

Big, Scary Mess: Clutter and Its Connection To Paranormal Phenomena

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In this nonjudgmental look at the role of clutter in claims of the paranormal, we address the really messy business of sorting out a haunted psyche from a haunted house. It's a delicate problem, and not always just a simple matter of impugning someone's housekeeping skills.

In an episode of one of the many popular cable television shows about ghost hunting, I watched with fascination as an elderly man invites the team and camera crew into his home on the evening of an investigation. Off camera, the abrupt sound of aluminum screen door slamming signals an end to fresh air, for, throughout the home, furniture stands away from the walls by four feet to allow for bundles of clothing and boxes tucked away "out of sight" along the walls. In the small adjoining dining room, one captain's chair is available for seating; the other three chairs are wedged in by stacks of newspaper four feet tall, and the dining table, itself, warehouses a collection of magazines and boxes. On the couch, an afghan molds itself around lumpy piles of unfolded laundry. The client leads the team down a dusty hallway, oddly free of any obstacles, and prompts them to enter the most paranormally active area of the home, his bedroom: seven feet across and as spacious as the cab of a truck. They cannot open the door more than a few feet, because one of the two twin beds teeming with pillows and knitted sweaters is impeding their access; one investigator, in fact, must climb over a pile of dirty laundry to reach a closet door in the corner, said to open on its own and emanate strange sounds. Wrinkled garments gathered at the foot of the closet are matted with cat hair and other filth. Faces begin to wince claustrophobically and one cameraman actually withdraws in a mild panic. The client summons them to his kitchen to examine what he believes to be photo evidence of spirit energy, but the cramped kitchen is as pathologically cluttered as the rest of the house, and they seem to be turned back by the preternaturally unlivable state of the room before they can even bring themselves to enter. Unwashed dishes and half-empty pots of food crest the sink, while factory-sealed boxes of new kitchen appliances crowd the dinette and chairs. Their host flummoxes them with an unexpected remark: he's tidied up for their arrival.

I am thankful that I have virtually avoided this scenario in my several years as a paranormal investigator. However, this is not to say that I don't recognize the pathology of it in a good many of the cases I have investigated. They were by no means housekeeping horrors, but homes suffering from some degree of clutter have been in the majority. This is statistically noteworthy and suggests a pattern that is not merely a crisis of feng shui. In coinciding with claims of the paranormal these cases provide us with an opportunity to examine the potentially significant psychological motives behind certain kinds of hauntings. In other words, there might just be a messy truth underlining some of the phenomena described as paranormal.

Firstly, let me say that I am in no position to judge people who allow one or more rooms of their home to fall into a state of clutter, nor is clutter necessarily synonymous with squalor and filth. Tired and overworked people are just as likely to triage the housework and, out of necessity, let rooms fall into organized chaos. Also, not everyone can afford to live in spaces large enough to accommodate their belongings, so clutter can be the natural consequence of an earnest attempt to make everything fit. Clutter can even be a personal design aesthetic for some people--one that I've been guilty of on many occasions. So, if we are to profit from this discussion, we've got to leave guilt and judgment out of the equation altogether.

Secondly, I in no way wish to imply that a cluttered home should immediately discredit the claims of paranormal activity or the occupants, nor would I jump to the conclusion that compulsive clutterers breed paranormal phenomena. I'm simply stating an objective truth, and I hope to present with equal objectivity and candor a set of common criteria in such cases to inspire further research on the matter. In fact, by far the most common reports of paranormal activity coinciding with disorganized and cluttered environments include paranoia, especially the feeling of being watched; anomalous shadows and "shadow people"; anomalous touching and groping; misplaced, relocated or moving objects; voices; and threatening encounters while occupants are in bed. Furthermore, the most frequent hours of activity in these homes are between 11:30 p.m. and 4:00 a.m. Individually, these are not much different from the reports of paranormal activity recorded in dozens of any other cases. However, the fact that these reports occur repeatedly as a common data set in homes exhibiting pathological disorganization strongly suggests some significant correlation at work, one that might point to normal or paranormal causes. However, honoring the scientific method and basic principles of deductive reasoning, it pays to examine a range of likely "ordinary" causes potentially responsible for such phenomena.

