

And Couldn't

● How I Tried to Explain Away the Unexplainable—



Steve Volk

Fringes of Ology

FRINGE-LOGY

HOW I TRIED TO EXPLAIN AWAY THE
UNEXPLAINABLE—AND COULDN'T

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*To my parents, Gerald and Joanne Volk,
for absolutely everything.*

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What We Talk About When We Talk About the Paranormal

Or: Why we can't even agree on just what it is we're discussing

My point is not that religion itself is the motivation for wars, murders and terrorist attacks, but that religion is the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a "they" as opposed to a "we" can be identified at all.

—Richard Dawkins, "Time to Stand Up"

It's cramped and irrational to say that there is no God—and premature. Because we are pathetically ignorant of the universe.

—Martin Amis

People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along?

—Rodney King

We have been sitting in the dark for hours. I am on the outside of a circle of a half-dozen strangers, reclining on the thick carpeting of a suburban home, watching the silhouette of a hulking man with a digital audio recorder. We are waiting, and listening, for some proof of a ghostly presence in the room. And I, for one, am not optimistic. I've come here with Lou Gentile, a well-known figure within the murky realms of ghost hunting. And so far, we have found nothing to confirm what this family in central New Jersey has told us: they tell us about strange rappings, jiggling doorknobs, and an occasional bang in the basement. We have heard nothing of the kind. But more than that, we both think the vibe this family gives off is strange enough without the additive of spirits.

The family patriarch, who I'll refer to here as "Paul," moves with the disassociated air of a ghost himself. He is a quiet, intense divorcé who seems to rule over his girlfriend and son with his ominous silences. Like me, he has recently lost a parent—in this case, his father. And while his family seems to maintain an appropriate skepticism, he clearly wants to believe.

Earlier, he showed Gentile a series of odd photos, including one that displayed what appeared to be a large, jagged light in his bedroom. He seemed happy when Gentile told him he wasn't sure what kind of camera defect might produce that anomaly. "It could be a defect," Gentile told him, "but I haven't seen one quite like this."

Paul also showed us a video he made in the basement, which was about as interesting, aesthetically, as might be expected. The static image he captured was mostly darkness, with the outline of a weight bench in the middle ground and still more darkness fanning out behind it. Every few seconds, however, a ping echoed in the room. "The sound is probably distorted by the condenser microphone on your camera," Gentile told him. "But it's worth investigating."

Gentile sent me down to the basement at that point, to sit in the dark. And though I was suitably scared for a minute or so, it quickly became clear to me that the “mysterious noises” Paul drew our attention to were produced by nothing more spectral than the air conditioning ducts that cut back and forth across the ceiling. I reported my findings to Gentile, who expected as much. “It doesn’t mean nothing is happening here,” he told Paul. “But the sounds on the video are just produced by your air conditioning unit.”

Paul, sitting cross-legged on the floor, looked distraught. Gentile readied his little digital recorder and asked Paul to turn off all the lights in the house. Hours passed. Gentile asked questions into the darkness, then played back the audio, listening for ghostly responses. Believers call this “electronic voice phenomenon.” I considered it a kind of investigative dead end, a series of unintelligible, scratchy noises that could easily have been produced by the recorder itself—the sounds occasionally coalescing by chance into a snatch that could be mistaken for a word or maybe even a phrase. On this night, Gentile didn’t seem particularly impressed by the results either. So to shake things up, he invited everyone in the circle to take turns asking questions. When it was Paul’s turn, he knelt down in front of the recorder and asked the only question of the dark that could be expected from a grieving son: “Are you my father?”

Gentile’s recorder captured no response.

FOR MANY PEOPLE, AND especially hard-core skeptics, all the paranormal ever amounts to is the wishful thinking of the grieving. By this time, however, I already knew better. I had been out with Gentile on more than a half-dozen investigations, and while much of what we saw and heard could be easily tracked to some earthly origin, some couldn’t. Further, while some of the self-proclaimed witnesses seemed to like the idea of ghosts in their houses, others were hoping Gentile might find some prosaic explanation. This in and of itself should not come as much of a surprise. If all our strange experiences could be explained so easily as a simple mishmash of wishful thinking and creaking floorboards, we’d have no need of the word *paranormal*. But we do. Paranormal experiences have been with us since the beginning of recorded history. And they don’t seem inclined to go away any time soon.

In fact, just on the subject of spirits, researcher and folklorist Lionel Fanthorpe announced in 2011 that ghost sightings were at their highest point in twenty-five years. We continue to be inundated with tales of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), and some of the accounts could fuel a feature film: Winston Churchill supposedly quashed a dramatic UFO report, fearing a public panic; famous U.K. computer hacker Gary McKinnon went poking around in NASA’s mainframe for evidence of alien spacecraft, evidence that he claims he found; but alas, he had no time to download the telltale photograph before his connection was cut off by an angry American government.

But the question we need to ask going forward is, What exactly are we talking about when we talk about the paranormal? I could, in fact, fill endless pages with odd, tantalizing stories. Did you hear the one about the cab drivers on the Solomon Islands? In the fall of 2008 they started complaining about picking up passengers who acted completely normal until they disappeared suddenly from the backseat. And they never did pay their fares. In the coming pages, I write about near-death experiences (NDEs), mental telepathy, quantum consciousness, UFOs, a mystic astronaut, ghost hunting, and a pair of scientists doing their level best to study aspects of human experience often derided as paranormal. But this book is about more than any of these things. This is a book about us.

We live in a world of false certainties: Whether we are discussing politics, religion, or economics when we flip on our televisions or open our Web browsers to a news site, we encounter the often

strongly held opinions of others—opinions that lead us into a series of binary choices: conservative or liberal, believer or atheist, capitalist or socialist. My argument, simply, is that these are false choices—that there are middle paths that bear more fruit. But unfortunately, as we'll see in the pages of this book, it is human nature and an automatic function of the brain to frame conflicting worldviews in extreme terms of right and wrong, good and evil, rational and irrational. And I would argue that this kind of Us Versus Them thinking is perhaps best and most readily seen in debates about the paranormal.

