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Parker Herren

Cuny Graduate School of Journalism

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Paranormal Pandemic: My COVID Exorcism

It started with a TikTok about a cupboard door opening on its own. The account @lainey_and_ben documents the young couple's encounters with the supernatural that quickly escalated beyond the cupboard to disembodied shadows, objects moving on their own, lights flickering and faucets turning on spontaneously. From their first paranormal video in May 2020, the couple have confronted more supernatural occurrences and became increasingly comfortable with the entity living with them. They call the specter by its name (Dave), tried out dowsing rods and hosted Zoom investigations with paranormal experts.

Another user, @gina_soave, moved into a new home with her fiancé last August. She experienced thumping sounds and moving objects. Lights turned on and off and doors opened independently. Soave's Amazon Echo speakers have spontaneously played Christmas music (she later found bins of old Christmas décor in the house's garage) and whispered her name repeatedly. Once, while working from home, she caught a ghostly figure standing in her hallway. Soave and her fiancé didn't know until they signed the house's deed that in February 2020, the previous owner had died inside it. Soave said in her videos that she couldn't find much information, but that the owner had died suddenly of an undisclosed illness.

Hauntings are huge on TikTok. Users post their experiences discovering unexplained phenomena around them and spooky hashtags rack up millions, sometimes billions, of views. "#Ghost" has 18 billion and "#paranormal" has nearly 17 billion. Even something as niche as "#poltergeist" has over 900 million views. But I started to notice a trend: Lainey and Ben, Soave and a host of others plagued by the supernatural seemed to be making first contact during COVID.

Over the long months of isolation, I could feel it too—something sinister oozing within and around me. Little things had tipped me off, like catching a shadow in my periphery during a work Zoom or waking up in the night with the sensation of invisible eyes watching, but I would eventually discover that I was full-blown possessed.

Specters that linger in homes after death are often the victims of illness and sudden death, their lives stolen without closure. Heightened states of fear and anxiety act as energetic beacons for paranormal energies. But anxiety, fear, illness and sudden death aren't just symptoms of hauntings.

In less than two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has unceremoniously taken the lives of millions worldwide as the disease continues to evolve and wreak havoc. For the living, mental health concerns have reached a state of emergency as reported diagnoses of anxiety and depression swell. The resultant mélange of death and distress have created a simultaneous outbreak of supernatural encounters like mine.

Since March 2020, the phones of exorcists and paranormal investigators have been abuzz. Organizations like Long Island Paranormal Investigators have been forced to waitlist those in need of ghost hunters. Reverend Vince Lampert, the ordained exorcist for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis, said his caseload has doubled, from five to six calls a day to 10-12.

Santa Fe-based psychic, medium and paranormal investigator Jane Phillips told me that business began to “ramp up” during the pandemic.

But the increase of paranormal activity during the COVID-19 years isn’t unprecedented. Throughout humanity’s death-plagued history, tales of spooks and specters have followed events of mass death from ghostly legends of the Bubonic Plague to reality TV after 9/11.

Not knowing if my own incorporeal companion was akin to Casper, a famously friendly ghoul, or some Satanic fiend, I decided to heed the call of busting my own ghost. I started at the top and emailed the Catholic Archdiocese of New York to kindly request an exorcist. No response.

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Has there been an increase in hauntings during the pandemic?

“I would definitely say yes to that,” said John Zaffis. “There has been a tremendous reporting of hauntings.”

Zaffis is a paranormal investigator and calls himself the “Godfather of the Paranormal.” He has appeared on *Unsolved Mysteries*, Discovery Channel’s *A Haunting in Connecticut* and *Little Lost Souls*. From 2011-2013, he was the host of his own SyFy channel series *Haunted Collector*, which followed him and his team on investigations. He’s been a paranormal investigator for more than 40 years, since the age of 15 when he encountered the spirit of his late grandfather and recounted the tale to his uncle, Ed Warren.

