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Current Research and Insights

**Poltergeists of the Woods**

**In Search of Hungry Ghosts**

**Asexual Human Reproduction**

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Alejandro Peralta Soler, MD, PhD

# Is the Viral Pandemic an Evolutionary Step Towards Asexual Human Reproduction?



**C**ould humans be evolving towards asexual reproduction? The hypothesis proposed here is that this is an evolutionary process of the species, and that the events leading to human asexual reproduction are being interpreted as technological and social advances, or disease events.

Biologists generally consider sexual reproduction as an advantageous form of reproduction compared to asexual reproduction with the argument that the mixing of genes from separate individuals will provide better opportunities for adaptation, survival tools for the progeny, and the opening of new evolutionary possibilities. However, asexual reproduction requires less energy, is fast, can occur in different environments, and requires only a single individual. Overall, asexually reproducing organisms have reached much longer survival and greater adaptability than sexually reproducing organisms. Genetic recombination in viruses, bacteria, and other organisms can produce astonishing spreading “success,” although obviously there are “failures” as well, and extinctions of entire species can occur in the process of genetic modifications.

The development of sexual and asexual reproduction systems is the result of selective forces over time, space, environmental conditions, and population limitations (Otto, 2008). Although sexual reproduction is widespread in eukaryotic organisms, the option of asexual reproduction by parthenogenesis is present in many animal species, including bees, sharks, and Komodo dragons, and a few eukaryotic species have completely lost the ability to reproduce sexually, such as *Bdelloidea* rotifers and whiptail lizards. However, asexual reproduction has not been described in primates.

The proposal of this paper is that humans are currently evolving towards asexual reproduction, and sexual reproduction could become extinct. Alternatively, sexual reproduction

could remain as an option, as in other species, depending on resources and environmental pressures. This has been previously proposed by astrophysicist John Gribbin and biologist Jeremy Cherfas in *The Mating Game* (1984) and in an earlier edition of their book entitled *The Redundant Male*. It is our contention, they wrote, “that the human male may have outlived his usefulness and could, in evolutionary terms, be redundant.” The question is why are males still around and playing a decisive role in reproduction of so many species, including humans? The answer may not be obvious for the individuals participating in the process. However, humans can generate rapid and profound modifications in environmental and phenotypical features, as well as in social behaviors, which could eventually speed the natural evolutionary time frame.

The direction towards asexual reproduction, as in many evolutionary changes, can occur in multiple steps. As in any biological process, the steps are not uniform or unidirectional. The significant overall decline in human fertility (The ESHRE Capri Workshop Group, 2001) is a tendency that suggests a possible irreversible evolutionary mechanism rather than a circumstantial phenomenon. In this paper three processes are proposed as significant steps towards asexual reproduction: technological developments, sociopolitical movements, and a viral pandemic.

## Technological developments

At the same time as a global decline in fertility rates, humans are developing at a very fast pace new forms of interaction and contact through non-corporeal media, which have changed dramatically our sexual and reproductive behaviors (da Fonseca, 1992; Cookingham and Ryan 2015). Virtual communication may be playing a fundamental role towards asexual reproduction. Eventually, virtual sex may become more prevalent than organic sex (Ciocca et al., 2020). Although sexuality in humans has many more functions than reproduction, the rapidly evolving technology will soon have a significant impact on decreasing human sexual reproduction.

In addition, new biotechnologies will eventually facilitate the actual process of female only reproduction. Although the first claim of human cloning in the laboratory (Hwang et al., 2004) turned out to be false, the authors were the first to unexpectedly generate human embryonic cells by experimental human parthenogenesis (Williams et al., 2007; de Carli and Pereira, 2017). This feasible technology was later corroborated (Revazova et al., 2008). Interestingly, in an animal model, experimental parthenogenesis resulted in increased longevity (Kawahara et al., 2009). In humans,

increased longevity appears to have predated the process of asexual reproduction. Thus, the possibility of reproduction by human females alone, without male intervention, may eventually become a reality.