The word *paranormal* is itself a kind of victim of human psychology, too often conflated with *supernatural*: “of or relating to an order of existence beyond the visible observable universe”; especially: “of or relating to God or a god, demigod, spirit, or devil.” *Paranormal*, conversely, can be defined and often is defined in far broader and more scientifically useful terms: “of or pertaining to events or perceptions occurring without scientific explanation.” In fact, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines *paranormal* as “beyond the range of scientifically known or recognizable phenomena.” If we take these definitions, the supernatural seems to force us toward religion, while the paranormal merely forces us to say, “I don't know.” There should be no shame in that, but I think the faithful too often want to equate their beliefs with knowledge, while the skeptics fear that admitting a lack of a final answer opens the door to all manner of hoo ha, including God. The skeptics also tend to view the words *supernatural* and *paranormal* as if they are easily interchangeable, but whereas the supernatural seems to lie firmly beyond science, the paranormal waits patiently for the technology and the willing scientists necessary for its discovery.

Whether we consider God in this equation or not, such a definition of paranormal as simply representing the unknown is striking because it encompasses a whole variety of phenomena we don't normally consider paranormal, like the placebo effect. It is beyond strange that people experience healing effects after being fed a useless sugar pill, but it happens. Researchers have pinned the cause to belief, but the exact mechanism of how belief in the efficacy of a medicine not actually administered leads to a reduction of asthma symptoms, for instance, remains unknown. Pharmaceutical companies are hoping to figure it all out, because incredibly, the placebo effect is getting stronger and no one is sure why. Is the placebo effect paranormal? Or belief? Hypnotism is another example of a phenomenon we don't normally talk about when we talk about the paranormal. And unlike the placebo effect, some skeptics try to deny hypnosis even exists, attributing its effects to the “power of suggestion.” There is reason for us to want to bury hypnotists in a great big hole: if careful procedures aren't followed, recovered memories are often false, and people have been wrongfully prosecuted based on “evidence” gleaned from hypnosis. But there are numerous, well-documented cases of hypnotism causing incredible relief from pain. Hypnotism has been dramatically effective in controlling the pain of surgery and childbirth. So if hypnotism isn't real, something dramatic is still occurring under that name. And scientists, again, have thus far failed to explain what it is or precisely how it works. Is hypnotism paranormal?

It is time for us to broaden our minds, lift the stigma from the word *paranormal*, and instead see the opportunities these odd stories present for us: in terms of science, the pursuit of the paranormal has propelled civilization toward some of its most important advancements. The study of alchemy—the power to transmute lead into gold—gave rise to modern chemistry. Francis Aston used the predictions of two occultists, which proved a springboard to discovering the isotope—a link long omitted from scientific textbooks. And then there is Hans Berger, who sought a physical mechanism for psychic events and landed on electricity as the answer. Berger invented the electroencephalogram or EEG, to measure theretofore unheard-of electrical activity in the brain—and provided the

foundation of modern neuroscience. In short, what is today seen as wacky often leads to tomorrow's progress. But in seeing the paranormal as grounds for investigation rather than argument, there is another, more immediate benefit we might get: to reconnect, each to the other, in a shared understanding that we are enjoined in a common predicament. At the most fundamental level of reality, we are fellow travelers stuck to the hull of a rock floating through space, without final answer to the questions that are traditionally most important to us: *What happens when we die? Is there a god? Are we alone in the universe? Why are we here?*

All we really know, in an epistemological sense, is that we *are* going to die. How nice. This is the existential reality of the human condition. But the paranormal potentially offers us answers. Because if ghost stories are merely folk tales, the product of overactive imaginations trying to deal with the existential angst of human experience, as skeptics maintain, they are worth writing down as documents of our innermost selves. And if some aspects of the paranormal prove to be real, as mystics contend, then we will have made a discovery worth inventing new words for—a discovery of *ginormous* proportions. Toward the end of this book, in fact, we'll find that such a discovery—a couple such discoveries—have perhaps already been made. As a result, I argue, taking the paranormal seriously means we gain a greater understanding of the world, regardless of the outcome. People have reported anomalous experiences since literally the beginning of recorded history. Plato told the story of Er, a soldier who awoke upon his own unlit funeral pyre, descended from that stack of sticks and spoke of a trip into the afterlife. President Abraham Lincoln famously dreamt of his own assassination. Coincidence, or did the president really see it coming? Psychiatrists Colin Ross and Shaun Joshi claim paranormal experiences are so common throughout the population that psychology must account for them in order to be comprehensive.

It is time we take a firm accounting of these stories. And I have my own reasons for conducting this research. I am, of course, interested in the fundamental questions of our existence, expressed in the deep panic of an existential crisis: *why are we here? are we alone? what happens when we die?* But the source of my interest is also more particularized.

I have made my living as a reporter for a dozen years now. And standard operating procedure for any journalist is to play the paranormal for laughs. Reporters assigned to Halloween “ghost hunt” stories go out with a local crew of amateur ghost seekers. They spend a couple of hours in a supposedly haunted location. Nine times out of ten nothing remotely unexplainable happens, and the reporter files a story that pokes gentle fun at the “real-life ghostbusters” who interpret every dip in temperature as a disembodied spirit. But I can't write that story, or at least I can't write that story in good conscience.

My own family passed a series of ghost stories on to me, stories they swore to be true. And I have my own memories of the events they describe. I remember the banging noises, for instance, that sounded like something was trying to hack its way in through the roof. I remember my older brother throwing his hands on top of his head and staring up at the ceiling in dismay. I remember my sisters claiming that their bed covers had been jerked from them, violently, as if by invisible hands.

My mother and father once sat and told me about what they called “the ghost.” I was in my mid-twenties, recently graduated from college. I had instigated the conversation by telling them I wanted the definitive account. The tale they told me was sensational, complete with a spellbinding ending that seemed traumatic to them all those years later. While I'll save the details until chapter 5, my parents' reaction to the telling of them gripped me. They held hands across the kitchen table. They looked sick to their stomachs. They were more than twenty years removed from the events they recounted, yet still frightened.

