THE TRUTH BEHIND GHOSTS, MEDIUMS & PSYCHIC PHENOMENA

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The paranormal has become the new normal among certain sectors of the religious demographic in America. A recent Gallup poll, for example, reveals that 32 percent of Americans believe in some sort of paranormal activity. The same poll reveals that 38 percent of Americans believe ghosts or spirits can come back and visit us. Twenty-eight percent of Americans think people can communicate with or “mentally” talk to the dead.

Spiritism—the belief that the dead communicate with the living—is no longer confined to the periphery of our society. No longer is occultism a fringe idea. Brooks Alexander, a cofounder of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project in Berkeley, California, suggests that “spiritism has moved beyond the weird and the supernatural into the normal and the mundane. Quietly, but convincingly, the entities [that is, spirits from the Other Side] have been serving notice that they intend to shape our future.”

Bill O’Reilly, of *The O’Reilly Factor*, says life after death is big business today. “It is a huge business in America—books, tapes, lectures—and 65 percent of Americans say they do believe in an afterlife.” Unfortunately, this interest in the afterlife has led many to seek contact with those on the Other Side. In keeping with this escalating interest, psychic John Edward—not to be confused with politician
John Edwards—had a television show, *Crossing Over*, in syndication on 210 TV stations, blanketing 98 percent of the United States. As well, over the past decade, today’s primetime psychic mediums—John Edward, James Van Praagh, and Sylvia Browne—have appeared on *Larry King Live* at least 20 times. Browne has also been a weekly regular on *The Montel Williams Show*.

One might be tempted to think only uneducated people believe in such ideas. This is not the case, however. A study conducted by Bryan Farha of Oklahoma City University and Gary Steward Jr. of the University of Central Oklahoma found that as students progress through their college years, they become more likely to believe in paranormal concepts. More specifically, they found that while 23 percent of freshmen believe in paranormal concepts, 31 percent of seniors and 34 percent of graduate students believe in such concepts.

Many of today’s college professors believe in extrasensory perception, often associated with the paranormal. A survey of 1100 college professors found that 34 percent of psychologists, 55 percent of natural scientists, 66 percent of other social scientists, and 77 percent of professors in the humanities believed in extrasensory perception as an established fact or a likely possibility.

The paranormal has made huge inroads among our nation’s teenagers. In early 2006, George Barna conducted a poll that revealed that 73 percent of America’s youth have participated in psychic activities and/or witchcraft. Four out of five have had their horoscopes read by an astrologer. One-third have played with a Ouija board or read a book about witchcraft, or Wicca. More than one-fourth have played occultic games. One-tenth have participated in a séance, attempting to contact the dead. One-twelfth have attempted to cast spells or mix magic potions. Thirty percent have participated in palm reading, and 27 percent have had their fortune told.

Barna also discovered that seven million teenagers claim to have personally encountered a spirit entity, such as an angel, a demon, or some other supernatural entity. Two million claim to
have psychic powers. And amazingly, among churchgoing teenagers, only 28 percent say they’ve been taught anything at church to help shape their views of the supernatural world.11

The Paranormal in Hollywood

The paranormal seems to have nearly taken over Hollywood. One indication of this is that networks produced 14 pilots with supernatural themes for the 2005–2006 TV season. Movies are also brimming with the paranormal. The Johns Hopkins Newsletter suggests, “One only has to look at the popularity of documentaries, television programs, books, and films that explore the world of ghosts to see a public devoted to the paranormal.”12

Paranormal TV Shows

Medium is a very popular TV show. This drama features a woman, played by Patricia Arquette, who is a research medium for an Arizona district attorney’s office. She can allegedly talk to dead people, see the future in her dreams, and read people’s thoughts. She uses her “gifts” to solve violent and horrifying crimes.