The impediments for a full switch in that direction is generally considered a reflection of our unique capacity for creating rules and moral imperatives over our animal base (Weasel and Jensen 2005). This argument guides the idea that humans can reach behavioral levels that are somewhat beyond nature. The general perception is that humans are the commanding force driving the development of technologies and behavior. However, human behavior, including technological and social developments, can interact with biological processes and be mutually modeled (de Winter, 1984; Whiten et al., 2017).

### Sociopolitical movements

Dramatic sociological events in recent years have resulted in close examination and generalized rejection of the use of sex as a tool for power and oppression (Radu, 2018). The movements against it are exposing the abuse of the powerful over the vulnerable using sex as a form of domination. Although violent sex behavior is still a complex issue for management in many societies, under the current social pressure it would eventually become extinct, and the process would lead towards gender equality for social and reproductive rights. As previously proposed, female reproductive choices in humans are part of an evolutionary process that tends to minimize sexual dimorphism and gender differences between the sexes, and consequently reduce masculinity (Berman, 2003). Decreased male participation in human reproduction is also exemplified phenotypically by a progressive loss of sperm production and Y chromosome active genetic content (Sykes, 2003). Sexuality between males and females, including sex for reproduction, would eventually be entirely under the control of females, and may ultimately contribute towards female only asexual reproduction.

### A viral pandemic

The analysis of diseases by health professionals is often clouded by the lack of understanding of large scale evolutionary biological processes (Peralta Soler and Soler de Peralta, 2005). The current viral pandemic is rapidly dictating new forms of physical interaction and could change irreversibly our sexual and reproductive methods (Stidham et al. 2020). The fast spreading impact of the pandemic on human behavior, including human isolation and the resort of communicating through virtual media, adds a powerful evolutionary pressure. Therefore, the current viral pandemic, together with already advanced technologies and social developments, could become a major contributory factor towards asexual reproduction in humans. The question should be not be *if* but *when* and *how* it will occur.

The potential advantage of asexual reproduction over the current sexual reproduction for the species is unknown and unpredictable. In the scale of long-term evolution, the individuals participating in any species undergoing evolutionary

steps, including humans, cannot possibly predict the future of the species or the physical and social environments in which the changes would take effect.

Asexual reproduction forms include fission, which is exclusive of unicellular organisms; fragmentation, which is common in starfish, fungi and worms; and budding, typical of yeasts and vegetative reproduction of plants. Given the structure of humans, asexual reproduction would be more closely related to parthenogenesis or cloning. These processes could become either facultative, as in mayflies, Komodo dragons, snakes, and sharks, or obligate, as in some lizards (Otto, 2008). Although technologies developed by humans would be required to generate parthenogenetic or cloned humans, the ultimate result of becoming an asexually reproducing species may not be under the control of individuals within the species. In adaptations resulting in phenotypical changes, neither the species as a whole or any of its individuals consciously control the process. Humans as well may not be able to control the full scale of pressures, including technologies, social advances, or pandemic infections, which may be needed for the species to evolve biologically, including the process of becoming asexual reproducers.



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## On “A Case of the Reincarnation Type?”

I read with interest David Moncrief’s article in *EdgeScience* No. 41. He describes a visit to a psychic who gave information that helped him to appreciate what he feels to be subliminal memories of a previous life. He states that he is not aware of psychics having given such information on other occasions, but actually there are a quite few psychics who have given veridical past-life readings and mediums who have relayed information in relation to reincarnation. I discuss all that in my book *Signs of Reincarnation*.

The psychic identified David as the reincarnation of his uncle Virgil, who was paraplegic for the last several years of his life. Now, we see all sorts of physical carryovers in reincarnation cases; it is not just a matter of birthmarks matching fatal wounds. Imad Elawar, from *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* by Ian Stevenson, recalled being bedridden at the end, unable to walk, and was surprised when he found himself able to walk again. Other case subjects have walked with a similar gait or limped like the person whose life they recall. So, I wonder, when David was young, did he have any difficulty walking, or does he recall anything in relation to that?