Of course, this should not be. As a child of the Enlightenment, I should believe in a rational, materialistic explanation for everything that happens. So should they. By this logic, my parents would either be liars or fools for believing there might have been a ghost in our house. That assessment may sound harsh. But Western science doesn't yield easily to the paranormal. We live in an age when the turf wars between mystics and rationalists are growing considerably hotter. These days, in fact, atheists advocate for their point of view with the passion of priests looking for penitents. And what gets lost in all this controversy is a whole world of phenomena ripe for psychological and scientific exploration. What also gets lost is the essential human drama of it all, the husband and wife sitting at the table, white faced, after twenty years in the wake of an event they cannot explain.

This book seeks to demonstrate that the paranormal can be covered in the same way as any other story—and that, in fact, these subjects are among the most important we *could* cover, yielding fascinating narratives that speak to the most fundamental concerns humanity has faced. So, where possible, I assess the veracity of the strange tales people tell. And what I'll find is that some paranormal claims are far more possible than the skeptics like to admit. But my focus remains on the experience most accessible to journalism: the experience of confronting a mystery.

People who undergo paranormal experiences risk falling into a special, unofficial subclass of U.S. citizens—a subclass I call “Embarrassed Americans.” For my chapter on UFO sightings (chapter 4), in fact, I make a trip to a town filled with the chagrined: Stephenville, Texas—dairy cow country. In January 2008, residents all over the county saw strange lights in the sky. But fewer than a dozen ever went public with their stories. The opportunity was there: swarms of national media descended upon the town. But many residents claimed they were embarrassed for themselves and their community. And all they had done for their trouble was see something in the sky that they couldn't explain.

The central problem, I think, is that as a species we *seem* to lack humility. One of the strangest books of recent times, *The End of Science*, was penned by John Horgan—who in spite of so much evidence to the contrary argues that science will not produce any more truly revolutionary findings. Of course, potential revolutions still abound: dark matter and dark energy are thought to make up roughly 95 percent of the universe, yet direct evidence of their existence eludes us. (Does that make 95 percent of the universe paranormal?) Temple University recently produced a book that identifies thirteen competing theories of quantum mechanics and explores their implications for how we understand the very nature of existence. Some highly esteemed scientists, including Karl Pribram and quantum mechanics mastermind David Bohm, advanced the idea that the human mind and the entire universe are like a hologram—a three-dimensional projection from some other, more fundamental reality.

If the universe doesn't seem quite weird enough for you yet, consider the matter of time, a particularly sticky wicket: Einstein himself called time a “stubbornly persistent illusion” because, from the perspective of a physicist, there seems to be no obvious explanation for why we experience time in the linear fashion that we do. To explore the subject, physicists Yakir Aharonov and Jeff Tollaksen devised an incredible experiment, in which the act of measuring a particle at, say, 3:00 P.M. predictably changes the value of the same particle at, um, 2:30 P.M.—a half-hour earlier. Numerous labs around the world have been successfully conducting and replicating the experiment, which seems to indicate something awfully wild about reality: an action taken in the future can affect what happens in the present, at least at a subatomic level.

Aharonov and Tollaksen aren't sure precisely what to make of their own findings. But this is precisely the spot at which we can use a real, scientific mystery to understand something about ourselves and how we react to the paranormal. Most likely, you rebelled, internally, during this last paragraph. You balked at the idea that what we do at 3:00 P.M. can effect what happened at 2:30 P.M.

But without belaboring the nature of time, there is a part of your brain that probably sent you a tremulous message to watch out when I wrote something that seems so nonsensical. Maybe you furrowed your eyebrows, your pulse quickened, you momentarily held your breath or even felt angry or dismissive, as if what I had written must be false and I must be stupid or even craven to write it. But here's the thing: that wasn't you, or at least not the rational, reasonable you. That was your brain talking—most dramatically, your amygdala, a necessary but frustrating part of the brain that we'll meet throughout this book. The amygdala is the spot in the brain I accuse of making us seem to lack humility—the part of our brain that can cause us to haughtily dismiss information we find threatening or don't understand.

When our place on the food chain was not so secure, and we had to deal with predator cats on a regular basis, the amygdala—a pair of almond-shaped structures near the base of our temporal lobes—did great work. Our brain processed visual images of a shadow moving in the grass, and our amygdala shouted, "Danger!" In response, we froze. Our more logical information-processing centers kicked in quickly trying to determine: Is this shadow a crouching tiger or a hidden rabbit? If the shadow was big enough, our logical frontal lobes responded, *Close enough to a tiger for me*, our amygdala sent a stronger signal of abject fear in return, and we ran.

Millions of years later, *Homo sapiens* is here—and we brought our amygdalas with us. Some of us are like kids in the inner city, or soldiers in the battlefield, still need them a lot. These are people who worry on a daily basis about potent threats to their health—about a lump in a stranger's pocket that might mean he is carrying a handgun; about a mound of dirt on the side of the road which might cover a bomb. But for most of us, the amygdala (along with other parts of the brain responsible for mediating emotion and processing conflicting information) is responding to far less grave mysteries and instead sending us messages of anxiety and fear whenever necessary and much of the time besides, including when the boss says something harsh to us at work, a coworker cuts us a nasty look or when we hear an idea that conflicts with our worldview.

This has profound implications for all of us, and our conversations about the paranormal, and means oftentimes our first reaction, even if it is about an intellectual subject, is an emotional one: We react to the ideas we hear not only with our rational frontal lobes but with this primitive part of our brain. And when we feel emotionally committed to a position, that is precisely the time we're in the greatest danger of reacting—not from our frontal lobes, like enlightened human beings, but from our amygdalas, like angry or frightened monkeys. Believers sometimes consider those of no or different faith downright unholy. Nonbelievers, of late, take great delight in openly deriding believers as irrational and childlike. And too often the rest of us wind up listening to people letting their amygdalas inspire far too much of the talking.