Ghost Whisperer, another series, stars Jennifer Love Hewitt. She plays a woman who helps dead people deliver messages to living loved ones, thereby enabling them to finally find peace on the Other Side. In an interview, Hewitt said she finds the Hollywood Forever Cemetery a soothing place to visit: “I wonder who these people were, how they died, and what their stories were…I look at them hoping they are at peace and didn’t have any unfinished business.”13

Herein lies a key premise of Ghost Whisperer. The ghosts Hewitt interacts with on the show cling to the living because they allegedly have unfinished business that prevents them from moving on with their existence in the great beyond. Hewitt seeks to help the people she meets—whether alive or dead—find emotional closure. In one episode, a little boy who died because he disobeyed his mother refused to move on until she told him he was forgiven. By the end of the show, the viewing audience feels uplifted and comforted.
about this communication between the living and the dead. The show really pulls on the heartstrings. Hewitt says people worry that when they die, “it’s all over and you don’t get a say in it. We try to say in our show that maybe you go on to something new.”

While researching her role, Hewitt had a psychic reading with the famous psychic medium James Van Praagh. Hewitt believes she was able to make contact with her friend Allen, who died when she was just 12 years old.

Interestingly, *The Hollywood Reporter* reveals that the producer of *Ghost Whisperer*, John Gray, had no experiences with the paranormal—at least until he was shooting the pilot for the new show:

Gray was just getting settled into a new home in New York when he, his fiancée, and his daughter began hearing noises in the house—such as the sounds of furniture moving around in the attic or someone walking up and down stairs. Lights would turn on at random, and in one instance, an entire set of puzzle pieces overturned by itself.

Gray says, “It was the closest experience with the supernatural I’ve had of any kind.” He ended up utilizing the services of a medium who serves as a consultant on the show, and she informed him that two spirits were living in the house who liked the previous owners better than Gray and his family. The medium allegedly persuaded the spirits to “cross over.” Since then, the hauntings have ceased. (I will biblically evaluate such claims later in the book.)

Does Gray believe in ghosts now? “I try to be open-minded—it’s arrogant to say it’s impossible…There’s more out there than we are aware of, and there are things that we can’t explain. I certainly hope it’s true.”

James Van Praagh is one force behind this current plethora of paranormal shows. The *New York Daily News* uses this clever play on words:

Psychic James Van Praagh has always made a nice living by claiming to see dead people. But he has made a killing
with his ability to foresee how television audiences would be entranced by programming about psychic phenomena, haunted houses, and other otherworldly encounters. He’s channeling a trend that has ghost-themed shows materializing on several, well, channels.  

Van Praagh, author of a number of bestselling books on communicating with spirit entities, is an executive producer of *Ghost Whisperer*. Many of the show’s episodes are based on real-life cases taken from his files. He boasts that he predicted the rise of interest in psychic phenomena some years ago on *Larry King Live*, right after the release of the blockbuster movie *The Sixth Sense*. “What’s so amazing,” he says, “is how it’s become much more acceptable in the mainstream, where you’re now seeing more and more of these types of shows.” He says the TV landscape has become a veritable ghost town in recent years—meaning that interest in ghosts is everywhere in Hollywood.

Another popular TV show is *Ghost Hunters*, which is aired on the Sci-Fi Channel. This reality series features a team of paranormal investigators from Rhode Island who travel to supposedly haunted sites throughout the United States and attempt to garner evidence of ghostly activity. These investigators utilize high-tech equipment like infrared cameras and digital recorders. Dave Tango, one of the stars of *Ghost Hunter*, makes this claim:

> There’s no doubt in my mind that there is something there. There is some other plane on earth where they exist… Right now, all we have is some weird energy and occurrences we can’t explain, but I believe that will change in a few years. I believe, in a few years, we will be able to prove scientifically that ghosts exist.  

Yet another TV show is *Dead Tenants*, airing on The Learning Channel. In this show, psychics, spiritual intuitives, ghost chasers, and occult specialists help homeowners with unwanted ghost problems and other unexplainable activity. One psychic on the show says, “It’s not that we are trying to get rid of the ghosts…We
are more like social workers. We see why [the spirits] are there.”

For homeowners who feel they have been harassed by ghosts, the paranormal investigators engage in a special “cleansing” ritual that allegedly puts the spirits at peace.

