One, Two, Three, Four, There’s a Shadow in Your Dorm:

A Scientific Investigation of Goucher’s Ghost Stories

Part 5:

There is a huge reason why seeing mold on the ceiling made me worried. According to a study from New York’s Clarkson University, as well as claims of many other scientists, many “ghost sightings” are actually caused by chemicals or other pollutants in the supposedly “haunted” locations. Toxic mold is one of them. (Peters). Study lead Shane Rogers, Associate Professor of Civil and Environment Engineering, has expressed his opinion: “Hauntings are very widely reported phenomena that are not well-researched. They are often reported in older-built structures that may also suffer poor air quality. Similarly, some people have reported depression, anxiety, and other effects from exposure to biological pollutants in indoor air. We are trying to determine whether some reported hauntings may be linked to specific pollutants found in indoor air.” These substances include a variety of toxic molds, also known as black molds, that can cause psychological side effects, such as psychosis and hallucinations. The severity of the psychosis depends on the quantity and age of the mold in the building. The types of toxic mold include:

**Aspergillus:**

This mold family includes 160 species, of whom only 16 are hazardous to the organism of a human. However, even these are not considered lethal. When aspergillus grows, it produces toxic and poisonous chemicals. (Toxic Mold Foundation). According to Mayo Clinic, symptoms of aspergillosis, the disease caused by the fungus in aspergillus, include **fever, cough, and asthma that keeps worsening**. (Mayo Clinic). Other, more severe forms of the disease can cause **body chills, difficulty breathing, shock, inability to perform physical activity,** and **increased body secretions, including cough with blood.** (Cleveland Clinic).Aspergillosis **does not** cause hallucinations.

**Stachybotrys:**

The mold **Stachybotrys chartarum** is perhaps the deadliest on the list. Its toxins are capable of causing **liver damage**, **hay fever**, and **pulmantory edema**. The most severe cases include **damage of the nerves and brain cells**, sometimes leading to **death.** (Toxic Mold Foundation). Stachybotrys is a mold that can cause **fear** and **anxiety** among other symptoms, and though hallucinations are not one of them, human imagination can easily **fill in the blanks**. (Winchester) However, this type of mold requires constant moisture in order to grow (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

**Claviceps Purpurea:**

This type of mold is the one that is most commonly associated with “haunted” buildings. Also known as **rye ergot,** exposure to it causes symptoms similar to LSD. These include **severe psychosis**, **seizures**, **violent rage**, **paresthesia** (Unnatural feeling of tingling, pinching, or other form, due to nerve damage) and **hallucinations**. (Black Mold and Mildew Removal). The only problem with this type of mold is that, as implied by its name, it only grows in products containing rye, such as wheat and bread. **Mycotoxins**, the toxins it contains, can also grow in alcohol and several other foods. Also, it is a myth that ergot causes all of these on its own, as special conditions, and sometimes even human intervention, is required for hallucinogens to be formed from it.

Even if there are other types of hallucinogenic black mold that do not depend on foods (Which I am certain, there are), I had not found enough mold in the building for my theory to be proven. The only thing I could do is perform a thorough examination of my surroundings, which was exactly what I did. What I saw completely shocked me, even though it might not have played a role in the mysterious events occurring there. Dirt (and possibly, mold) was found on **vents,** **hatches**, and some parts of the **ceiling**, making it apparent that these areas were cleaned the least often. Dirt was also present **inside** of the building’s **lights**, along with **dead insects**. These details did not indicate any possible impact on human health. However, they still looked like something to be taken as notice by whoever might be in charge. Furthermore, if the interior was in this condition, more serious issues might have been discovered had there been sufficient time for further investigation. However, my stomach was already dreaming of the dinner waiting for me in my dorm, along with homework assignments I still needed to do. But now I knew, or at least believed, that my time in Gamble was not wasted.

And so, I had discovered some really interesting things while conducting this investigation. I proved to myself, and hope to prove to you, that even the most bizarre occurrences always have scientific theories to explain them, even though a complete explanation may never be found. But the investigation and debunking attempt of Goucher College’s paranormal occurrences nevertheless had some extremely interesting results. And now, when it has reached its end, I can freely give the following conclusions and explanations for the events:

**1911-Present Sophie More Wanderings:**

Sophie More’s alleged movements through the buildings are a campus legend with no known eyewitnesses. No one in the Alumni/ae house, or on campus in general, seemed to know anything at all about it, besides former worker Hannah Dowling, who herself said it was an old legend. The letter I had found in the archives, with one professor thanking another for “resurrecting” Sophie, was most certainly an expression of gratitude for not letting the mascot tradition fade away, and passing her on to the next freshman class. An examination of the doll did not reveal any kinetic mechanisms that would explain possible movements, leading me to believe that the shadows and footsteps allegedly reported are likely incidents of optical and acoustic pareidolia, the misidentification of sounds and images for other sounds and images.