And, some of the causal connections do seem obvious. For example, a great many of these cases include reports of small objects dropping from a height or "jumping" several feet. Using ordinary reasoning, one might surmise that many precariously stacked piles and unrelenting clutter breed an environment where objects fall or become obscured by the clutter. Under the cover of darkness, that disorganization becomes even more frightening and emotionally unmanageable. The clutter and crowded living conditions that are navigable in the light of day become treacherous territory at night. And occupants frequently don't cognize their own living environment as cluttered. It isn't until they are in the quiet and darkness of the early morning hours when, like Young Goodman Brown hurrying through the forest at night, they're not as sure of their own footing--or their own perceptions. The darkness makes a cluttered home, both, physically treacherous and emotionally threatening.

Of course, with darkness also come shadows. Typically, shadows and shadow people do not manifest during the daytime in these cases, which suggests that the physical environment at night is responsible for casting shadows that are misinterpreted as paranormal phenomena. Haphazard piles that were clearly recognizable in the light now cast shadows with larger, distorted proportions that can be interpreted by the brain as faces and bodies (a phenomenon known as "pareidolia"). Additionally, with a crowded and cluttered environment, pockets of absolute darkness become unavoidable—those corners and corridors, doorways and closets, that seem black with despair and creepier than an open tomb.

Another common characteristic of a cluttered home is actually built right into the interior design aesthetic of the occupants: pictures. Lots and lots of pictures. Pictures are extremely important to us; the faces of our loved ones and the art that lines our walls bring us comfort and a feeling of security in our own home; we may have to wander among strangers in the real world, but in our own homes we stroll among a familiar tribe. Walls that are crowded with portraits and photographs, big and small, individually framed or collaged, frequently coincide with reports of an intense feeling that one is being watched. While it is by no means a proven fact, it is a reasonable suspicion that occupants can become habituated to the many faces staring at them during the day, but when the lights are off they realize subconsciously that the eyes are still there in the dark—the walls, in fact, are "alive" with eyes staring them down in the darkness. Clients who dwell in such environments frequently complain about an irrational fear that, not only are they being watched when they enter a room, but also they are being closely shadowed by a presence from behind.

It's not at all surprising to find in the background of such clients a history of serious psychological stress. Again, no judgments here. Stress comes in many forms and degrees and does not automatically denote a traumatized or unstable client, but it is nonetheless so common a feature that one must reconsider whether clutter is the generative cause or the inevitable effect. In recent years, psychologists are finding indisputable correlations between obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and compulsive hoarding. Up to forty percent of people diagnosed with OCD exhibit symptoms of compulsive hoarding. Some speculate that hoarding and habitual clutter are potentially symptoms of OCD, while others debate that the two are separate disorders effected by the same anomalies of biochemistry and psychology. Regardless, the implications of this for claims of paranormal activity are staggering: it means that, for a percentage of people distressed by paranormal activity in their homes, the activity is likely to be a manifestation of their own behavioral issues. And those issues do not have to be extreme in order for the occupants to experience paranormal activity, because even mild obsessive tendencies can manifest themselves as obsessive attention to the home environment, where every little sound or flicker of light challenges the client's ability to control and manage his life or home environment. In such cases, though, we do sometimes discover that the paranormal experiences belie deeper issues, sometimes abuse, in the client's past. Not surprising, then, that reports of paranormal phenomena with psychosexual elements abound in these cases, ranging from groping and other unprivileged touching to sleep paralysis or waking dreams with molestation scenarios.

These theories have their detractors, who are quick to point out that the phenomena are ordinarily reported by entire households and therefore cannot be explained simply by the stress or obsessive tendencies of any single occupant. However, family members, motivated to support the claims of a client whose psyche is delicate, frequently corroborate their loved one's stories with victim scenarios of their own, though these are usually milder and more guarded. In short, they lie to protect. Frequently, an entire household will adopt the pathology of one family member whose trauma manifests psychologically as a compulsively cluttered home during the darkest and most treacherous hours of the night. To friends and relatives who are painfully aware that "something not quite right" is happening in the home of someone they care about, it isn't much of a stretch to assume the disorganized state of the home is really just a marker of that instability. Nonetheless, to spare their loved ones from embarrassment and shame, they too may vaguely corroborate the client's account of paranormal activity as a show of solidarity and support. And, very quickly, alliances are formed based on who believes in the haunting and who does not.