In keeping with this wave of interest in the paranormal, The Biography Channel airs a reality show called Dead Famous: Ghostly Encounters. This show pairs a female skeptic with a male psychic as they chase after the spirits of such deceased famous folks as Frank Sinatra, Marilyn Monroe, and Jim Morrison.

Even The Travel Channel has gotten in on ghostly phenomena, featuring the popular America’s Most Haunted Places and Haunted Hotels. The show features a team of paranormal investigators who travel to various sites throughout Europe in search of ghosts.

Court TV features a popular show called Psychic Detectives, which recounts real-life cases in which cops and psychics work together. The success of this show has motivated Court TV to debut another show entitled Haunting Evidence, which pairs a psychic, a medium, and a forensics expert who visit various haunted crime scenes. By joining their efforts, they seek to bring fresh insight to “cold cases” and perhaps help bring closure to the families of victims.

One final TV show worthy of mention is Ghost Trackers, airing in Canada. In this reality TV show, kids compete to become the ultimate “ghost master” by investigating paranormal activity in a variety of haunted venues. The winners move on to subsequent competitions.

Why are such TV shows so popular? Van Praagh offers this suggestion: “More people than ever are believing in life after death. They’re looking for other belief systems and for other ways to deal with the world around them, and people want to find out what this is all about.”

Paranormal Movies

The paranormal has also been quite popular in major motion pictures. Though many dozens of films have featured ghosts
throughout Hollywood history, *Poltergeist* brought the paranormal into the mainstream consciousness of America.

*Polter* is the German word for “noisy” or “rumbling.” *Geist* is the German word for “ghost” or “spirit.” Hence, *poltergeist* refers to a “noisy ghost” or “noisy spirit”—a spirit that disrupts households by moving and influencing inanimate objects. The movie, produced by Steven Spielberg in the 1980s, portrays a family being terrorized by a poltergeist infestation in a house built over a graveyard.

*Ghost* was another hugely popular paranormal movie. Patrick Swayze plays a young man who is suddenly ripped out of his physical body but stays on earth long enough to solve the mystery of his murder. He seeks to reconnect with his girlfriend, played by Demi Moore, and in the process, educates both himself and the viewing audience to the “realities” of being a real-live ghost.

A cover story in *Body, Mind & Spirit* (New Age) magazine features an interview with the movie’s writer and director, Bruce Joel Rubin. He says, “*Ghost* has made it big because it reawakens us powerfully and passionately to who we really are as multidimensional beings. Its depiction of death and the astral world breathes magic back into our daily lives.” Occultists believe the astral world is a spiritual dimension or level of being that lies just beyond the physical world. (I’ll talk more about this later in the book.) *Ghost* was one of the top-grossing films of all time and has been an incredibly powerful promotional vehicle for the paranormal.

In *The Sixth Sense*, Haley Joel Osment plays a troubled, isolated boy who claims to see dead people. By the end of the movie, the boy tries to help some of these dead people deal with unresolved problems so they can be at peace. The movie earned more than $293 million in the United States and a worldwide gross of $672 million, making it number 22 on the list of biggest money-making movies of all time. The line “I see dead people” became a popular catchphrase after the film’s release. Famous psychic Sylvia Browne, her psychic son, Chris, and her psychic seven-year-old granddaughter, Angelia, went to see the movie, and Browne
commented, “We appreciated how accurately one of our daily realities was portrayed.”

*White Noise* was yet another hit movie. When a radio or TV is on but not tuned to a channel, one hears “white noise.” Occultists believe spirits can communicate with living people through white noise. This form of communication from the beyond is known as EVP—Electronic Voice Phenomenon. In the movie, an architect named Jonathan grieves over the recent death of his wife. A paranormal expert then approaches Jonathan with an unusual claim: the ability to hear his wife from beyond the grave through white noise. Jonathan subsequently becomes obsessed with using electronic equipment to contact his wife in the great beyond.