The Warrens are paranormal royalty. Ed and his wife, Lorraine, investigated over 10,000 cases during their careers between 1952, when they founded the New England Society for Psychic Research, and Ed’s death in 2006. They claim responsibility for popularizing the paranormal, paving the path for celebrity ghost hunters like Zaffis, and most recently became known as the subjects of *The Conjuring* films. Portrayed by actors Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga, the franchise, which currently features eight films, portrays famous cases from the Warrens’ archives plus spin-offs of its popular villains, like the Annabelle doll. The franchise has grossed over \$2 billion in worldwide box office.

Zaffis enjoys *The Conjuring* films, even if he admits they’re a bit amped up. He tells me that “when I go to see a scary, spooky, haunting movie, what do I want? I want to get scared.” He’s particularly fond of *The Amityville Horror* and *The Exorcist* (“Gosh, I couldn’t sleep for three nights after watching that”).

Before *The Exorcist*’s depiction of a girl possessed by the satanic spirit Pazuzu and the religious war against the incubus sent the Catholic Church into a tailspin of moral outrage, exorcisms weren’t unusual business for priests. Exorcist Larry Elward is both a practicing Catholic and an ordained priest, but conducts his business independent of the church so that he can work freely the way exorcists did before *The Exorcist*.

“It's not the exorcists that don't want to talk to you, Parker,” said Elward, “it's the bishops that are in charge of them and the other clergy that tell their priests, ‘If anybody calls about exorcisms, we don't do that stuff.’”

The CDC reports over 730,000 deaths in the United States due to COVID-19 and because of quarantine measures, many weren't properly buried or given a funeral. Zaffis says that between the suddenness of the disease and the lack of closure given to those who died from it, those who passed may have lingered. He's added a new question to his investigation repertoire: has anyone you're close to or connected with passed away suddenly due to COVID? About 50% of Zaffis's recent clients have answered yes. Many who have died from the Coronavirus seem to have remained connected to those who have survived.

Zaffis also said the increased amount of time people have spent at home has contributed to the rise in paranormal encounters. Since March 2020, the cases that have landed on his desk come from a surprising nine-to-five demographic: “people that normally don't usually go down that road, looking at the perspective from the paranormal. They always try to look at things from a logical or a scientific perspective,” he said.

For the businesspeople, long days at the corporate office have been relocated to home offices. In 2019, a haunting may have gone unnoticed when slumping through one's front door after an exhausting workday. A self-opening door, disembodied whisper, flickering light or an object that seems to mysteriously relocate around the house was just a sign of needing a good night's sleep before doing it all over again. Rarely would one expect these were the signs of a poltergeist.

There is no unified database of all reported ghost sightings to prove the exact rate of change. However, one of Zaffis's peers confirmed the assertion anecdotally when I asked if the supernatural is ready and waiting for those open to taking notice.

Javier Bosch, researcher and electronic voice phenomenon (EVP) specialist at New York Paranormal Studies and Research Association, said that he conducted an experiment. He set up his investigative equipment in his own home just to see if he happened to catch something. Sure enough, he made contact with a soldier from the Revolutionary War. Bosch said the ghost was just passing through—a one-time encounter. The point is he captured something on a random night's whim.

“Anywhere that you can be, you can catch something,” said Bosch. “That's why I think the paranormal is all around us. It just depends on if they want to bother with us or if they want to be noticed or if they have an issue that they want to express.”

It seemed that in years past, potential hauntees just weren't around or receptive enough to know it.

“People are more in tune to paying attention to their environment,” Zaffis says of quarantining with a paranormal entity. Zaffis points out that older homes or multi-family dwellings like apartment buildings are particularly susceptible. These energies can lie dormant until set off by

the living, which is more likely the more time a person spends at home. I felt a chill as he said this over the phone while I sat in my Brooklyn complex.

“I’m hearing more and more from people saying, ‘Hey, I lived in my home for four or five years, but I never really noticed anything before,’” Zaffis said. “One of the questions that I ask now: are you working from home at this point? And as soon as they say yes, that makes me look at things a little bit differently than the normal circumstances.”