**1980’s-Present Apparitions of Deceased Faculty:**

The only explanation that can be given to this is the misidentification of living faculty by others. Although it seems unlikely that it could happen so many times, people’s imagination, along with difficulty of communication (Some of the ghosts were indicated to not respond when called out to) possibly fueled ghostly sightings.

**2000’s-Present Mildred Dunnock Theatre Haunting:**

This is the case that has probably the most definite explanation of all of the on-campus occurrences. The ghosts sightings and electrical disturbances started when the theatre’s electrical and sound systems began having problems. Due to the presence of a huge variety of electronic equipment in the theatre, a circuit overload is almost bound to happen at any moment. Whenever it did happen, circuit breakers went for their assigned task, shutting the system down. It is entirely possible that the circuit is unique to the theatre, which explains why the blackout was exclusive to the theatre. As for the flickering lights, their behavior can be explained by the pressure they receive from working almost unstoppably, during both night and day. The sound system problems could as well be because of the wire being jammed between two sides of the wall, possibly preventing the signal from being sufficiently transmitted. It is very much worth noting that the problems began to happen on a much lesser scale after the entire electrical system was changed in the early 2000’s, as indicated by Ms. Rebecca Free. Today, however, the equipment receives the same pressure, explaining the minor shutdowns that still happen, possibly fueled by a slight issue in the outlets themselves. The opening and closing of doors, knocking over of equipment and cleaning supplies, and other such report, could be attributed to three words: Power of Convincing. When a person is told that a place is haunted, they enter the place with a brain prepared to demonstrate them everything they were told of. A person who does not know about the alleged Blackbox Theatre haunting would likely ignore a falling broom, and blame the flickering of lights on an overload. And while it is not my intention to offend thespians in any way, what I know is that some theater members have a culture of rituals, often based on superstitions. The tradition of saying goodnight to Mildred Dunnock when leaving the theatre in the evening can be taken as an example. This leads us to believe that the sightings of a shadowy white figure believed to be Mildred Dunnock may have in fact been cases of optical pareidolia. Similarly, the “bad smell” attributed to the ghost could have been anything from spilled cleaning supplies to a burned-out light. It is also a possibility that the theatre crew themselves sometimes pulls pranks on each other to break the monotony of things, or to just have a good laugh. Thus, what haunts the Mildred Dunnock Theatre is an electrical misconfiguration, and people’s wild imagination, rather than a playful ghost.

**Tom Gill/Lorelei Everly ghostly presences:**

As mentioned earlier, the experiences described by the two FMS workers very strongly resemble a miscalculation of their body’s position by their own brain due to sudden neuronal disturbances, which often happens spontaneously, without an apparent reason. Furthermore, psychology has proved that people who believe in ghosts are most likely to associate this phenomenon with the paranormal. The voices mentioned by Ms. Everly were quite possibly acoustic pareidolia, or the passing of another conversation through the walls. Evidence to this is that many of the walls in various rooms are thick enough for sounds to pass through them extremely quickly. As I said before, I do believe in the spiritual world, but the scientific facts found offer a very plausible explanation, without the need to learn more about the plantation that existed on our campus grounds during slavery times.

**October 2011 Archive Door Incident:**

The students most likely fell victims to a jammed lock, which only opened when faculty member Kristine Krieger pushed the door open, thus freeing it from an uncomfortable positions. Evidence for this occurred when I examined images of locks like the ones that could potentially be installed in the archives. Further examination was not possible due to the 2019/20 Coronavirus pandemic.

**2018 Brashear/Fernandez Affair:**

Even though the 2019/20 Coronavirus Pandemic and quarantine prevented me from examining Gamble 314 at least once, Lilian Fernandez and Devin Brashear most likely fell victims to acoustic pareidolia, blaming the movement of a ghostly chair on a sound very similar to it. It is also very likely that they were unaware of the presence of someone else on campus, who was doing late night modifications. A forgotten, burned out, or automatic turned off light possibly fueled their imagination further.

