

What We Do and Why

Once upon a time in the Land of Oz lived a Wizard, powerful and strong, who spent his time seeking ghosts and goblins and most any kind of mystical apparition. People would call him from far and near in hopes that he might rid them of their unwanted spirits, but soon learned that while the Wizard was rich and powerful, he had no secret charm or incantation to make the spirits relent. One day, he met another wizard, who asked why he worked so hard to find these ghosts, but did nothing to send them on their way, to which the Wizard of Oz exclaimed, "It is not my nature to unbalance things, I only wish to observe!" The older wizard then responded, "A physician is not a physician if he does not heal, a cobbler is nothing without his shoes. You say you are a Wizard Extraordinaire, but you perform no magic, what then is your claim to fame?" To which the Wizard of Oz quickly answered, "A greater one than yourself, for everyone known my name! You travel hither and yon to cater to the masses and they know you not, but I arrive with my usual flurry and those same people bow when they hear the name of the great and all powerful Oz."

An interesting character, the Wizard of Oz; people adored him for doing nothing! Yes, yes, he is a fictional character for sure, but as a writer I have to tell you that there are few characters that do not come from the imagination of the author that have not been based on real people, although sometimes stretched to the extreme. I ponder the Wizard of Oz for good reason, simply because at least in form and function he still exists today. I refer to the dozens of "ghost hunters" who dot the landscape, advertising themselves as investigators of the unexplained, when in fact they are simply thrill seekers who go to a victim's home, poke around with any number of high tech gadgets and then depart, after confirming to the owner the existence of a spirit, but offering little advise beyond tell them to, "be strong."

These folks do have some strong points, they are great self promoters, owning some of the niftiest websites you will ever see and they convince folks that they are the best in their field. One group has now fostered several sub-groups flying the same banner and travel the countryside from one case to the next; their average stay is a few hours, they speak of demons and entities, not to mention all manner of disembodied spirits, then announce they have to be on their way to the next hot case in some even more remote location. To the best of my knowledge, they do no real research, nor seem to understand what they are doing to the victims they leave behind. They certainly don't care that they leave a mess for legitimate researchers to clean up afterwards, or the light in which they leave our field as a whole.

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Recently, we were invited into a case where another “prestigious” research group had visited. The host noted that they did have very impressive equipment, but also pointed to a human sized hole in the ceiling of one room, where the groups lead investigator had fallen from the attic. After that little mishap, the group departed, without so much as a thank you or apology ... and the ghost was still very active!

Doing even more damage are those who speak from “years of experience,” (usually a grand total of 3 years on average) who spew forth a long string of babble to impress their clients, but when asked for some concrete examples of their track record, respond that such material is confidential. These modern day Wizards of Oz are mesmerized by their self importance and rarely if ever look back to consider the consequences of what they do.

I’m becoming fixated on these folks because I am reminded of an ongoing debate that I had been involved in with Scott Rogo many years ago. Scott was in favor of limiting field investigations to lettered professionals, believing that a Ph.D. would do the best job of documentation when dealing with the Unknown. I supported the other side of the coin, suggesting that I would rather be in the field with a reporter or police officer, who are trained observers, although not academics by the common definition. Shortly after Amityville, I once again voiced my opinions on who should do field investigations and gained the support of several key players when I gave a presentation at the PRF, then on the Duke University campus. Now, over 30 years later, I am reaping what I had sown, but the vast majority of those who now claim to be field investigators have neither the academic credentials nor the common sense to see the forest from the trees.

Paranormal investigators should not be judged by the price of their equipment, the size of their Winnebago or the flash on their website, it should be based on solid experience, study and a focus on what the job is to begin with. The best investigators know how to take notes, can demonstrate that they have read the works of other great researchers and exercise a caution yet open minded approach to what they are studying. It is not our position in life to force square pegs in round holes, or to regroup your data so that a simple paranormal event becomes a screaming banshee from hell for the client. We are looking to identify those things we already have been trained to recognize with a sensitivity toward finding anomalies that have not yet been categorized... but it is also imperative that we offer some assistance to the client, who is often scared to death.