Zaffis is a firm believer in the power of energy and explained the intense emotional states experienced during the pandemic can create vulnerability to the paranormal as well. He said that the long period of emotional turmoil over the past two years can be both an attractor for spirits as well as a symptom that a haunting has already begun.

“Let’s face it. The rug got pulled out underneath our feet,” he said. “That definitely is going to affect individuals on the way they look at things and understand things, and is going to heighten the energy getting thrown off of individuals, thus causing paranormal activity to occur that people normally would not even be paying attention to.”

Lisa Morton, author of *Ghosts: a Haunted History*, wrote that try as investigators might to exhume evidence of the paranormal, those that are skeptical “have experimented with the human brain to find non-supernatural explanations for ghosts.” She lists mental illness and repressed trauma as popular theories for why some can spot apparitions while others can’t, but disclaims no consensus has been reached.

Some psychologists treat all instances of spectral hallucinations and disembodied voices as symptoms of schizophrenia. Others believe that communication with the dead can occur through visitation dreams, a type of lucid dream where a deceased loved one visits the living.

I optimistically wondered what the diagnosis is for those sane and awake when they make the acquaintance of a ghost.

Just under half of Americans reported feeling both more sad and more lonely than they did before the pandemic. 63% said they consistently feel more worried. That’s reflected in the number of those seeking therapy, which is also on the rise. Three in ten psychologists documented an increase in overall clientele and three quarters reported an increased demand for anxiety treatments during the pandemic.

Kerri Dee, a clinical social worker based in Austin, Texas, told me the pandemic has unearthed an extraordinary amount of grief in her clientele. While none of Dee’s clients have reported hauntings, she considered the idea with deadly seriousness.

“I believe people can be haunted,” she said, “or have entities attached to them.”

While she admits that for most of her peers, the traditional medical model would indicate the client was having a psychotic break, Dee is open to conversation rather than a trip to an asylum.

“I have certainly through my work...” she paused. “There were people who legitimately had schizophrenia, but that’s different than someone open and aware of the entities existing all around us.”

Before now, I’d never been haunted. Or I’d never been diagnosed with a haunting. Was I just sad or were the conditions of pandemic life capable of manifesting as poltergeists themselves? I called Jane Phillips, a cleanser of spiritual and supernatural entities or, as I understood it, an exorcist-lite.

Phillips was a mortgage loan officer in Minnesota for 20 years before she took a class to learn the business of being a psychic. In the course, she kept getting the feeling she should move to Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 2008, she arrived in the city and opened a paranormal cleansing and investigation business, Geysers Ghostbusting. Because of her past career, most of her early success came from realtors with stubborn properties on their hands. After a session with Phillips, the houses always sold.

Even before the pandemic, she preferred working remotely, especially as referrals started coming from outside of Santa Fe and she found herself performing cleansings in Dallas then Los Angeles and Sao Paulo, Vietnam and Ukraine. Phillips doesn’t need to be in a space physically to cleanse it because she doesn’t work alone. She employs a team of energies that align with her.

“The bottom line is, I do quantum energy work,” she explained to me as I blinked perplexedly. “So, I’m working with the thought field; quantum physics works with the thoughts.”

When Phillips begins consulting with a client, she sends her energy guides into the client’s home to see what she’s dealing with. Within five minutes, they begin to “beam back information,” which can range from electromagnetic frequencies from a television giving off “bumpy energy” to the phantom of a man who’d murdered his mother with a kitchen knife and shouted profanity toward her.

When I met Phillips over Zoom, she briefly turned off her virtual background to give me a glimpse of where she conducts her paranormal cleansings from, a tiny home just outside of Santa Fe. A large window backlit Phillips, washing out her surroundings in a spectral glow. Oversized, tin letters spelled the word “enjoy” above the window. Each letter was decorated with lines of globe light bulbs that I imagined would ignite dramatically above her like a Broadway show, but they remained unlit.

“It’s supposed to be lit,” Phillips said with a quiver of chagrin, as if reading my mind.

