary widely

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Magazine update



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"Why do you guys always do this kind of thing at night?" a student asked Terry Howell, the founder of the Central Virginia Paranormal Research Group, who was at Randolph College earlier this year to investigate the longstanding tale of ghosts haunting the former women's school.

"If something's there," Howell said in response, "it's there during the day as well as at night. You know, after the sun goes down, and people kind of get settled down, it's a little easier to use your equipment. "Ghosts are there during the day as well as at night ..." he continued, but something interrupted when he said the word "ghosts."

Inside The ND



The door to the tiny parlor where he and Cindy Holt of the Bedford Ghost Investigation Group had set up shop for the night suddenly slammed shut.

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"There's a big fireplace in this room over to your right, and there's a big mirror near the fireplace, and chairs and sofas lining the walls and whatnot for your date - and as the story goes, sometimes people in the room will look up into the mirror, and there would be an old lady sitting in one of the chairs that's right there when you walk in the door. And you look over, and of course there's no old lady in the chair. So we were really anxious to get in there - and that's where Terry and I had decided to set up first," Holt said.

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"And so he set his video camera up, and I just had my tape recorder hanging around my neck. And I think there were three students with us. Well, you know, when you have that many people, you're going to get to talking - it's hard not to," Holt said. "And one of the guys asked Terry, Why do y'all do this at night? And Terry was in the process of



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answering - and he was standing right in front of this little hallway, and this little hallway, all it was was a door to the right going into the stairwell, and there were these heavy metal doors that are just basically made heavily so that if you've got an armload of books, you can just open it and not have to worry about closing it behind you, because it will slam shut on its own. And there was another door just like that at the end of this hallway.

"So Terry was standing with his back to this little hallway, and he was answering this guy's question - well, all of the sudden, that door behind Terry just went SLAM!" Holt said.

"It was not open - they're made to stay shut. You could hear me say, What was that? And Terry was like, I don't know. I think it was the door behind me," Holt said.

"I went straight over to the doors, started opening them, shutting them, trying to get them to slam, trying to get it to sit rested open with that little thing that sticks out of the door, resting on the door jamb - and it just wouldn't do it," Holt said.

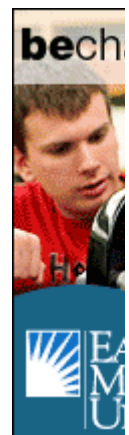
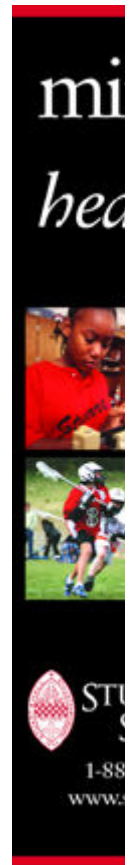
It's the 21st century - and we're well into the Age of Enlightenment that was supposed to rid us of any of those Old World illusions about things that go bump in the night.

Reason has supplanted irrational explanations like that there are things called *ghosts* that engage in activities that we refer to as *haunting* people and places.

All life can be reduced to a simple mathematical formula. And there isn't anyplace in that formula for something as silly and superstitious as believing that a ghost heard Terry Howell talking about it and deciding to make a door SLAM! in the middle of the night.

Is there?

"One of the things that a lot of scholars have thought about is why in a rational age we would be interested in ghost stories," said Lowell Frye, a professor of rhetoric and humanities at Hampden-Sydney College, which, as far as I can tell, isn't haunted, though you can never really be too sure about these kinds of things.



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Frye uses ghost stories in his Rhetorics 102 classes as a way of offering students "a type of playground through which we can explore things that are uncertain or that we fear or that we worry about on one level or another," he said.

"It's interesting to me that questions are raised or explored psychologically by people like Sigmund Freud - and Freud's appearance on the scene more or less mirrors the interest in ghost stories as well. I think there's a lot of psychological investigation that's going there," Frye said.