While TV paranormalists have served a great function to sensitize the public about the possible existence of spirits, many have gone overboard, playing in public with things that might better be left in the lab. When a TV heartthrob decides he needs to perform a Ganzfeld experiment in a client’s home to

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communicate with a demon, we have gone too far. Ganzfeld was a research tool a generation ago and proved to be a heady mind altering experience for some subjects, but to play with it outside a controlled environment, without adequate medical and psychological support is like playing with sticks of dynamite. I have written extensively on Ganzfeld, participated in studies at three noteworthy institutions but would never recommend it as a tool for field investigators, especially those who don't yet have a grip on the true uses for a K-2 meter!

As always, this brings us to the point where the lunatic fringe begins to murmur about things like licensing the ghost hunters . . . let's give them a test to see if they know what they are doing . . . let's limit them to studies under reputable universities, etc. That is what I would call throwing the baby out with the bathwater, it would limit the nature of future studies to a mainstream who can't perceive the existence of anything not already in the science books, or even worse, religious texts. No, licensing is not the answer. Self policing our field is!

I respectfully suggest that a catchy name or claims of higher understanding by one group over another is pointless. Reasonable guidelines can eliminate a good deal of the hype and confusion, fair play and following the basic rules of "good sportsmanship" are another. If there is a well trained group in a given location, why would anyone travel 300 miles to spend three hours to investigate a household spirit in that area; why not pick up the phone and simply say to the closer group, "This one's for you!?" Honestly, I believe that you don't have to go far to find a haunting; they are all around us, so why the rush to go into someone else's back yard? I understand the idea of visiting a well known haunt; that is much like going on vacation to any historic location, but if you are interested in studying the common grackle, you don't have to travel to Yellowstone, just look out your own window or in a nearby park!

How do we express the obvious; money spent on equipment does not equate to knowledge in our field. Only hard work and a lot of time reading and researching past cases can help you to understand what all those nifty instruments are trying to tell you and only communications within the various groups will help to put things in perspective. Some folks spend countless hours chasing photos of orbs, while others dedicate their time to shooting infrared and full spectrum photography in search of the allusive full bodied apparition. They are not the same; we might learn something from both, but the photos alone are not enough, they are simply anecdotal images.

So, while unlikely, I would still like to see less drama and hype and more solid research in our field. An investigation can't be thorough after a three hour visit. Some groups spend weeks researching the background of a case before ever stepping foot on the premises. The client interview may take place over several days before a visitation, and every case follows the same parameters for consistency.

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In my group, the normal “reveal” is given in writing and routinely covers more than a hundred pages, explaining not just what was found but also how the phenomenon falls within other historic cases and similar experiences. When finished, not only do we have some good data, but hopefully the client is more at ease and no longer panicked. We keep in touch with the client, visit again as necessary, until some resolution is found. In the hundreds of cases the ASUP has investigated over all these years, we have encountered what seemed to be demonic only three times and referred those cases to experts for follow-up. We have met some “entities” that were neither ghostly nor demonic, but they were in the minority and the basis of our field work would tend to suggest we are still dealing with human intelligence that has successfully survived death in one form or another.

The point is simple: how can a group rationalize a four or five hour drive into an area where there are already qualified researchers, to spend less time on site than other groups devote to just writing their reports? And who do they share that information with? Obviously, there is a difference. While the “travelers” apparently are not worried about burning gas and seem to equate the number of cases “collected” to some sort of scorecard tally, they are not paranormal investigators.

The aim of the paranormal investigator is not to emulate a TV show, but to learn... not easy when you realize that one TV “star”, a glowing role model no doubt, gleefully announces at least once a month that he has never read a book! So much for learning from folks like D. Scott Rogo or even William James.

Anyone who has spent any time in the field knows that it is insane to have someone lock you in an abandoned property for any reason; and it is reasonable to assume that 14 year olds are not seasoned investigators, even if you give them expensive gear to play with. And knowing about the Ganzfeld experiment does not suggest it should be used to communicate with demons or that working with a psychic who tells you there are two children walled up in a recently built sub division is fact, until you seek some corroboration to that claim. If you are not following this string, let’s put it bluntly... some things are real, and some things are creations of your imagination. A trained field observer knows the difference and he or she is not about to spend time and money building a flashy website to try and sell their belief in elves and wood nymphs!

It is time to stop the insanity and call it as you see it. If those legitimately dedicated to real investigations would band together and cooperate, the snake oil salesmen would retreat . . . or at least, I hope so.

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