There is intriguing research that backs this up, including not just brain scan technology but terror management theory. It seems that both religious and irreligious people see death and threats to their worldviews as of a piece; in other words, he who threatens my life and he who threatens my way of looking at the world are, on a psychological level, related. That is a dangerous way of thinking, but it seems we're built for it—machines constructed to fight.

As we'll see late in this book, mystics have come up with some great ways of taming the more unruly, emotional centers of our brain, including the amygdala. And of course science helps in particularly dramatic fashion. If anxiety is our response to mystery, then discovering the truth and eliminating the mystery not only gives us more information about the world, it helps to soothe us. *Calm down there, amygdala. And trust in science.* The problem is that we often lack real answers. At that point, our own psychology can't help but get in the way. The anxiety we feel at confronting a rea

mystery encourages us to supplant the unknown with an answer that fits our preexisting worldview. For mystics, that means injecting God or some similar force into all the explanatory gaps; for materialists, it means maintaining faith that some prosaic explanation, far from mysticism, will ultimately emerge.

Science is often typified as a perfect, self-correcting system that compensates for our faulty wetware by gathering and totaling up evidence. Mystics, with their reliance on subjective experience can't make the same claim. I find this standard analysis to be devastatingly accurate—to a point. My critique is that while we might look over the long haul and see a “perfect,” self-correcting system, we aren't looking at today from the perspective of a decade, a generation, or a century from now. This means we might be looking at a completely laughable model of reality and calling it the most likely one—just because this is the time we live in and this is the best information our science has yielded to date.

Modern neuroscience provides a fantastic example of this: scientists are examining brain function at the level of the neuron to try to explain how consciousness is produced. Yet no one has figured out why neuronal firing and the interactions of neurochemicals produce thought, your feelings of being you, with your specific set of wishes and wants and fears, who feels a particular sensation upon perceiving the color red or enjoying the flavor of a good steak. There is a whole level of activity going on below the level of the neuron—a level we can't investigate so well because we don't yet have the instruments to do the job properly. And so, modern neuroscientists, for all their advancements, could prove to be just like the drunk looking for his misplaced car keys under the lamppost.

Where, we ask the drunk, did you last see your keys?

About three blocks away, he replies, a little man on his hands and knees.

Then, why are you looking here?

Because, he replies, this is where the light is.

In short, I'm not so much critiquing science as calling for more of it, particularly in areas derided as paranormal. The placebo effect was entirely disregarded for decades, a blip in the system, until the past ten or fifteen years. Now we know the placebo effect seems to depend on everything from the bedside manner of the doctor to the color of the pill. We're learning to manage belief so it works for us. But for years, the idea that what people believed could affect their health was just too far outside mainstream scientific thinking to be embraced as a field of study. Why would this be so? Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* remains a kind of bible for those who would seek to understand science not just in its idealized form, but as it's actually practiced. The act of rigorously gathering and methodically analyzing data isn't carried out by idealized beings, after all, but people. And these people get invested in their findings and the theories they've signed their names to, and they protect the dominant way of looking at things—the current worldview science has built. So, at times, we not only have to wait for technology to catch up, but literally, for fallible scientists to accept all the data that science has amassed.

Science will eventually yield up all kinds of delicious truth—over the decades and centuries. The thing is, we're alive right now—not millennia from now—and so we have, as we've always had, a science that is doing the best it can with today's knowledge and technology base. The perfect aspect of science is its method, not the given set of information it's yielded to date. That store of information will change, and if history is any guide, it will continue to change dramatically—in ways we haven't even dreamt of. Look at the way science has dealt with quantum mechanics. By now, most people are familiar with the basic weirdness of the quantum universe, where particles regularly perform impossible feats: appearing in two places at once; communicating information across distances;

blinking out of existence in one spot and reappearing suddenly in another.

Those strange subatomic operations underpin our every day reality, mainstream physicists long maintained, but do not manifest themselves *up here* at the macro-scale. In fact, in the realm of the paranormal, skeptics have long laughed at the way believers resort to quantum explanations for everything from the afterlife to consciousness and telepathy: *Quantum phenomena are so small and require such cold and stable environments, they chortled, that they could never persist long enough to be of any real importance in the operations of warm, wet biological systems.* But just in the past five years biologists have been discovering possible interactions between the micro- and macro-scales—interactions thought impossible till we found them. I discuss a few of these in chapter 3, but I am arguing that, given this state of affairs, we should be alert for and wary of dogmatism of any kind—be it religious or scientific. And I am further arguing that, before the evidence is in, many of us presuppose the answer that will best fit our worldviews—and soothe our overheated amygdalas.

What this means, in practice, is that professional skeptics deny any thought that validation for mysticism might arise from the quantum realm, while many modern believers go on seeing the quantum as the heavenly land we'll journey to when we die. I'd like to see these two sides in the debate start collaborating—or at least start taking each other seriously, and occasionally, there are signs such a thing might be possible. I'm a fan of the skeptic Brian Dunning, an atheist without an attitude, who runs a podcast on critical thinking called *Skeptoid*, which I highly recommend. And I'm perhaps even a bigger fan of the semi-retired entrepreneur Alex Tsakiris, who runs a podcast called *Skeptiko*. Tsakiris doggedly attempts to bring proponents of the paranormal and skeptics together for productive conversations—and sometimes he even succeeds. The brightest spot on the horizon, however, might be David Eagleman, a neuroscientist and author who has become the de facto leader of a new way of looking at the world, dubbed *possibilianism*. The creed of the possibilian is, I think, best summed up by Eagleman himself in an interview with the *New York Times*: “Our ignorance of the cosmos is too vast to commit to atheism, and yet we know too much to commit to a particular religion. A third position, agnosticism, is often an uninteresting stance in which a person simply questions whether his traditional religious story (say, a man with a beard on a cloud) is true or not true. But with Possibilianism I'm hoping to define a new position—one that emphasizes the exploration of new, unconsidered possibilities. Possibilianism is comfortable holding multiple ideas in mind; it is not interested in committing to any particular story.”