If the psychic’s identification is correct, David’s experiences are a good example of how we can be affected by previous lives even when we don’t have conscious memories of those lives.

*James G. Matlock, Ph.D.*

*Research Fellow*

*Parapsychology Foundation*

### P. D. Moncrief replies:

This is a logical question. The short answer is “no,” I’ve never experienced back trouble, walking problems, to an unusual extent. I had a long stride when walking and was persuaded to go out for track. In early middle age I began to have back pain, which was mostly muscular, and have had some back discomfort more and more. In a bipedal species, this is rather common, especially when midsection bulge occurs. The odds are heavy that most people suffer from this, sometimes to an extreme extent. But I have never had those serious pains.



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Joshua Cutchin

# WILDNISGEIST: Poltergeists of the Woods?

**O**n March 13, 2005, a wife hiking with her husband in Benton County, Oregon, heard a growling sound—“low, deep, like a vibrating growl or snort”—that stopped her in her tracks. After cautiously taking a few steps, the couple saw a baseball-sized rock fly onto the path from a commotion in the brush. “About ¼ mile along the trail we hear a loud ‘whomp, whomp’ like wood against wood sound ahead of us up on the hill,” the witness wrote. “My husband describes this sound as a person hitting a tree quite hard with a large log.”

Because the incident took place in an area with a rich history of Bigfoot sightings, the case was reported to the Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization (BFRO), which deemed it a “Class B Report.”<sup>1</sup>

The BFRO defines Class B Reports as “where a possible sasquatch was observed at a great distance or in poor lighting conditions and *incidents in any other circumstance that did not afford a clear view of the subject are considered Class B Reports*” [emphasis mine].<sup>2</sup>

In many Class B Reports, witnesses fail to see anything resembling a large, bipedal primate in the forest. They instead report activity suggestive of, but not explicitly attributable to, Bigfoot: tossed rocks, wood knocks, vocalizations, anomalous odors, etc. (While not universal nomenclature within the Bigfoot community, the term “Class B Reports” is used herein to indicate sightings where this behavior—sans Bigfoot—is observed.)

But perhaps it is hasty to attribute such activity solely to Bigfoot, especially when the creature is not clearly observed—if an unseen assailant throws a rock in the woods, *it simply cannot be conclusively labeled a Bigfoot report.*

Intellectual honesty demands that we consider that phenomena other than Bigfoot might be responsible.

## Wildnisgeist

The end of 1951 wrecked Anna Duryba. The Ukrainian immigrant had invited her 14-year-old niece, Kathleen, to winter with her in Chilliwack, British Columbia, only to find her tiny four-room cottage under attack. Something began violently smashing outer walls and breaking windows. Countless visitors and neighbors heard the rappings, sometimes as many as 30 in one evening.

A brief respite in the siege occurred when Duryba, at the urging of her priest, vacated the premises for ten days. The activity, however, picked up right where it left off upon her return.

Sheriff’s office employee A.J. Edwards reported:

I have heard the sounds on four occasions. In each case they have come as rapid, violent rappings on the outer wall near a window. All persons in the house were within my range of vision on these occasions, with the exception of Miss Duryba’s teen-age niece, who was asleep in her bedroom. Each time I ran outside, but could see no one, although the house was fully floodlit . . .

On the four occasions when I heard the sounds, they came between 8:00 p.m. and midnight. I am told they have been heard regularly during the day, as well as at night. Windows have been broken on several occasions, including one kitchen window which was broken after it had been protected by a wire screen and sheet of plastic.<sup>3</sup>



The case—“The Chilliwack Poltergeist”—shares similarities with quite a few Class B Reports. Coming from the German *poltern*, “to knock,” and *geist*, “spirit,” *poltergeists* have been reported for millennia around the world, wreaking havoc in victims’ homes.

