

In Defense of the Haunted

Published on October 9, 2021

[Edit article](#)

[View stats](#)



Howard W. (Doc) Whitaker

Consulting Clinical Clergy, Beekeeper & Bookseller

1 article



Every few years, usually at the runup to All Hallows Eve, an intrepid new cohort “discovers” old articles, handouts, slides, or conference audio tapes (remember those?) of mine on pastoral care in the context of paranormal activity: specifically, hauntings, apparitions, poltergeists.

I am old and rapidly becoming invisible and irrelevant professionally. I do not care about being discovered anymore. I find debate tedious and redundant. But I do not like my already scant and thready legacy being misused. So, allow me this cane-waving elder rant.

Yes. Among many other roles, I am a priest to people who see ghosts. So, there. Laugh and cue the damn theremin.

No, I am not a ghostbuster, ghost hunter, psychic medium, or exorcist. I do not do seances, query Ouija boards, or bend spoons. I do not have special cameras or detection equipment. I do not study “ghost photographs.”

No, I do not spend much time in cemeteries, haunted houses, or on old battlefields. I do not tell ghost stories, though I suppose I am a repository for them.



writing papers. If you truly are doing a graduate-level independent study at an accredited institution, forward letters from your dean or faculty advisor, a learning contract, and budget tuition appropriately. I am not Mr. Miyagi.

No, I am not a traveling evangelical entertainer for your church. If you are a church official wishing a consultation on these or other odd occurrences in your midst, letters of reference from your denominational authority or ecclesial association are expected. Psychic powers are not needed to know that prelates of any stripe have tetchy startle responses around the sudden, edgy, and unusual.

Keep in mind that this area of interest is a small subset of what is already my attenuated semi-retirement practice. I am not bored and in need of diversion.

*I am a priest of the Church
who does what pastors have
always done. I help people
interpret and incorporate the
phenomenology of an
encounter with the spiritual
world.*

I am a priest of the Church (albeit a chaplain to psychiatry) who does what pastors have always done. I help people interpret and incorporate the phenomenology of an encounter with the spiritual world. It could be the response to beauty or grotesque, a sudden awareness of the presence of God, an interaction with something that cannot be seen, or an interaction with something that “isn’t there.” I have worked with a lot of mystics. I have also worked with a lot of psychotics.

Some people simply have a more enhanced awareness of the non-material world than others. Some people welcome this awareness; some may need to “turn it down.” It may be a gift, but it tends to creep folks out.

All in the mind? Overactive imagination? Maybe. As Joan of Arc replied to her inquisitors: “How (else) would God speak to me, if not through my imagination?” So, yes, my work takes place as much inside your head as inside your house. My working understanding of the sacred mysteries includes scaffolding from the fields of neurology, psychiatry, psychology, and anthropology.

little interest in the physics of the phenomena and may not endorse their conclusions. Remember, I care for the **living** in their response to spiritual experience. That does not require me to explicate every remarkable thing I encounter or demythologize every metaphor.



I am comfortable and happy to witness or interact with phenomena as needed, but my presence is usually not an ingredient in the recipe that makes things happen. Again, the locus of my work is the pastoral care of folks in the here and now who, minding their own damn business, experience a visit from a deceased person, an all too real vision of a historical event, or frightening, unexplained disturbances in their physical environment. It happens. These experiences in themselves are neither evil nor pathological. Some are welcome, beneficial, and healing. They may be explained or unexplained. They may be hoaxes. But left unsupported, a person involved in such an experience could easily come to doubt their sanity, believe they are in the presence



We could medicate anyone who ever conversed with their dead loved ones. We could barricade the sacred spaces that alter our consciousness. We could destroy our 'thin places' as public safety hazards. If we erased these experiences, we would lose much of our record of literature, art, and poetry. We would turn living in a sacramental universe into dead parody. And, we would be left with a more spiritually impoverished existence than we have already.

As for me and my people: We'll take a few ghosts.

© Howard W. Whitaker, 2019

Published by



Howard W. (Doc) Whitaker
Consulting Clinical Clergy, Beekeeper & Bookseller
Published • 2w

1 article

#ghosts #death #pastoralcare #halloween #paranormal

Like Comment Share

3 · 42 views

Reactions



0 Comments



Add a comment...



Howard W. (Doc) Whitaker

Consulting Clinical Clergy, Beekeeper & Bookseller