In most respects, I applaud Eagleman. We live in a world of false certainties, a world in which a fundamentalist minister like Pat Robertson claims to know God, and Richard Dawkins claims with near-equal certainty and no less passion that no such God exists. The media, of which I am a member, foments this kind of debate all the time, in which only two polarized views are presented. We suffer through this in political coverage, too, listening to the most strident Republicans and Democrats and no one with an alternative point of view. And I think, as a people, our grip on reality itself is diminished. We are always being presented with binary choices, when reality is far more complex.

This book isn't going to provide a lesson in epistemology, the study of knowledge, which has gone on for millennia. It'd take a lot more space than I have to do that. But this is a book that asks the reader to recognize that there is a difference between knowledge and belief, and the bar for what constitutes true knowledge is set awfully high—far higher than we can attain throughout our society. So in court, for instance, we rely on eyewitness testimony when we also know, by scientific study, that eyewitness testimony is shockingly unreliable. What this means is that, as human beings, we traffic largely in belief. I think this fact could set us free if we let it. In not only admitting we don't know but acting on it, we open a door to conversation—as opposed to debate—and the exploration of new ideas.

a good-faith sifting through of the facts we have. I think, theoretically, most religious people can at least grope their way toward accepting this: in theological terms, doubt is often seen as a necessary part of real faith. Skeptics might have a harder time, because they usually profess that they deal only in facts. But as we'll see throughout this book, the arch-skeptic is as capable of seeing things according to his or her biases as the believer.

The result is that we don't merely live in a world of false certainties; we live in a world in which people at either extreme try and get those of us in the middle to buy into their particular fairytale version of reality.

This line of argument is normally waged solely against believers—the “old man with a beard” who takes away the sins of the world and greets us all in heaven with a sweetie. Psychologists also often talk in terms of the emotional or real-world payoff people receive in exchange for what we do—from the actions we take to the beliefs we hold. And for a long time, this sort of transactional aspect of belief was most evident in, well, believers. Those who believe in God or even a Godless afterlife have long been examined in terms of the benefit they receive for holding that belief: faith in the paranormal as a panacea for knowing death awaits us all, for instance. But if the New Atheists have succeeded in anything, it is in crafting a materialist fairy tale. Known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens have created a similar payoff for believing there is no God. In their view, the only immortality available to us is the legacy we leave behind; and because they are right they will be remembered and judged well by history. And here on Earth, while they're alive, they get to feel smart while stupid goes on doing as stupid does.

Religion tries to scare people into believing its tenets. *Follow our rules or burn in hell.* Dawkins declares a kind of intellectual *fatwa* against belief itself, swaying fence sitters to his position through fear of ridicule. Forswear belief or be called a superstitious dullard, a dangerous fool? Atheists shall be known as “brights,” and believers “dulls.” Is this an improvement? It all works out the same. Believers and unbelievers alike operating as mean, petty bullies. It also betrays a startling ignorance of human psychology. When people are attacked, they become defensive, stop listening, and cling to their views more aggressively. In this respect, Richard Dawkins isn't fighting fundamentalism. He's calcifying it. And so the New Atheists have succeeded in pointing out the sandy foundation of dogmatic religious belief; they have lent succor and courage to the secular humanists too long confined to our cultural closet. But their cartoonish one-liners have also brought the same sense of polarized opposites to our discussion of faith and spirituality that already dominates and demeans our politics.

In the end, then, I'm not arguing for or against religion or atheism. What I'm trying to do is illuminate their common ground. Each side claims to have worked out a way of looking at the world that holds the ultimate claim on truth. Neither side seems likely to change its position. So in light of this, it seems we had all better do one thing in particular: learn to get along. I'm arguing that we learn to talk about so-called paranormal issues productively, so that believers and disbelievers alike gain a better understanding not only of how the world works but of themselves and each other. The way I see it, we're all land-based mammals on a planet with a greater surface area devoted to things that swim. We are all trapped on this same unforgiving rock, floating through space, with no rulebook for living other than the one we discover and write together. Under such circumstances, are we better off approaching each other in a posture of debate—or conversation?

I'm not alone in thinking this way. I should point out that among the New Atheists, Sam Harris seems to clearly understand the difference between a paranormal claim, or ideas related to spirituality (for lack of a better term), and supernatural propositions, or the kind of thinking codified into a

religion. “The question of what happens after death (if anything) is a question about the relationship between consciousness and the physical world,” writes Harris. “It is true that many atheists are convinced that we know what this relationship is, and that it is one of absolute dependence of the one upon the other. Those who have read the last chapters of *The End of Faith* know that I am not convinced of this. While I spend a fair amount of time thinking about the brain (as I am finishing my doctorate in neuroscience), I do not think that the utter reducibility of consciousness to matter has been established. It may be that the very concepts of mind and matter are fundamentally misleading us.”

I suspect that most of us are reasonable enough to realize that systems of thought, whether religious or scientific, that have survived for centuries and for millennia must necessarily contain truths that are ours for the taking. What gets too little play, at least in our public discourse, is any sort of middle or integrated view in which both political parties have valid points to make, or both rationalists and mystics have something to teach.

But the good news is that we, as a society, are already beyond both Pat Robertson and Richard Dawkins. Or, at least, a world beyond these partisan yelling matches is *available* to us. Whether it is Eagleman, philosophers like Jean Gebser or Ken Wilber, or for that matter the Dalai Lama, more and more serious thinkers are recognizing that the most enlightened view allows for a rich dialogue between science and religion—not the dominance of one at the expense of the other.

Bringing more people into this kind of collaborative worldview won’t be easy. And the media is one of the obstacles we need to overcome. Journalists often portray the fight between mysticism and materialism in stark terms—and through the lens of some dramatically phrased question, like, *Can science and spirituality coexist?* In the following pages, this book is essentially making one argument. That in the fullness of time, it’s not only apparent that science and spirituality can coexist, as they have coexisted for centuries. The lesson is even more dramatic than that. The lesson is that they can serve one another.