"I also think that whether you're a skeptic or a believer of one sort or another, the finality of death is still something that people worry about. And thinking about supernatural tales or reading supernatural tales gives us a chance to think about death in ways that maybe are easier on us - or at least emotionally and imaginatively interesting to us in ways that other things might not be," Frye said.

So maybe we cling to ghost stories as a way of something that none of us, not even in the Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, the Internet Age, could ever hope to be able to explain - namely, life and death, and what it all means.

But surely it goes beyond just that.

"There's quite a few people who believe that this stuff exists - and that there just hasn't been evidence for it found yet," said Jeff Wagg, the general manager of the Fort Lauderdale, Fla.,-based James Randi Educational Foundation, a nonprofit founded in 1996 with the aim of promoting critical thinking "by reaching out to the public and media with reliable information about paranormal and supernatural ideas so widespread in our society today," according to the foundation's mission statement.

"We come from the perspective that we just believe what the evidence tells us. Ghosts, as an example - we could never prove that ghosts don't exist, for many reasons, one of which is, no one has yet defined *ghost*, so we don't even know what the term is," Wagg said. "So if we don't even know how to define ghost, we can't design a test for it. So that would be hard for anyone to prove. Yet we can say that we don't see any evidence at all that even suggests that such a thing as a departed soul visiting the earth has ever happened - there's just nothing there."



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The founder of the James Randi Educational Foundation has a more direct answer to the question about the interest in the modern world in ghost hunting.

"Why is there so much interest in ghost hunting? I don't understand the question. Why is there interest? It appeals to crazy people and the naive and juveniles - and they will pursue a thing like this for the same reason that people always pursue things like this," said Randi, a famed magician and escape artist who has made it his life's work to debunk and demystify paranormal and pseudoscientific claims.

The question regarding the apparent spike in interest in ghost hunting is a fair one, though - given the increasing popularity of TV shows like "Ghost Hunters" and ad-hoc research groups like Central Virginia Paranormal Research, the Bedford Ghost Investigation Group and the Haunt Masters Club, an outfit that focuses on investigations into paranormal activities in Southwest Virginia, Northeast Tennessee and Western North Carolina.

Jake Denton founded the club in 2003 out of a childhood interest in the paranormal.

"My interest got going with a ghost story that my dad used to tell us when I was a kid from near where he grew up - where a lady committed suicide, cut her throat from ear to ear, supposedly - and when my dad and his siblings were small, they would see things and hear things coming from the home," Denton said.

"That home is in Bristol - and we have been able to investigate it numerous times, because it is owned by some of my family now," Denton said.

"The investigations have went really well down there. We haven't really caught a lot of stuff there yet. The house is really used now more for storage and barn usage - and laying near the house now is a cowpasture field. But it is a great place for us to go and train new people who are getting involved - because we have groups that are getting on their feet that come to us for instruction," Denton said.

Terry Howell and Cindy Holt both came to the field of ghost hunting naturally themselves.

"I went down to San Antonio with a friend of mine - and there's a place down there at these railroad tracks, and you see it on the Travel Channel and Discovery Channel all the time, so we went down there and visited it. The story behind it was these kids back in the '30s or '40s were crossing the railroad track in a school bus and got hit by a train. Now, if you go down there, the story goes that the kids will push

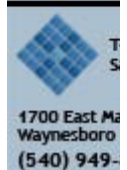
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you across the railroad track. What you do is you pull up to the railroad track, and the road crossing the track is uphill, so you stop, you put your car in neutral, and you cut it off. You take your foot off the brake, and the kids push you uphill over the railroad track. This actually works. Why it does it, I don't know. But there is something that pushes you up over the hill and over the tracks," Howell said.

"When I got back from there, I got to thinking about it. You know, I've really got this interest. Maybe somebody knows something more about this - so I went online and started hunting around. I found this guy who runs the Virginia Scientific Research Association - and he was teaching paranormal researchers classes at the Moundsville Prison (in West Virginia). I got a hold of him, and he was teaching a class at the prison. It was a nighttime tour - all night long. And he was showing us the equipment and different things," Howell said.