One final paranormal movie worthy of mention is *The Ring*. In this movie, the spirit of a little girl who was murdered terrorizes and kills other people. Any character in the movie who watches a particular video receives a phone call that says they have seven days, and then they are violently killed seven days later. The dead girl's body is eventually discovered at the bottom of a well, and she is given a proper burial. But instead of being put to rest, the spirit is more interested in continuing to harm the living. The only way to escape harm is to make a copy of the tape and show it to someone else.

Cultural analysts have debated whether TV shows and films shape peoples’ beliefs or merely reflect them. Perhaps both are true. On the one hand, movie producer George Lucas once commented that TV shows and films are teachers with very loud voices. Certainly Hollywood productions have introduced many people to the world of the paranormal. On the other hand, such TV shows and films may be successful because the target market is already so huge.

**Celebrity Clients for Psychics**

Stars who openly utilize the services of psychics have also given a PR boost to the paranormal. For example, many newspapers and tabloids reported James Van Praagh’s alleged contact of O.J. Simpson’s murdered wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, on behalf of her
sister, Denise Brown. The famous singer Cher also utilized Van Praagh’s psychic talents in allegedly communicating with her late ex-husband, Sonny Bono, shortly after he died in a bizarre skiing accident at Lake Tahoe in 1998. Van Praagh’s clientele has also included the late Audrey Meadows, who believed that through him she was able to make contact with her dead TV husband, Jackie Gleason. Interestingly, many years ago I had the opportunity of doing a TV talk show with Gleason, and I remember him commenting that he owned one of the largest private occult libraries in the world.

Government Interest in the Paranormal

Even the United States government has been interested in the occult and the paranormal. According to government documents that were declassified in the 1990s, the United States—during the years of America’s cold war with the Soviet Union—spent a whopping $20 million studying extrasensory perception and other psychic phenomena “in an effort to determine whether these forces of the paranormal world could somehow be put to use by espionage experts in the natural world.” (The $20 million was wasted.)

Former president Jimmy Carter once consulted a psychic to do what the United States’ satellite surveillance system couldn’t do—find a downed American plane in Africa. Carter recalls the experience:

We had a plane go down in the Central African Republic—a twin-engine plane, small plane. And we couldn’t find it. So we oriented satellites that were going around the earth every 90 minutes to fly over that spot where we thought it might be and take photographs. We couldn’t find it. So the director of the CIA (Stansfield Turner) came and told me that he had contacted a woman in California that claimed to have supernatural capabilities. And she went into a trance, and she wrote down latitudes and longitudes, and we sent our satellites over that latitude and longitude, and there was the plane.
Paranormal Education

Today the various means of becoming educated in paranormal and psychic phenomena seem to have no end. In fact, paranormal education has become big business.

Community College Courses

One can take a variety of courses on the paranormal from local community colleges. In one newspaper we read, “Want to learn how to develop your psychic abilities?…Look no further than your local community college, where a variety of unusual non-credit courses are being offered.” The school also offers courses on ghosts and how to contact the dead.

A Ghost School in the United Kingdom

A new school for ghost hunters was established in 2006 in the United Kingdom. Dr. Jason Braithwaite teaches students the scientific skills needed to investigate “haunted” houses in a two-day course at Muncaster Castle. This castle is well known for spine-chilling manifestations of spooks and specters. In this building, “sounds of children crying and screaming, feelings of another-worldly presence, the sound of footsteps, and fleeting visions have all been reported.” Braithwaite, a cognitive psychologist and neuroscientist from the University of Birmingham, seeks to teach people the skills they will need to decide for themselves what lies behind such strange phenomena.

A Paranormal E-mail Course

A six-week course for developing psychic intuition is available online. The course claims to “shatter the mystery about psychic phenomena and makes the intuitive world accessible to anyone.”

Ghost Seminars

Seminars across the United States teach people about paranormal phenomena and hunting for ghosts. One such seminar in
Aspen, Colorado, taught attendees how to use cameras to capture ghost orbs on film and how to use meters to measure electrical activity inside a building, thereby (allegedly) indicating the presence of a paranormal being. (A “ghost orb” is allegedly a ghostly sphere of light that represents the soul of a dead person.) One of the leaders at this seminar made this comment:

The one thing I found from the spirits here is that the majority seem very content. The majority of them have already moved on. They can go back and forth, and sometimes they come back to places that are fond memories for them.34

I will biblically evaluate this idea later in the book.

