Fear of the Unknown

There is one thing that every person, from every walk of life, from every country, continent and color, everyone on this planet, has in common; it is the fear of the unknown. Our desire to control our environment and insure our own safety has created the boundary we know as “normal”. Past that boundary lies danger. Within the danger lies the potential for confusion, pain -- maybe even death -- and therein lies the fear. Our rational mind knows that true danger most likely does not lurk in the darkness at the bottom of the basement stairs. What does lie there is the washing machine and dryer. The washing machine and dryer that you need to use everyday. But fear doesn’t know rationality. Fear, the emotion itself as well as the physical manifestations that accompany it -- pounding heart, prickling scalp, adrenalin rush and tunnel vision, is created in the part of the brain that is concerned with survival, not thought. So, although you “know” that there is nothing to fear in the darkness at the bottom of the stairs, your brain responds to this darkness as potentially dangerous, and reacts accordingly, pumping blood faster, unleashing adrenalin, and speeding up respiration in order to either fight or flee the danger. Waiting until the danger is apparent before readying the body for action would have ensured our ancestors never surviving prehistory. We exist as a species because we are almost always ready to fight or run sooner rather than later, thus giving us the needed strength or speed to outrun, out climb, or out fight our opponent. It’s a trait that has worked in our favor for thousands of years – but it is very annoying when all you want to do is get the laundry done.

Fear of the unknown is so universal that it needs no explanation or translation. There are no cultures that transcend this primal emotion. When looking at fear from the perspective of the paranormal investigator, we have to look closely at the motives of each individual as to why that individual continuously embraces what the average person strives to avoid. For the most part, the investigator does experience fear — it is hard wired into our central nervous system – it is what we do with that fear and our reasons to constantly seek it that make the paranormal investigator different from the average person. Some investigators seek out the adrenalin rush that accompanies fear. Like the athlete who engages in extreme sports, the adrenalin thrill of defying intense fear is addictive. Many more simply ignore the fear. Knowing that the fear of the unknown as it relates to the paranormal is for the most part, groundless.

Defying Fear
For those of us who do not purposefully embrace fear in our quest for understanding the paranormal, fear is like a background noise that you simply get used to. Knowing that it is a normal mammalian response to darkness and the unknown helps. What helps more is the knowledge that there is rarely – very rarely – any reason to fear paranormal encounters. There is always the possibility of natural reasons for unexplained phenomena. But, more importantly, the paranormal investigator knows that there is less chance of being harmed by a ghost or spirit than there is of being harmed by the rational, natural reasons behind most seemingly paranormal encounters.

In other words, an investigator or resident of a so-called haunted house is more likely to be hurt tripping on the staircase because of their own clumsiness, being exposed to mold spores and fungus from the attic insulation, being electrocuted by exposed wires and simply getting in a car wreck on the way to the investigation then they are of being hurt by a ghost. The reality is – ghosts don’t hurt people – people hurt people. Fungus, mold, bare wires and tripping over furniture in the dark hurts people. Ghosts do not. There have been reports of scratches, poking, pinching, even slapping, – but real harm is almost non-existent.

So, when you feel the trepidation of going down the dark stairs to get the laundry done – know that the feeling is universal, explainable, and normal. It is simply fear. You can choose to embrace it, cultivate it, or ignore it, depending on your personal preference. Embrace it if you like the idea of monster movies and books, cultivate it if you are a thrill-seeker wanting the exhilaration of the adrenalin rush or ignore it, knowing that fear of the unknown as it relates to the paranormal is generally groundless.

Roosevelt really had it right when he said, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself”.

**Conquering Fear**

For those choosing to ignore fear there are several exercises that will help. When confronted by a fearful home owner or someone having to live with paranormal activity I tell them to keep one thing in mind: what they are afraid of is the unknown. Hearing but not seeing something or seeing but not knowing what it is or what it will do. Putting a face, figure or name on what is frightening can greatly reduce the fear because it no longer inhabits the category of the unknown. Give your ghost a name. “Alfred” was the name of the ghost I grew up with. He became a part of the family. No one ever saw him but hearing his footsteps was common as was his constant opening and closing of doors and drawers. My mother said he was
nosy but harmless. We believed her. Think of your own Alfred as an old man wandering the house in his slippers and underwear, cigarette dangling, occasionally breaking wind and scratching an arm pit. Not very scary. This is how I viewed Alfred when I was a child living in what many called a haunted house. Another exercise is to go ahead and imagine the worst thing that could happen. Statistically, that would be being lightly touched by a ghost or having one wake you up in the middle of the night inches away and staring into your face. Anyone having grown up with older brothers has endured much, much, worse. Ghosts really can not do nearly as much harm as a fourteen-year-old brother but no one seems afraid to sleep in the same room as their brother. It’s because we know what the brother is capable of (believe me, it’s a lot worse than what a ghost would ever do) and people don’t know what the ghost will do. Again, the fear of the unknown.