"That was how I got into that part of it," Howell said.

"My parents, when I was about 14 or 15, built a house in a subdivision in Forest, and it was right across the street from Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson's summer home. This was back in '75, '76. We had lived there maybe three years, and all of the sudden, all of these things started happening, and it got to the point where they were just occurring on a daily basis," Holt said.

"It was me, my mom, my dad and my sister - and we're normal, everyday people, a really close family. Everything seemed to be geared toward me, actually. We started noticing that nothing would really happen unless my dad was not there, or he was asleep. It only seemed to happen when the girls were there and awake," Holt said.

"At first, you're like, Am I crazy? And then we're all seeing and hearing things and having the same experiences - and my dad would go on all these business trips, and he would come home just anxious to see what had gone on while he was gone," Holt said.

"My dad and I always said we were going to go and research the deed on that land to try to find out what had gone on there. But we never got around to doing that - and my dad passed away in 2000," Holt said.

Having gotten to know Holt, Howell and Denton a little bit over the past couple of months, I certainly wouldn't consider them "crazy," "naive" or "juvenile," to borrow from James Randi. Neither does Lowell Frye consider his rhetoric students who get caught up in his ghost-stories course to be any of the above.

"Students might be attracted to mathematics because it seems certain. But it's precisely because most ghost stories - instead of ending in certainty, they end in uncertainty of one sort or another, you're never



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quite sure what's happened - that there's a certain type of pleasure that comes from having uncertainty be the result rather than certainty," Frye said.

"Most of the students that I teach are 18- or 19-year-old guys here at Hampden-Sydney - and I think that's an age where wondering about what's real and what's not real is a very powerful thing, so that there's a sort of interest in things that are occult or worrisome in that way," Frye said.

"I do think that probably in our working lives, most people - certainly most sort of professional, middle-class people, perhaps - are rationalists. We work by reason, we expect things to make sense in a reasonable way. And on the other hand, I think that it can be in some senses that it may seem limited," Frye said.

"It's a difficult connection to make a direct one-to-one with ghost stories and formal religion. But in the same way that believers in a more formal Christianity have a difficulty with certain scientific or rationalistic conclusions, I think that even those of us who live in a rational world the way we look at the world are attracted to the notion that maybe we can't make sense of everything, that it's less limiting if we can't make sense of everything," Frye said.

Michael Shermer is good at what he does.

The executive director of The Skeptics Society and the editor-in-chief of *Skeptic* magazine is, well, skeptical about my thesis that there seems to be an increasing interest in the paranormal based on what we're seeing in popular culture and in the activities of the various self-styled research groups that are out most nights on the prowl.

"I think it's possible that we're just noticing it more because there are more channels and more media attention," Shermer said. "In reality, I think the percentages of people who believe in superstition or ghosts or whatever has pretty much stayed the same - we know it has over the decades. I think what happens is specific beliefs come and go depending on what kind of attention they're getting in the popular media - so right now conspiracy theories about 9/11 are big, 10 years ago conspiracy theories about JFK were big. You never hear about them anymore. Crop circles were big for a while, but they died down. Then Mel Gibson came out with a film about crop circles, and they were big again for a while - and now they've died down again. So I think you're

right that there's a lot of attention being paid - not more so than before, only that there's more media outlets."

While it may not be any more popular, necessarily, the World Wide Web has at the least added more visibility to what used to be something that might have been talked about in some fringe circles, but certainly not at all in the mainstream.

"What the printing press was for culture centuries ago, the World Wide Web is for us today. It's a good thing. More knowledge accessible for free to more people in more places, that's good - good for democracy, just for all mental health. Of course, the downside is that the printing press that printed Shakespeare also printed *Mein Kampf*. That's the price that you have to pay for modern technology," Shermer said.