These questionable dynamics and suspicious environmental factors might lead one to pronounce any cluttered home summarily "debunked" if it weren't for the fact that investigations of these homes ordinarily do capture activity of some sort. Although virtually never to the degree and amount clients claim, such evidence is usually compelling enough to warrant anything but a definitive conclusion. This perhaps is one of the most difficult scenarios for investigators: when legitimate activity is occurring in the home, but the client's own pathology embellishes these reports and exacerbates the problem. Then, investigators must differentiate between what is potentially of "genuine" paranormal concern and what is of psychological concern.

I need to digress for a while on the vocational aspects of paranormal investigating, for we carry a profound respect for our clients who come to us in their time of worry and confusion. Like it or not, those of us who are in this to help others work under a Hippocratic-style oath: do no harm. Whether our clients' reports of activity are real or not, it always behooves us to remain objectively sensitive to them. We want to help them, but such cases demonstrate to amateurs like me just how far out of our depth most of us can be. Even if such clients really do have "legitimate" paranormal activity, is it at all possible to differentiate it from a host of psychosomatic experiences that, like the client's cluttered home, are really just manifestations of the occupants' confusion, compulsive tendencies, psychological stress, or paranoia? (I use these terms here only in the most general, non-professional way—the only way I

am qualified to use them, truthfully.) Despite my earnest desire to help such clients, I find myself instantly drawn into a moral dilemma: on the one hand, I risk adding to the client's feeling of persecution by recommending the counsel of a clinical psychologist, but on the other hand I risk adding to the clients' unhealthy delusions by validating their claims. (Sometimes, all it takes for that validation to occur is to show up to the investigation!) Like most, I prefer to err on the side of caution, but it's not always easy to discern whether the paranormal activity causes the client's psychological stress, or the stress causes the activity. Again, it exposes a real deficit in my qualifications to judge.

And good judgment is what this comes down to. Popular TV shows and movies make paranormal investigators look like Special Ops teams who, believing in the clients' claims when others won't, show up with their own theme music ready to whoop some supernatural ass. The true "big guns," however, are the real world experts: medical professionals and qualified technicians, who will save a child from the onset of schizophrenia, or who will recognize the unsafe Carbon Monoxide. Paranormal investigators should be the choice of last resort, when all other possibilities have been addressed first. That's merely good judgment. Those who turn to us first perhaps flatter us, and I've witnessed investigators who thrive on the ego-stroking attention that provides. Truthfully, however, the unfair stigma of psychological ailments as deficiencies of a weak mind holds back many from having open discussions with counselors and clinicians who are far better qualified to diagnose a condition mistaken for paranormal activity. Granted, it is more common these days for paranormal investigation groups to have members with backgrounds in behavioral psychology—people who are qualified to make the call. However, far too many groups are hobbyists who bring as much, if not more, emotional and psychological clutter to the home of someone in need because they don't challenge the client to seek practical help for potentially serious problems when they should. And that strays from any oath to do no harm.

Clutter, they say, has become a common habit among even the most organized of us, for we procrastinate with the sorting of our life baggage. In other words, we hoard because we cannot "let go." In our modern and complicated twenty-first century culture, people with the resources to spare are now enlisting the help of life coaches to assist them in their ambitions and in putting their lives back in order. "De-cluttering" their lives is the acme of these endeavors, because each unnecessary object we hoard is a link in the chain that binds us to our past issues. When holding onto past baggage becomes a way of being, strange behaviors can manifest—behaviors that can range from the conspicuously sloppy to the ostensibly "crazy." When used carefully and ethically, paranormal investigating can become a kind of "life coaching" (the irony of that title notwithstanding). However, it requires prompting clients to take a broader and more pragmatic look at their cluttered psyche; in the process of sorting out the truth from the fiction crouching in the shadows of their crowded rooms, we inevitably encourage them to think more critically about their own lives and circumstances. This can be an uncomfortable responsibility for investigators, who compromise their own good image as heroes. But we're dealing with real people with genuine problems, not just impersonal paranormal phenomena. After all, truth seeking is nothing if not a messy, sometimes cluttered process. We simply roll up our sleeves and try to get the job done with all the clarity and dignity we can offer.