So, imagine the worst the ghost can do and prepare yourself for it to happen as if you know it will happen. Most of the fear will evaporate. And better yet, what you prepared for very rarely actually happens.

Deep breathing is another way to combat fear. It is impossible to try and circumvent our hard-wired response to fear. We can’t just say to the hypothalamus in our brain, “quit pumping hormones that make me wired”. But what we can do is try to counteract the fear-response by taking slow, deep, breaths. This tells the central nervous system, “False alarm! Nothing to fear!” and helps reduce the onset of the fear-induced secondary physical changes our body experiences such as skin prickling sensations, hyperventilation, and sweating.

**Banishing the Ghost**

Another way to deal with the fear is to simply have the ghost and all it’s little friends, noises, smells sights and sounds leave. Most ghosts are just people who have died and for whatever reason don’t want to vacate the area you share. If they were nice, caring, considerate people when they were alive they will be nice, caring and considerate ghosts. Simply telling them to leave or asking them not to bother the family may do the trick.

Unfortunately, death does nothing to improve the personalities of mean-spirited, nasty or evil people. All that happens is that they then become mean-spirited, nasty and evil ghosts. These are the ghosts that enjoy scaring people. Telling them to leave may only create more activity as they now know you are afraid of them and are aware of their presence. In other words, what they’ve been doing to scare you has worked.

In this case you may need to call in the cavalry.
**Paranormal Investigators**

Calling in the right group is paramount in getting the help you really need. Many groups have all the gadgets, gizmos and equipment needed to measure, photograph, record and validate ghostly activity. That’s great. But what the average person really needs is someone to tell them how to get rid of the ghostly activity. The folks being frightened don’t need validation that they have a ghost. They already know that they have a ghost — they want the ghost to leave. All the doodads and measuring devices in the world aren’t going to help. What will help is a team of investigators who know how to assess a situation and then either explain the phenomena as a natural occurrence or offer suggestions as to how to live with it or remove it. There are far too many investigative teams who go in, find the problem, document the problem, and then leave. This is not helpful to the average recipient of paranormal phenomena. Paranormal measuring equipment and technical know-how is great, but be sure that whatever team you choose first and foremost have the people skills you need to reduce your fear and successfully remove or diminish the problem. An electromagnetic field detector does nothing to rid your house of spooks. A good talking to by a paranormal investigator with good communication and people skills just might.

**Summary**

Whether you are believed by others or not, whether the phenomena is caused by the paranormal or faulty wiring, fear of the unknown is very real. As strange as it may seem, fear of fear is also real and it has ensured our survival as a species for thousands of years. We are both predator and prey and our brains are wired to respond as such. Fear is normal and very uncomfortable. Some people engage in frightening activities for the thrill. Most people choose to ignore it or avoid it. For some, it is life altering for others, life affirming. Whatever your response to fear, chances are very good that as far as paranormal activity goes, fear is groundless. As a general rule, ghosts simply do not hurt people. Conquering fear may be as easy as attaching a name and a personality to the recurring phenomena, or imagining the ghost as someone’s grandfather or grandmother. You can try imagining the worst that could happen and then realize this isn’t so bad. Dealing with fear is best done taking deep breaths and allowing the brain’s
thinking parts to rationalize that people hurt people, ghosts don’t hurt people. Take it from a man confined to a wheelchair and completely defenseless against his numerous enemies when he said, “There is nothing to fear but fear itself”. Ask those that are frightening you to please stop. Ghosts are just people – dead people, yes, but still just people. You may find that they do as asked, moving on or quieting down, now aware that their antics were unwanted.
If being nice doesn’t work, call for help. Get paranormal investigators to come in and give you a hand, not just in validation, but in diminishing or ridding the premisses of activity.
Most of all, don’t give up. Be tenacious. It’s your house, place of work or property. It is no longer theirs. Don’t be intimidated. Be nice when you can but stubborn and fierce if necessary.
Call for help when you need it. And don’t be afraid of your fear.