"The World Wide Web enables anybody and everybody to be their own writer, editor and publisher - and so you get all these blogs, and people just proclaiming things, and before you know it, they become little Internet factoids that people just know is true, but the fact is that there are no fact-checkers on these blogs and so on," Shermer said.

"You just have to have more of a buyer-beware alertness about that," Shermer said.

"Of course, we can use the Internet as well to present scientific explanations - or at least have debates and discussions that are thoughtful," Shermer said.

So this attention being paid to the paranormal, it can be good, and it can be bad.

The same can be said about the attention that those who spend their free time investigating the paranormal give to various technologies that are now widely available.

I asked each of the ghost hunters that I interviewed for this story to detail to me the equipment that they use in the process of undertaking their investigations. Common to all - electromagnetic-field readers, called EMF readers for short, digital thermometers, digital cameras and basic audiocassette recorders.

The problem, say the critics, isn't that would-be researchers are using

the wrong investigatory tools. It's that they use any tools without having a working knowledge of what they are supposed to be looking for.

"It's not necessarily pseudoscience. It's legitimate science, but it's misapplied," James Randi said.

"It's exactly like looking for decay on your teeth by doing a full-body X-ray, which is absolutely not necessary. These people are always overinstrumented. What they do is they go into situations with instruments that they don't understand at all - EMF readers and things like this. And so anybody passing by with a cellular phone in their car will make the thing go off the scale - but they don't differentiate between that. They say, Oh, there was a big surge in activity," Randi said.

I did run into some - too much, actually - of this in my interviews with ghost hunters.

"It is believed that if a spirit or ghost is around, you will have a significant degree change in temperature, either hot or cold - usually cold," Jake Denton said to me matter of factly in explaining the use of digital thermometers.

Then in discussing his use of EMF detectors, he asserted that they "detect energy forces - that might not necessarily be coming from an actual energy source. It's believed that ghosts and spirits let off that type of electricity."

"We use audio recorders and digital-voice recorders to do EVP work. We'll ask questions, then we'll bring the recorder back and upload the audio files to the computer with a program that will analyze the frequency levels - because spirits are believed to be able to speak on a frequency level that we can't hear, but can be caught on tape," Denton said to me a little later.

Terry Howell went into more detail about how he handles an investigation - starting with the initial interview.

"First thing, you want to get as much information from them as you can. You interview them, you ask them questions. The first thing you try to find is some logical explanation. I've seen some people who automatically think this is something that is just real, that any paranormal thing is real. Of course, you have people on the other end who think none of it is real. You've kind of got to get right in there in the middle and keep an open mind," Howell said.

"The next thing is you check the place out real good. I take pictures. I've got a couple of EMF meters. I take readings. Just different

processes that we go through depending on the situation," Howell said. "I spent a lot of time with one lady who saw some orbs one time that passed through her trailer. That's been an ongoing thing ever since I started this. And I've actually seen things down there. A friend and I had an experience - where I saw the orbs, they killed his batteries, they killed a battery in his camera. She had taken the screen that it passed through and sent it off for tests - and they said yes, it was something up with it," Howell said.

"I looked into a house in Gretna - an old plantation house. It was undergoing renovations - and renovations seem to get these things stirred up, for some reason. People had said that they had seen people in period costume and heard voices and things. I went up there and checked that out - and I didn't really find anything. But that's another point - just because something's not there when I am doesn't mean that it's not there. It doesn't mean it wasn't there the day before or won't be there a month after," Howell said.

James Randi pointed out some rather elementary flaws in this kind of approach.

"First, they don't go into a new house and test it - because they find the same thing in a brand-new house that no one has ever inhabited. But they go into the old creaky houses - and of course they're amazed when they find there are drafts there. Which isn't at all amazing in old, creaky houses - it happens. I live in an old, creaky house, and I get drafts all the time. When the cold wind blows, I feel it - and I don't think that's supernatural. I think that's the result of the fact that it's an old, creaky house," Randi said.

"These people are overinterpreting everything. There are magnetic fields all over the world due to various natural factors that are there. They don't test the backyard or somebody else's backyard to find out whether they get the same kind of background phenomena. They don't know enough to do that - they don't understand what they're doing," Randi said.