**Katherine Shane, March 2020 Door Handle Incident, and Other Reports:**

The bottle knocked over in Katherine Shane’s former dorm room was likely the effect of wind, coming from either a small crack in the interior of the room, or from the campus air filtering system, in the case that the room has one. The system is very powerful, and, based on my own experiences, can knock over some of the heaviest things. Ms. Shane herself said that it was possibly a “wind issue”. The “slam” she heard on her desk could have been any other sound, such as a neighboring student slamming their hand on the very thick wall. Therefore, this, along with all other sounds she heard, could be explained with pareidolia, especially since the “strange sounds” weren’t identified or compared to anything. The “force” she claimed attempted to open her door was likely a fellow student mistaking the room for his own, or, at the very worst, a prankster. The act that she did not see any shadows does not make it any more mysterious, as the ability to see them depends on where each person is standing at, their distance, the opening beneath the door, and the time of the day. As for my own experience of seeing a door handle move, I have a much harder time explaining it because I saw it with my own eyes, and because of how vivid it was. However, the explanation I could offer would be a combination of imagination, wind, a loose door handle, and, most likely, my easy-to-be-convinced personality. I likely saw a loose door handle, and convinced myself that it is a ghost. Just like this, many of the reports of shutting doors and falling supplies can be explained by imaginative people attributing common everyday incidents to supernatural forces.

I must now clarify that these are my own interpretations of the investigation outcomes, and the reader is free to interpret them their own way. However, at this point in time, I am myself contempt. I had lived through an exciting adventure, meeting many people, just like the characters of the show I was inspired by. I had been through almost everything they usually go through: Listening to stories, interviewing witnesses, collecting and analyzing evidence, consulting specialists, taking tests, and even having a possible encounter myself. Furthermore, I had found possible scientific explanations to almost all of the things I was told about. All of them, except Sophie More. Her alleged 2017-2019 disappearance still remains a mystery. What is even more peculiar is that, just like with Sophie’s supposed “promenades”, no one besides Ms. Dowling seemed to recall the disappearance. Some even recall seeing the doll in its case during that time. The only explanation I can possibly give to this final mystery is that there was a confusion with the dates, and Sophie had disappeared earlier. But Ms. Dowling only started working here in 2016. False memories? How so? And even if it did happen, where did the doll go?

After my adventure at Gamble, I was determined to finally solve this bizarre riddle. But I was too hopeful. By March of 2020, the COVID-19 virus had spread all over the world, causing schools, churches, colleges, and many other establishments to shut down. I had hoped to conclude any necessary collection of evidence, such as taking samples of the possible mold in Gamble, and solving the Sophie More mystery after break was over. However, disappointment came over me when it was announced that Goucher would remain closed for the rest of the year, thus aborting my entire investigation a leap away from its ultimate conclusion. I felt anxious that I hadn’t done my absolute best, especially on the Sophie More case. Only after I arrived home did it cross my mind to request camera footage of the doll from Public Safety. Any random footage of her in 2018 would ultimately prove that she did not disappear during that time. But public safety does not appear to have an email address, and contacting them on the phone for something besides an emergency might harm people who have actual, imminent problems. Perhaps I’ll revisit this some other day. Some other year maybe. Perhaps, if I try enough, the mystery of the doll that disappeared will, eventually, be solved. But for now, unfortunate circumstances have forced me to put a period on my efforts, at the same time giving believers in the paranormal a chance to speculate.

It is the last day of my two-month long investigation. I am sitting at my desk at home, writing the final report, and I want to be completely honest. I am still unsure about many of my explanations. I am not the protagonist of the show that inspired me, arresting bad guys and analyzing toxins. But there is one thing true in this entire affair: The explanations I have given are entirely possible. Some of them may be remotely possible, and carry a lot of mismatches. But still, they are possible. The thing with us humans is, we always try to explain everything. And that is because we have a blinding illusion of control that makes us think we are the masters of this universe. That we know everything. And so, even when we encounter a problem we cannot solve, we go through incredible struggles to adjust it to our understanding. Although this happens to all of us, this illusion of rein over the world is very prominent at a young age, explaining the spiritual and religious struggles of many teenagers. See? Even I did it. Right now. I wanted an explanation for a struggle I often have, so I offered it. Both to myself, and to you. But what many of us often fail to understand is that there are things in this world we may never get to figure out. And that while we are here establishing our domination over the world, inanimate objects might, after all, be disappearing into the great beyond, just to remind us that there will always be that one thing we missed.