**Psychic Fairs**

Psychic fairs have also become very popular in our day. At such fairs, psychics often give readings to attendees and help them communicate with friends or relatives who have died, or crossed over to the Other Side. Other psychics give tarot card readings for people. In some cases, psychics offer to take photographs of people’s psychic auras and interpret them (more on this later in the book). Through such fairs, many people have been introduced to the world of occultism.35

**Paranormal Weekends**

Similar to the psychic fair, some people like to attend “paranormal weekends.” During such weekends, skeptics and believers alike are invited to listen to lectures about paranormal investigation. At some of these events, speakers teach attendees how to use special photographic equipment to photograph ghost orbs. After brief training, attendees are invited to visit different areas and attempt to take their own photographs of ghost orbs. By attending such paranormal weekends, a person can become certified in paranormal investigation.36
Other Paranormal Promotions

Today many games are on the market that are rooted in the paranormal. Such games are often played in the dark, involve various occultic activities, and can have unexpected, even terrifying results. Popular games include Light as a Feather—Stiff as a Board, Ouija, Bloody Mary, and bending spoons. Sometimes teens sneak into abandoned or allegedly haunted buildings at night and play these games.

Teens like these games for the same reason they like horror movies—they like to be scared. Understandably, most researchers recommend that people avoid such games. Let us consider two examples:

The game Light as a Feather—Stiff as a Board is a levitation game. In this game, one person lies on the ground, and four people sit around him or her. Each of the four place two fingers of each hand beneath the body and began chanting, “light as a feather…stiff as a board…” With hardly any effort, the four are able to raise the person off the floor in apparent defiance of gravity. While many consider this activity benign, some researchers warn that levitation is part and parcel of the world of the occult.

Another example is Ouija, a game board containing numbers and letters with a pointer that a “visiting spirit” can use to communicate a message from the Other Side by guiding the hand of the players. Participants ask questions, and the pointer seems to magically slide around the board, spelling different words. The Ouija board can be purchased in just about any mainstream toy store. Tragically, teenagers who play this game are completely unaware that they are opening themselves up to the world of the occult, often with terrifying consequences.

Several radio shows focus exclusively on the paranormal. For example, in the Twin Cities in Minnesota, one radio talk show focuses on ghosts, hauntings, and UFOs. The show is called “The Darkness on the Edge of Town” and features local and national guests. One of the first guests was the lead investigator and star of the Sci-Fi Channel’s *Ghost Hunters* TV show.
Another paranormal radio show is the “Kevin Smith Show,” now broadcast in 53 countries via the Globalstar Communications Network. Smith says, “My guests are hot and the topics are sizzling. People are interested in the strange and unexplained.”

The BBC reports that the Ultraviolet Insurance Company has written a policy for a store that will pay out up to one million pounds “if staff or customers are killed or suffer permanent disability caused by ghosts, poltergeists, or other abnormal phenomena on the premises.”

A recent book titled Above Us Only Sky: A View of 9/11 from the Spirit World gives accounts of 9/11 that are communicated from dead people. This book, written by medium Sarah Price, is comprised of channeled messages from deceased victims of 9/11 and from “spirit witnesses” who saw the entire event unfold. These spirit witnesses include Anne Frank, President John F. Kennedy, John Lennon, and NBC journalist David Bloom, “who bring their own insights on the events of 9/11 and advice on life in general.”

This chapter shows the prevalence of psychic phenomena among teenagers, college students, college professors, and the general adult population in the United States. It also demonstrates the paranormal’s influence in Hollywood and summarizes some occult educational opportunities. It has provided a brief taste of the more wacky side of ghostly phenomena.

I think you can now see why I believe the paranormal has become the new normal in some sectors of America’s religious landscape. In the next chapter, we will focus attention on the appeal of the paranormal in our day.