She switched back on her stock image of a cluttered bookshelf in front of a plain, white wall. Her workspace was pixelated and the image froze and jumped occasionally. She explained that she works from a hotspot, which has been acting up lately.

I nervously rambled. I told her that I had never looked into the paranormal. I told her what I'd observed and the research that I'd done connecting COVID to the afterlife. I told her I'd never encountered a ghost before.

Phillips nodded along and, when I finished speaking, grinned knowingly.

“You have two possessions on you right now,” she responded.

A mixture of panic and triumph. Was she sure?

“You do,” Phillips responded calmly. “The guides just told me that. I’m going to remove them with your permission.”

I was about to be exorcised.

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Tales of the supernatural have followed deadly affairs for centuries. While the lineage of ghost fables may be traced from the storytellers of ancient Rome through Shakespeare and Dickens all the way to William Friedkin and James Wan, the occurrence of a haunted place or population is often borne from the grief that follows a tragedy—like the real-life version of the campfire scene that initiates countless *Friday the 13th* films and recounts the bloodshed of the previous movie.

The sites of violent or cruel demise become the sites of phantasmic sightings. London’s plague pits, in which hundreds, sometimes rumored thousands, of victims to 1665’s Great Plague were hastily buried, haunt the city and its underground trains that tunnel past them. Eerie reports from Roanoke, Virginia, where an entire colony of early U.S. settlers mysteriously vanished, are so common that the name has become a fixture of pop culture. And perhaps the most haunted city in the States, New Orleans, has constructed entire tourist attractions around the monstrosities that befell the African slaves that arrived and were sold there.

In itself, the topic of ghost sightings is as vast as Earth they haunt. Another passage in *Ghosts: A Haunted History* states, “Quite simply, ghosts are everywhere. They’re found in every country, and in every period of history. If the world’s entire population could somehow be polled, it is likely that a majority would say they believe in ghosts.”

However, many places and times of death not only became hubs of paranormal activity, but the cause of popular obsession with the spiritual realm.

The September 11 terror attacks were followed by an upsurge in ghostly interest. That day, which still haunts life in America, hijacked planes struck the Pentagon and the Twin Towers. The New York City structures crumbled to the ground with workers inside, some photographed as they leapt from windows. Nearly 3,000 died.

Jessica O’Hara, author of “Making Their Presence Known: TV’s Ghost-Hunter Phenomenon in a ‘Post-’ World,” wrote that 9/11 “has prompted a collective interest in the nature of evil, haunted

spaces (such as the destroyed World Trade Center towers), enduring trauma and mourning, and the debt the living owe the dead in seeking justice and reparation.”

“In this post-9/11 climate, it is thus not surprising that we have become so interested in ghosts,” wrote O’Hara, “for they might provide just the metaphor we need to conceptualize the nature of history, trauma and our relationship with the dead.”

The way those traits of trauma and mourning manifested was a barrage of paranormal TV shows and movies. Programs like *Ghost Hunters*, *A Haunting*, *Ghost Adventures*, *Paranormal State*, *Celebrity Ghost Stories* and Zaffis’s *The Haunted Collector* are a few examples of the immensely popular programs that sought to solve the mystery of death. American cinema experienced a surge in remakes of Japanese ghost films like *The Ring*, *The Grudge* and *One Missed Call* about the vengeful spirits of the dead followed by equally popular American explorations of death and life afterwards like *Paranormal Activity*, *Insidious*, *The Babadook* and *The Conjuring*.

But the trend appeared even before it could be documented on television. The Civil War was the bloodiest battle in American history to that point; about 750,000 perished during the war over slavery between 1861 and 1865. The country was unprepared for an internal conflict of this scope and as soldiers were killed, their bodies were left on the battlefield, unburied and without ceremony. Thousands of families that grieved losses from the war turned to paranormal experts to commune with their lost kin and attempt closure for both parties.