We are about to embark on a tour through a series of fundamental questions about the nature of human existence. In a sense, we will all be like the man, Paul, we saw at the beginning of this introduction. You may hear the foot-falls and bangings of various ghosts—or the workings of human imagination.

You will definitely encounter a UFO.

Mind reading, a trip to the moon, and spiritual ecstasy are also all on the agenda—and we’ll get a few glimpses of potential afterlives, besides.

The answers, when they are available, sometimes sacrifice the specificity of a false certainty for the accuracy of the unknown, as they did during my time with Lou Gentile. Paul and his family reported a wide range of phenomena—including doors that rattled in the middle of the night and drawers that inexplicably shook in their dressers, all in the wake of a death in the family. But the most interesting thing was that series of photos Paul showed us.

I’d seen lots of photos like these over the years, and Gentile had probably seen thousands of them. Paul seemed certain that each comprised evidence that a ghost—maybe the ghost of his father—was floating around his house. But light reflecting from nearby, out-of-focus dust particles, can create a halo that turns a dust mote into what some take to be evidence of spirits. So Gentile, slowly, gently, and deliberately, explained to Paul how dust floating in the room might have caused the vast majority of his strange images.

When we left, I took this as an occasion to talk to Gentile about how easily people delude themselves into thinking every photographic anomaly is a ghost. Lou agreed. But he always tried to

counter my skepticism with examples of phenomena that couldn't be so easily explained away. And so, on one of my visits with him, he set up a projector screen in his home and told me a story about what he considered perhaps the best photo he ever took in all his years investigating haunted houses. "I want you to see a photo," he said, "that isn't just dust."

He was looking into a reported haunting in Connecticut, he explained, and he was standing in an upstairs hallway, just waiting for something to happen, when a sudden movement flickered in his peripheral vision. Turning quickly, he saw it—a long shaft of light, slowly undulating toward him, like a snake floating in the air. Gentile had a camera hanging around his neck and recovered his senses just in time to snap a single photo as it passed him by.

Gentile told me this story many years after the event in question occurred. The projector screen behind him was still blank. Then he clicked a button on the projector and the photo he took appeared before me. The light he claimed to see was in the image, maybe six feet long, its form clear and consistent, its leading edge caught in the middle of a dip. I stayed focused on the light itself, but then Lou showed me why he thought this light was so intriguing. And there it was, in the lower corner of the photo, a shadow, seemingly cast by this odd shaft of light—suggesting that *something*, however unlikely, was actually there.

"What do you think that was?" Gentile asked, to which I could only reply, "I don't know."

In the coming pages, these interrelated tales will force us to use that same dirty, three-word phrase—"I don't know"—on a regular basis, heating up our emotions in the process. But I think a tour through our own fractured universe, in a sense our own fractured selves, is exactly what we need right now.

On Death and Not Dying

The Provocative Beginning of Near-Death-Experience Research

Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name.

—Ernest Hemingway, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

I can hear my mother wailing, and a whole lot of scraping of chairs. I don't know what it is, but there's definitely something going on upstairs.

—Nick Cave, “Dig, Lazarus, Dig!”

She sipped tea with the rhythm of an addict and ate chocolates the same way. Swiss chocolates, from her homeland, her fingers steadily working, her face going momentarily serene whenever cocoa met tastebud. These small pleasures were essentially all that was left her. The great lady's world had shrunk along with her tiny frame. She was one of the most significant figures of the twentieth century, shaking hands with dignitaries the world over, accepting not their congratulations but their thanks.

All that was over now. The great lady had diminished with age, like a paper going yellow in the tick of time. She was seventy-eight years old but seemed even older, her skin wrinkled in deep folds, her voice and body weak from a series of strokes that did her in over a period of years.

She knew.

She had seen all this before.

Up close.

But this time, the looming presence in the corner of the room was there for her. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was dying, in an Arizona nursing home, and still, complete strangers came to her. They had been coming for years, people who had been touched by her work in some way and wanted, sometimes with feverish intensity, to meet her. Once, as her friend Fern Welch made her way inside her tiny private room, she found Kübler-Ross beset by two young women, who she remembers literally kneeling on the floor and bowing before Kübler-Ross. Welch made her way around the two prostrate girls to give Kübler-Ross a customary hello kiss. But when she leaned in, the old woman whispered to her, “Please get them out of here!”

Welch had seen all manner of Kübler-Ross's fans show up over the years, and shooed the girls away. But this particular episode stayed with her. The irony was so great. Two young girls, venerating an old woman and stealing a portion of the little time and energy she had left. Kübler-Ross died not so long after this in August 2004, culminating a long, public descent.

Most people know Elisabeth Kübler-Ross as the writer and psychologist who wrote *On Death and Dying*, which remains one of the most important books of the twentieth century. Published in 1969, her tome's message was brutally simple: We, as a society, treat our sick and dying loved ones as

something less than human. Hospitals relegate terminally ill patients to back rooms, where the specter of illness can be kept out of sight. They enforce short, strict visiting hours, as if to make sure the dying suffer alone. And they strip the sick of their dignity, failing in most cases even to acknowledge the patient's terminal diagnosis. This description, written in the present tense, appears jarring and somewhat inaccurate today, some forty years later. But at that time Kübler-Ross merely described the world as it stood. She had gone into a hospital to help the sick and found that everyone was ill—that seemingly healthy family members, doctors, and nurses were all victims of the human condition.