"Remember, they're looking in a place that's supposed to be haunted - instead of going into a brand-new, unoccupied house and seeing if they find the same anomalies," Randi said. "They would find many of the same anomalies. We are subject to electromagnetic fields all the time from passing taxicabs, from cell phones, from amateur-radio operators in the area, from everything. And these people, they have these field-strength meters and other detectors like this, they will pick these things up, and they don't know what they are. And they assign them supernatural origins."

Jeff Wagg relayed an interesting bit about the use and possible misuse of digital thermometers.

"The problem is that that's not how the devices work. They only detect the temperature of objects - so if you shine one across the room, it will detect the temperature of the opposite wall. If there's a cold spot between you and the opposite wall, it doesn't matter - the thing is going to detect the temperature of the opposite wall, because what has to happen is a signal needs to come off the thermometer and bounce off something else, and that's what's going to happen from air. So if they're seeing a cold spot, what they're seeing is a cold spot on the opposite wall," Wagg said.

"The reason it's unexplained is that I haven't torn the wall down to see what's on the other side," Wagg said. "There could be a cold water pipe, there could be a drain, a hole in the insulation. For a hot spot, there could be mice behind the wall. There are any number of explanations. I don't know which one of these are real, if any. But to jump to ghosts is just silly. I don't know why you bother going in the first place.

"I've done a little bit of ghost hunting on my own - and what I've seen is a whole lot of setup," Wagg said. "You know, they always tell you the story. This is what happened here. They get you in the mood. And this does something to your brain - it sets ideas up, and you unconsciously look to confirm those ideas.

"The default position of these people is that anything that we can't explain is a ghost. So when digital cameras came out, there were all these new phenomena that people caught with the cameras - there's orbs and streaks and such. We've done research, and we recreate all these things - and we know what the orbs are, we know what the light streaks are. All are very simple, easy-to-explain things that are artifacts of digital photography. And the reason that we didn't see these things before is that film works in a different way," Wagg said.

"The honest ghost hunters will look at the evidence and say, Oh, alright, we were wrong about that, let's find something else. However, there's quite a few people out there who still will insist, No, you're wrong, that isn't a speck of dust out of focus in the flash, it is a ghost. At that point, you're dealing with a true believer - and there is no combating a true believer, because they don't care about the evidence. They have their conclusion first, and then are seeking evidence to back it up," Wagg said.

But even a good skeptic like Jeff Wagg can admit when he can't explain something.

He agreed to look into a reported ghost sighting in Leesburgh in Northern Virginia for a friend - and he still can't say what it was that she was experiencing.

"She wasn't crazy - she was a sane, rational person. But she had these things happen to her that I couldn't explain," Wagg said. "For example, when she was moving into the house, which had a swimming pool, she heard a voice say, A little girl died here. It was midnight, she's out in the middle of nowhere, no one's around, and she hears this voice. She doesn't think anything of it - it was kind of weird, but maybe she was tired. Well, it turns out, she did a little research, and indeed, the family who had lived there before her moved out because the 8-year-old granddaughter had drowned in the pool.

"So ... I'm a skeptic. What do I do with this? Well, I can call her a liar. I don't have any evidence that she's a liar. Her character doesn't seem like that," Wagg said. "I can come up with some explanations like - oh, there was somebody out there talking through the window, or somebody was playing a trick on her or something like that. Or I can do what I did - and that was to say, I don't know.

"I think more people need to be comfortable saying that. We're not going to get answers for everything, and we're going to need to learn to be comfortable not getting answers for everything, while at the same time remaining curious. Though not to the point where we make up explanations just to feel better," Wagg said.

This is somewhat near the place where Bobbie Atristain finds herself. Atristain is the founder and director of the Richmond-based Center for Paranormal Research and Investigation - which despite its name is probably more on the side of the skeptics in the ghost-no ghost debate than not.