Spiritualism was already a growing movement in the U.S. by the 1860s. Records of mediums holding seances to commune with the dead appear as early as the late 1840s and by the time the Civil War concluded, those sparse records had expanded to 35,000 mediums and 11 million people that reported belief in Spiritualist practices. First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln is said to have hosted as many as eight seances, some with her husband present, within the walls of the White House.

Not long after, about 20 million soldiers and civilians from around the world died during World War One and just as soldiers were returning home, the 1918 Influenza claimed at least 50 million more worldwide. Desperate to reconnect with lost family members, friends and lovers, many turned again to conduits for the paranormal.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, and physicist Sir Oliver Lodge lost sons to the war and, after, Doyle lost a brother to the flu. Both men testified in lectures and books legitimate communication with the deceased through seances, although celebrity escape artist Harry Houdini warned about a burgeoning class of scammers posing as mediums. Over the same period, Ouija boards, which first appeared in the 1890s, experienced a boom in demand as those unable to finance professional assistance in communicating with the dead clamored for affordable options.

Although our current tragedy has not yet ended, the influence of the paranormal on mass consciousness has already begun. The QAnon conspiracies claiming political figures like Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama communing with the malevolent ruler of the Christian underworld,

Satan, arrived with the Trump presidency years before COVID. But its followers have since created a phantastic mythos beyond the scope of its origins.

In early November, QAnon believers gathered en masse at the site of President John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas, Texas. The theory was that although it's widely known that JFK's son, Kennedy Jr., died over 20 years ago in a plane crash, he's been lying in wait to join Donald Trump in a coup for the Presidency. So, hundreds communed in Dallas to resurrect the deceased political figure (inevitably without success).

Perhaps our obsession with the afterlife will continue to manifest politically as the COVID pandemic draws to a close. Perhaps Twitter users will continue to joke that Senator Mitch McConnell is a reanimated corpse. And perhaps documentaries like Discovery's recent *Demon in the White House* will plague media in abundance.

“Many of the world's peoples, both now and in the past, believe that their ancestors are present,” wrote Morton, “and that an improper burial can create an angry ghost.”

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I felt a connection to the ghost confronters of pandemics and tragedies past as Jane Phillips lifted a black chord with a golden pendulum attached at the bottom into frame with the intention of exorcising me. Before she began, she told me it costs \$100.

With one hand, she began to swing the pendulum in a circular motion and spoke very quickly:

“I've just asked for the white light to be open above your head. Archangel Michael, Mother Mary, Jesus—I work with religious people—Archangel Raphael—who is a healer—Archangel Uriel and 20,000 angels—I used to do 10 angels. Now it's 20,000. And we invite these energies to cross to the light to whomever would welcome them home with love and acceptance.”

Phillips said that like an x-ray in her mind, she could see the spirits leaving me. She explained her team works fast and within three days, my possessors would be arriving in Heaven. I asked who they were, but Phillips said she doesn't waste time asking questions. Trying to interact with the entities would only waylay their journey away from Earth. She does tell me that one was male and one was female, my first devil's threeway.

Phillips advised me that an easy way to detect if spirits have re-attached to me is to evaluate luck. If unusually bad things have been happening, Phillips suggested this could be evidence of a possession. My next exorcism might cost me, though. Phillips had recalled earlier in our conversation a cleansing that she charged \$5,000 for.

Over the next few weeks, I set aside time to evaluate whether or not my luck had changed post possession. In the news, violent hate crimes were going unpunished, the battle for reproductive rights was looking grim and a new COVID variant loomed threateningly. On top of that, Starbucks always seemed to be out of pumpkin spice, my grandfather died and I ripped the ass of my favorite jeans. The short answer: my luck sucked.

I realized my hauntings weren't supernatural. My demons were manmade—the spawn of social and political mechanisms and my own pettiness. My true exorcism was an ideological one. Fear is a condition of the living. As the possessed girl Regan tells Father Karras in *The Exorcist*, the demon will stay within her “until she rots and lies stinking in the earth.”

But something Phillips said still comforted me: she'd congratulated me. I'd freed two spirits from our worldly realm. I was jealous as hell.