Doctors saw the death of their patients as a professional failure, so the terminal diagnosis went unspoken; the nurses felt trapped by this, darting in and out of the room and avoiding eye contact, the better not to give away the truth; and loved ones struggled with what to say. Our symptoms may differ, but the underlying distress is universal. Because, Kübler-Ross wrote, every last person coming into contact with the terminally ill patient is reminded of his or her own mortality. What this means is that we love the dying, pity them, mourn for them, wish to heal them—and hate them, too, for reminding us that one day we also will lie there helpless, flat on our backs till the end. This cocktail of emotions is so potent that Westernized societies, deceived by the seeming omnipotence of modern medicine, tucked the dying out of sight, hiding them behind closed doors, beeping machines, and IV stands—a veil of technology that soothed everyone but the terminally ill.

Kübler-Ross became most famous for outlining five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—stages that subsequent academics have since criticized and amended in various ways. But her real accomplishment was in getting cultures all over the world to openly discuss death—the reality we'd all been busy hiding from. She accomplished this feat in a slim 276 pages. And in so doing, she became the public face of a then-new hospice movement.

It is impossible to quantify the impact Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* had on the world at large, but by any account it was massive. The emotional maelstrom unleashed in the wake of her book literally remade end-of-life care. And today, laypeople still turn the pages of *On Death and Dying* when there seems nowhere left to go. Medical programs still list her as required reading. And in brief newspaper and magazine summations of Kübler-Ross's life, her story often seems to end there, in about 1974, on the heels of her greatest professional achievement. But she lived for roughly thirty more years. And for our purposes, the real entry point into her life story is the subsequent turn she took into the paranormal. In 1975, in fact, she put her then impeccable reputation on the line by penning the forward to Raymond Moody's *Life After Life*—literally the first book ever written about near-death experiences (NDEs).

By now, the lore of the near-death experience is well known: The tunnel, the light, the life review, the reunion with loved ones. But in 1975 the term NDE had never previously been used, so the press and academia both were shocked at Kübler-Ross's involvement. The story was clear enough for every reporter to see: the brave lady who asked us not to shrink from the reality of death suddenly suggesting death may not exist at all. There is much to be learned from this twist in the life story of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Perhaps most important, venturing into these realms is dangerous—to our reputations and relationships, to our filter for what's real and what's fiction.

By 1980, in fact, the same woman who cried “Bullshit” about Western medicine had succumbed to bullshit of another flavor: she was consulting mediums who claimed to channel spirits of deceased loved ones and “higher entities.” She hosted New Age-themed spiritual retreats for widows. Her husband left her and became the main caretaker to their children. Her most prized medium proved fraudulent. Kübler-Ross's fall from grace became a running gag in the media, her life story ballooning into something too vast and complicated to be captured by any single narrative. Her son, Ken Ross,

minds her legacy now—the foundation formed in her name. And he knows, up close, how hard it is to pull together a coherent story about his mother. He says HBO has spent years trying to develop a movie based on his mother's life. Numerous screenwriters have come and gone, none delivering a workable biography. "My mother's life was complicated," says Ross. "They told me they couldn't figure out which story to write."

But the Kübler-Ross story isn't only hard for screenwriters to encapsulate. It's hard for all human beings—or at least those of us with normal, functioning brains. We are, as a species, neurologically uncomfortable with ambiguity. Imaging studies of the human brain in action demonstrate that the fussy little onboard computers in our skulls send out anxiety messages when confronted by conflicting or confusing information. As a consequence, we have a natural, internal impetus to settle on an interpretation that removes any perceived conflict.

If we're not cognizant of our own biases, this probably means choosing an interpretation that preserves our current worldview and disregards contrary evidence, replacing the accuracy of *I don't know* with the false certainty that we do. So, how *do* we reconcile the brave, passionate, hardnosed pragmatist who taught us about death with the New Age queen who lost so much over her commitment to a psychic? Well, according to the people closest to Kübler-Ross, and just as modern neuroscience would predict, we don't. We see her as the great lady. Or we see her as a crank. We bow to her memory. Or we smirk at the mention of her name.

"People tend to see Elisabeth as they want to see her," says Rose Winters, a friend of Kübler-Ross. "It's hard for those of us who knew her. Because people don't acknowledge *all* of her. They don't see her as she really was."

We see her, it appears, in much the same way we see the paranormal (or the political), as if we only have two choices: to passionately embrace or hotly reject. But there is a messier, truer view, one we need to draw closer to if we are to understand her, or even ourselves, let alone the paranormal.

ELISABETH KÜBLER-ROSS WAS BORN in Zurich, Switzerland, on July 8, 1926, the first to emerge among triplets. She weighed just two pounds and was not expected to survive. As a child, perhaps mindful of her own early frailty, the young Elisabeth Kübler nursed any injured animal she found, including a crow she fed and protected till it was strong enough to fly away. She defended weaker kids from schoolyard bullies. And she even bounced a book of psalms off the head of a preacher who had unfairly punished one of her sisters. Though she was later typified as a New Age faerie queen, the truth is she was a bit more like Keith Richards—a rebel by any accounting.

She first rebelled against her father, an assistant director of Zurich's biggest office supply company. "He had dark brown eyes that saw only two possibilities in life," his daughter would later write. "His way and the wrong way."

In the chauvinistic Switzerland of the early 1940s, her dream of being a doctor was considered just that. And one night her father sat her down to talk about her future. She was so responsible, he said, so capable, he thought she would make a fine . . . *secretary*.

"You will work in my office," he told her. But the thought of being stuck in his boring office, following his boring orders, and furthering the aims of the boring office supply industry, rather than doctoring, made Elisabeth Kübler half-nuts. "No, thank you!" she told him.

His counteroffer? "Then find work," he said, "as a maid."

Having no other means to support herself, she did just that. And in the ensuing years, she made her own way in the world. She left home, attended medical school, and met her husband—an American

med student named Manny Ross. Her gender shaped her path. After she moved with Manny to America and became pregnant, the only residency program that would have her was the one she didn't want: psychiatry.

Still, they needed the money. So she took a position at the Manhattan State Mental Hospital, working in a small unit with schizophrenic women. The head nurse allowed her cats to freely roam the ward, pissing and defecating among the patients. The entire asylum carried the ammonia stink of cat urine. And patients were punished for showing signs of their mental illness—beaten with sticks, subjected to electroshock treatments, and experimented upon with drugs like LSD and mescaline. “What did I know about psychiatry?” Kübler-Ross later wrote. “Nothing. But I knew about life and I opened myself up to the misery, loneliness and fear these patients felt. If they talked to me, I talked back. If they shared their feelings, I listened and replied.”