“In earlier times, reports of poltergeist disturbances cite primarily rock-and dirt-throwing, flying objects, loud noises, strange lights, and other apparitions, terrible smells, rapping, physical and sexual assaults, and shrieks,” wrote paranormal investigator and author Rosemary Ellen Guiley. In the modern era, these hauntings include electrical disturbances and, more rarely, physical attacks. Such infestations typically begin and end abruptly, rarely exceeding a few months.<sup>4</sup>

Poltergeists were historically blamed upon demons and spirits of the dead, regularly manifesting during spiritualist séances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Beginning in the 1930s, contemporary parapsychologists like Nandor Fodor proposed that many cases were actually the result of a living agent, often an adolescent female, whose stress or sexual tension generated psychokinetic activity. This attitude is largely retained in contemporary paranormal circles and does not necessarily conflict with earlier reports of poltergeist behavior during séances—after all, these ceremonies centered around a single individual as well, typically a female medium. The poltergeist seems tied to individuals, rather than locales.<sup>5</sup>

Since poltergeists are unilaterally reported in or around homes, it is obvious why few parapsychologists have ever entertained the notion of a wilderness poltergeist—or, to coin a phrase, a *wildnisgeist*. Considering the idea opens up a new realm of possibilities; in many cases, the only thing differentiating poltergeist cases from Class B Reports is their setting. Could the same phenomena—taking place in an outdoor environment, where it is less likely to be labeled as such—explain both poltergeist cases and Class B Reports where Bigfoot is not observed?

The comparison between Bigfoot encounters and poltergeists has been drawn in the past. Fred Beck, survivor of the infamous 1924 “Ape Canyon” attack where multiple Bigfoot allegedly besieged a cabin near Mount St. Helens, Washington, perceived his attackers as spirits, the accompanying thumps on the cabin wall as poltergeist behavior.<sup>6</sup> In later years, cryptozoologists flirted with the connection as well. In a presentation at the 2001 Australian “Myths & Monsters” Conference, Tony Healy reported:

... three cases in our files suggest our Furry Friends might also have something in common with poltergeists. For example, in 1946, when George Nott and his family moved into a long-abandoned property near Wilcannia, they heard thumping sounds in the ceiling. Doors swung open, objects flew, and so many pebbles fell on the roof that they “sounded like a heavy shower of rain.” At the same time as this classic poltergeist phenomena, huge human-like tracks appeared in the yard and a large, very irate hairy ape-man began to invade the house, once trying to drag Mrs. Nott outside.<sup>7</sup>

Other researchers brave enough to broach this taboo subject include Greg Newkirk, Dana Newkirk,<sup>8</sup> Linda Godfrey,<sup>9</sup> and Loren Coleman.

“Rock-tossing poltergeists are frequently reported in the archives to be found in many kinds of non-cryptozoological studies,” Coleman wrote in 2008. “Should old and new accounts of stone-throwing poltergeists be re-evaluated as possible evidence of Bigfoot activity, or should unseen ‘Sasquatch’ or ‘Windigo’ said to be throwing rocks be re-evaluated as poltergeists?”<sup>10</sup>

To reiterate: none of this suggests Bigfoot do not exist, nor that they are not responsible for many Class B Reports. Rather, the implication is that we may simply ascribe more activity to them than they deserve. While similarities between poltergeist phenomena and Bigfoot have been noted in passing, few have carefully examined their depth, and even fewer seriously entertained the wildnisgeist concept.

## Generalities

English researchers Alan Gauld and A.D. Cornell were the first to conduct a large-scale analysis of poltergeist infestations in the late 1970s. After examining 500 international cases from 1800, they found 63 points of commonality, including:

- 64% of cases featured the manipulation of small objects, including movement, disappearances, and *apports*, or spontaneous transference from one location to another;
- 58% peaked after nightfall;
- 48% involved rapping sounds;
- 36% included the movement of heavy furniture;
- 24% exceeded 365 days;
- 16% featured communication between poltergeist and apparent agent;
- 12% involved opening/closing doors/windows.