"We're a little different in the sense that we do know from hundreds of eyewitness reports that there are phenomena that have to be considered unexplained - and it's our mission to figure out what it is. And probably 95 percent of the time, we find a logical explanation," Atristain said.

Where Atristain and CPRI find themselves criticized by fellow debunkers and demystifiers is here.

"There's still that 5 percent that we can't find an explanation for. And when we can't find an explanation, we just say, According to our understanding of physics and science today, we can't explain this. Not that it's not going to be explained tomorrow or 10 years from now, but right now we can't," Atristain said.

"That said, we're not debunkers like a lot of groups that go out there whose rational explanations sound more paranormal than the ghost stories," Atristain said.

So even the skeptics have among their number skeptics.

"We get criticized by the orb chasers - the people who take pictures of dust and pollen and declare it to be a soul. And the skeptics think our website is interesting - which is their way of saying we're fruit loops. But you can't please everyone. We try to stay right there in the middle ground," Atristain said.

"We're not against the idea that ghosts might exist - and it's not going to break our heart if there are no ghosts, either. We just think the concept is really interesting. And we just look for the truth," Atristain said.

Atristain even has her own case in point that sounds a bit similar to the one from Jeff Wagg from above to illustrate where she is coming from.

"We had a case with a lady in Northern Virginia who moved into a new house, and every night she woke up and saw what she said was the ghost of a woman at the foot of her bed," Atristain said. "We go in there, and one of the things that we do on an initial investigation is an EM sweep - and when we did that, we noticed that her headboard had a huge amount of high EM. And what we discovered was that on the other side of that wall was the main circuit-breaker for her house. So we asked her to move her bed to the other side of the room - and when she did, she never saw the dead woman again.

"Science and quantum mechanics are going to hold the key to understanding a lot of these things," Atristain said. "I don't know if personally I think that the souls of dead people are sticking around. But what I do think is that we all have an electrical field around us. You can test that with one of those EMF meters. And I think that it's possible that because you can't create or destroy energy, somehow that gets left on the environment, and it can replay every once in a while. It might have to do with vibrations and frequencies. Maybe it leaves a recording on the environment - and when conditions get to a certain point, it replays."

Whatever is the case, "The brain has to categorize things," Atristain said.

"That's how we're wired. We have to put things in a category. Years and years ago, thunder and lightning was the result of the gods being angry - because we had to categorize things. So when we can't understand something, we have to try to make sense of it. We're not happy accepting that we just don't know," Atristain said.

So Jeff Wagg and Bobbie Atristain have some believer in them. Then it shouldn't surprise you that Terry Howell thinks of himself as being something of a skeptic.

"My views fall somewhere between James Randi and maybe Fox Mulder's," Howell said. "There are things there. People have seen ghosts and UFOs and all sorts of things like this. Ever since man has been here, things like this have been talked about. It's obviously there."

Cindy Holt, for her part, is "almost obsessed with trying to figure out what's going on."

"I hate to use the word *debunk* - but I want to try to come up with a logical explanation when things do happen, and sometimes you can find one," Holt said.

"Most people are skeptical - and I'm skeptical. I mean, everybody should be skeptical," Holt said.

"We can capture any evidence we can get and present it - and everybody is entitled to their own opinions about it. I am not out here trying to convince anybody of anything. I'm just curious for myself - because I just think it's absolutely fascinating. And there are too many things that I have been through myself to dismiss it - dismissing it, as far as I'm concerned, is just not an option. But not everybody feels that way," Holt said.

"I know that there are people who think, That's just hogwash. But I'm not saying that there's anything to it - I'm just saying, it fascinates me," Holt said.

For further reading ...

Center for Paranormal Research and Investigation -
<http://viriniaghosts.com>

Central Virginia Paranormal Research Group -
<http://paranormalvision.com>

Haunt Masters Club - www.hauntmastersclub.com

James Randi Educational Foundation - www.randi.org

Skeptic magazine - www.skeptic.com

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