She was already opening herself up to the role she would play to the dying: the woman who shared their burdens and received their woes. But psychiatry never felt right to her until she and Manny moved to Denver for hospital positions. There, a colleague asked her to fill in and deliver a two-hour lecture he couldn't make. She cast around for a subject. She hunkered down in the library. She walked the hospital halls, wondering what topic would be suitable for a general audience of medical students and residents in various specialties. The answer came to her at home, as she stared into a pile of dying leaves, rake in hand. At the time, in 1964, death was not really a hot topic in medicine. In fact, when Kübler-Ross went back to the library to see what was available on the psychology of dying she found precious little: a single, dense, academic psychoanalytic treatise; some sociological studies on death rituals across cultures. She realized she would need to do her own research. But for her talk, she spoke only for the first hour. Then, during the break, she retrieved a patient she met in the hospital's wards: a sixteen-year-old girl who was dying of leukemia. When the students returned, Kübler-Ross explained the girl's terminal condition and opened the floor to questions. No one raised a hand. So she called on students, requiring them to come to the stage and *think* of a question.

These were med students. They asked about the girl's blood count, the size of her liver, her chemotherapy trials. The girl grew furious and began talking, unbidden, about what it was like to be sixteen and given only a few weeks to live; what it was like to never go on a date or have a husband; and how she was coping with it all. When she was finally wheeled from the room, the audience sat in heavy, dumbfounded silence. And gently, in her soft, Swiss accent, Kübler-Ross diagnosed what troubled them. *Your reaction is a product of your own mortality*, she told them, *which the girl forced you to confront*.

In this sense, they had not been looking at a sixteen-year-old girl at all. They had been looking into a mirror. The experience was so powerful that Kübler-Ross stopped questioning her own commitment to psychiatry. And when she and Manny subsequently moved to Chicago, she took a position at Billings Hospital, which was affiliated with the University of Chicago, and began her mission: to reconcile the world of the dying with that of the living. She grew famous for her efforts. But what is less well known is that during her years in Chicago many strange things happened to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. And she also found an unlikely professional companion.

The Reverend Mwalimu Imara (then named Renford Gaines) was assigned to Kübler-Ross by the hospital's administration, almost as a kind of bodyguard. No one thought she would be the victim of actual violence. But the academic seminars she began on the topic of death and dying caused great controversy in the hospital's halls, so Imara, one of the hospital's chaplains, walked alongside Kübler-Ross as a sign she was not alone. She had the administration's support. The truth is, Imara wasn't the one who experienced himself yet, certainly not in the duties he'd be attending to beside Kübler-Ross. And he

watched as her colleagues lied to her, again and again. “I am here,” she would say, “to meet with you dying patients.”

“No one here,” she was told, “is dying.”

No doubt, they thought they were doing the right thing. They thought it better for the patient not to discuss what was happening. No matter. She could read a patient’s chart like any other doctor and found the terminal for herself. Imara still remembers watching Kübler-Ross attend the first patient they ever visited together. The woman sat alone in the dark, perched on the edge of her bed. Uneaten food rotted on a stack of trays left on a nearby table. Kübler-Ross pulled up a chair and sat down across from the woman. “And how are things going for you?” she asked.

The patient, her head down the entire time, finally looked up at Kübler-Ross. “I’m hungry,” she said.

Kübler-Ross stood, opened the blinds, and called the nursing staff down the hall. “Get this woman fed,” she said. “Help her eat.”

The next day, Kübler-Ross returned to the woman’s room. The blinds were still open. The uneaten food had been thrown away. The woman looked fitter. Kübler-Ross sat down beside her on the edge of the bed, and the woman smiled. The two ladies sat like that for a long time, grinning at each other. “Now,” Imara told me, “just multiply that moment by hundreds or thousands of other moments just like it.”

For Imara, bearing witness to scenes like these transformed his position alongside Kübler-Ross from assigned functionary to more than willing collaborator.

The terminally ill were being neglected. They sat alone in their rooms waiting for the culmination of a death sentence that had never been formally pronounced. And as Imara puts it, “hurricane Elisabeth Kübler-Ross” helped them to go on living as best they could manage until they did die. This meant reconciling relationships, acknowledging their feelings, and finding what joys they could. Most of the hospital’s professional staff allied themselves against these efforts. Some doctors and nurses accused Kübler-Ross of ghoulishness. One nurse asked the psychologist if she enjoyed telling a twenty-year-old man he was dying. The signs advertising her seminars were torn down. But Kübler-Ross seemed to gain strength from the opposition. She recognized the resistance she faced as a symptom of the illness she treated.

And together, she and Imara didn’t just challenge the medical establishment. They sat by the bedsides of people who described incredible happenings: *I left my body, I floated up to the ceiling, I saw the doctors resuscitate me*. While their bodies lay below, in distress, they rose above them and felt an overwhelming sensation of peace. There was more, much more, and these patients wanted someone to tell them they weren’t crazy. But at this point in her life, Kübler-Ross not only disbelieved in organized religion, she viewed death like most Western doctors. Death meant the end—the terminus of termini, the obliteration of all possible beginnings. Even Imara, the reverend, was unprepared for these near-death tales. Many if not most sects of Christianity accept the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus but disavow paranormal happenings in our time. And here they were, what Imara calls the “Mutt and Jeff team,” hearing classic near-death experiences years before anyone had coined the phrase, years before the phenomenon was widely known. These stories suggested death was merely a gateway from one existence to another, from one incarnation to a newer, more profound one.

The stories told by children were often the most incredible—and consistent. “So many kids would start telling these stories, in the days before they died, about spirits visiting them,” said Imara. “Some drew pictures recording the date and time of their deaths.”

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