Gauld and Cornell also determined, in cases where the activity centered on a human agent, they were most likely female and less than 20 years old.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting the propensity for poltergeists to focus on an *individual*, rather than a location, might explain the problems inherent in repeat witnesses, who seem to have all the luck encountering Bigfoot activity while other researchers go their entire lives empty handed—perhaps the behavior they observe is generated by the observer, rather than an exterior source.

A few additional points of comparison between poltergeist and Bigfoot experiences immediately emerge from Gauld and Cornell’s study. For example, while no shortage of daytime encounters exists, many Bigfoot reports—Class B and otherwise—occur nocturnally. A calculation by Cliff Barackman using researcher John Green’s database of sighting indicates “that Bigfoots are probably 100 times more active at night!”<sup>12</sup>

Stephanie Quick analyzed the sightings of Bigfoot researcher Claudia Ackley through the poltergeist lens:

During a 7 day camping trip undertaken to try

and learn more about Bigfoot, Ackley and her fellow researchers observe a variety of phenomena. The phenomena start with sounds growls and screams, continue with stones thrown by an unseen agency and the leader's dog staring at an invisible presence. Finally the group sees and records a hairy hominid and later finds two humanoid footprints. Poltergeist infestations tend to follow a similar pattern of escalation of phenomena—from sounds through rock throwing/manipulation of small objects to full body apparitions.

Poltergeist infestations have also resulted in large footprints and “arts and craft” type creations using materials found in the home (for example pin hole writing on paper) which to my mind recall the “stick structures” observed by Bigfoot researchers.

Many poltergeists tend to crystallize around a “focus” who is present for phenomena. The focus may be followed by poltergeist phenomena to different locations, in the same way that Ackley sees Bigfoot and detects other Bigfoot phenomena in a number of different settings over the years. In the last sighting, Ackley is accompanied by her two daughters. The eldest daughter, who Snapchats the creature, at age 14 is pubescent as are the classic poltergeist focii.<sup>13</sup>

Typical poltergeist agents are young and female, a data point resonant with Bigfoot lore. Legends universally describe the creature's keen interest in young women and children,<sup>14</sup> even abducting them as in the (possibly apocryphal) case of 17-year-old Serephine Long.<sup>15</sup> This attraction to both youth and women remains a minor meme in the Bigfoot community: during the 2000 collection of the celebrated Skookum cast, investigators broadcast recordings of children playing and infants crying to attract Bigfoot,<sup>16</sup> while other researchers employ feminine products hung from trees as bait, convinced female pheromones attract the creatures.<sup>17</sup>

Poltergeists attach to female youths; youth and females attract Bigfoot.

## Throwing Stones

Among known animals, primates, especially chimpanzees, are the only ones that exhibit stone-throwing prowess.<sup>18</sup> In Bigfoot sightings, this behavior is consistent throughout the historical record.<sup>19</sup> At the same time—to use an old adage—all fish swim, but not everything that swims is a fish. While Bigfoot throw stones, it is possible not every stone thrown comes from Bigfoot.

Class B Reports regularly describe stones tossed by invisible assailants. In 2005 a Virginia policeman heard a loud vocalization from a distant ridge while camping. Once his comrades fell asleep, he began to notice repetitive clicking sounds; though they were coming from pebbles bouncing off a nearby picnic table, he saw no one throwing them. The following morning, he distinctly heard “Russian or Eastern European and an Asian language of some kind” drifting from the woods.<sup>20</sup>

Rocks striking homes are attributed to Bigfoot without

a second thought to poltergeists. An elderly Florida couple reported an eerie cry and foul odor near their property in 2013, culminating in multiple stones hitting their home and outdoor furniture. Despite Bigfoot's absence, the report nonetheless found its way to BFRO.<sup>21</sup>

