

My Turn

Dan Greenburg



Confessions of a Nonbeliever

I have something to tell you and I don't know how you're going to take it. I don't really know how to take it myself, if you want to know the truth.

What I have to tell you is that, all those years when we used to giggle at anything having to do with the occult—with ghosts and clairvoyants and faith healers and voodoo and mind-over-matter and whatnot—well, maybe we were wrong to giggle.

Look, I'm a rational, logical, linear-thinking, sensible fella, same as yourself, and if about two years ago I started running around with witches and mediums and practitioners of ceremonial magic, it was mostly because I figured they'd be fun to write about. Have a little chuckle at their expense, and where's the harm, you know? I certainly never expected to encounter anything I couldn't explain away with my rational, logical, linear-thinking, sensible, old belief system, but that is what seems to have happened.

It didn't happen in the melodramatic situations I found my way into either—it didn't happen in the spooky home of a black magician next to Loch Ness, Scotland, and it didn't happen in the coven of teen-age witches I hung out with in Brooklyn, and it didn't happen during the sinister voodoo ceremonies I got into Haiti. Where it happened was in perfectly ordinary apartments in perfectly ordinary places like Chicago and New York City and Toronto. There was no weird chanting, no voodoo drums, no whooshes of fire, nothing like that.

SEEING IS BELIEVING?

The first thing that happened was that a psychic named Alex Tanous asked me and a ladyfriend to participate in a little experiment. He went into a room adjacent to the one we were in, found a magazine, opened it at random so none of us could see it and put it face down on a bed. Then he came back into the room we were in and, in a semi-meditative process, guided us into trying to "see" it. He asked us to describe the picture in the other room and, not believing there was the remotest chance of doing so, we took a whack at it.

We each described entirely different

images: the young lady described a small black-and-white portrait of a woman with a broad-brimmed hat. I described a religious painting, dark in color, with a three-quarter-inch white border around it and a glare on the page. We went into the other room and turned over the magazine. On one page was a small black-and-white portrait of a woman with a broad-brimmed hat. On the facing page was a religious painting, dark in color, with a three-quarter-inch white border around it and a glare on the page.

Our reaction was giddy laughter. It didn't seem possible. It didn't seem frightening either. It was just fooling around.

PARANORMAL SHENANIGANS

The next time something happened I was fooling around too. While watching a ghastly old movie on TV, I half-seriously suggested to my companion that I was going to hurl an invisible bolt at the screen and shut the set off. I hurled. The set shut off. We laughed that time too, but maybe not as loudly.

The next thing involved a psychic in Chicago named Olof Jonsson, who did the by now famous ESP tests with astronaut Edgar Mitchell from the moon. When I met Olof he had me hold a deck of ordinary playing cards in my hand and, although he never came within 15 feet of me, he caused a card in the deck I held to dematerialize.

I've described this incident to a number of stage magicians. They all assure me it's the oldest trick in the book, but when I ask them how it was done the best they can do is mumble something about how I only *thought* Olof was 15 feet away from me the whole time. All I can tell you is that he *was* 15 feet away. I mean, I was there and the magicians weren't. (Olof did something else that day of an eerie nature, but I'll tell you about that in a moment.)

Now then, if it isn't satisfying to describe such incidents to stage magicians, it's even less so to tell them to physicists. Most physicists say they don't believe in paranormal shenanigans any more than you do, but don't get them started talking shop or before you know it they'll be telling you about things like tachyons,

which are subatomic particles which travel faster than the speed of light and arrive at their destinations almost before they start out. And don't talk shop with astronomers or they'll tell you about black holes, which are collapsed stars with magnetic fields so strong they swallow up even light waves. And biologists are no better because they'll tell you about eels that can smell a thimbleful of rose scent diluted in a lake covering 14,000 square miles.

Anyway, what I did about all this was write a book called "Something's There" and, although it's come out, I haven't stopped my research. I have even tentatively called myself a psychic investigator a couple of times, just to see how it sounds.

I must confess that I have also been doing a lot of chuckling at all my old, rational, logical, linear-thinking, sensible friends who don't believe in the occult—they're obviously threatened by it. Not like us hip, open-minded psychic investigators.

EERIE NATURE

Funny thing, though, about us hip, open-minded psychic investigators—sometimes we don't act so hip. Remember my saying that Olof did something else of an eerie nature when I met him? What he did was he had me think of a short phrase, and then he read my mind. Not once, but three times in succession. I'm so hip and open-minded that, the moment it happened, I blocked it out of my mind until long after it was too late to put it into my book.

So I guess I'm pretty threatened by the paranormal after all. There's only one problem about this field, though—I've come too far and seen too much to go back to my comfortable old beliefs. But I have gone back to giggling a little at the occult. Laughter is still the best method I know of dealing with fright.

Dan Greenburg is the author of "How to Be a Jewish Mother," "Scoring" and other books.