As noted, incorporeally tossed objects, especially stones, usually indicate a poltergeist infestation. Beginning in 1965, a family in Jaboticabal, Brazil, endured a rain of bricks inside their home, followed by a shower of stones—312 in total.<sup>22</sup> In such cases, the stones are usually “warm to the touch.” The famous 1998 Humpty Doo poltergeist of Australia produced rocks “not just warm, but very hot” when held by witnesses.<sup>23</sup> Some contend this is because objects traversing other dimensions gather heat.<sup>24</sup>

During 1978's Minerva, Ohio, Bigfoot sightings, the Cayton family repeatedly had stones thrown at their roof from the ridge behind their home by an unseen assailant. Roofs, it should be noted, are prime targets for poltergeists: in late 1921, stones began striking warehouses in Chico, California, culminating in a March 9, 1922, shower of “rocks ranging in size from peas to baseballs” on the roof of a building owned by J.W. Charge.<sup>25</sup>

## Rappings & Prints

Raps are a hallmark of poltergeists. In the 1661 Drummer of Tedworth case, the Mompesson family was plagued for weeks not only by drumbeats but also raps, apports, disembodied voices, apparitions, and foul smells.<sup>26</sup> In the 19th century, the Epworth Rectory poltergeist wracked an English home with raps and knocks so hard they shook the very walls.<sup>27</sup> Raps are commonly interpreted as spirit communication during séances—in fact, such activity at the Hydesville, New York, home of the Fox Sisters birthed the entire spiritualist movement.<sup>28</sup>

It takes little imagination to draw comparisons between wood knocks—sounds of wood-on-wood in the forest, speculated to be Bigfoot communication of some kind—and the rappings of poltergeists. A more direct comparison can be made when Bigfoot are accused of assaulting witnesses' homes with knocks and slaps. In the aforementioned Minerva Monster case, for example, the Caytons reported regular pounding and taps on their outside walls and windows.<sup>29</sup>

This interference extends to rooftops. In 1973, a Monogahela, Pennsylvania family reported sulfurous odors, shadowy apparitions, and odd screams in the area around their home. On the evening of August 24, they distinctly heard “something heavy walking on the roof.”<sup>30</sup>

Even beyond showers of stones, similar rooftop thumps are not uncommon in poltergeist cases. The 1878 poltergeist of Amherst, Nova Scotia, centered around 19-year-old Esther Teed, whose presence generated rapping sounds as if someone were slamming the roof with a sledgehammer; no culprit was ever observed.<sup>31</sup>

Critics will counter that Bigfoot, unlike poltergeists, leave behind clear trace evidence of their domestic attacks. In 1962, for example, a muddy 11-inch handprint was left on the side



of a home slapped in Fort Bragg, California.<sup>32</sup> To be pedantic, there is no proof Bigfoot left that print—beyond that argument, poltergeist infestations can also generate anomalous footprints. In 1956 London’s Battersea Poltergeist left a single, large footprint in white powder spilled across the floor<sup>33</sup>—the lack of a path in or out of the powder brings to mind how lines of some suspected Bigfoot tracks abruptly end in the middle of empty fields.<sup>34</sup>

### Disembodied Voices

In the mid-1970s, Bigfoot researchers Ron Morehead and Alan Berry recorded a series of peculiar vocalizations in California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains after leaving a microphone on a branch near their cabin. Morehead’s recordings, dubbed the “Sierra Sounds,” seem to feature multiple individuals grunting, snuffling, incomprehensively conversing, even bickering; after examining the sounds, it was the opinion of a retired United States Navy crypto-linguist that they represent an unknown language spoken by nonhuman entities.<sup>35</sup>

Disembodied voices are a hallmark of poltergeist infestation. In the 19th century, Ballechin House of Perthshire, Scotland, suffered from a variety of poltergeist phenomena, including, knocks, raps, odd odors, the sound of explosions, and (like the voices of the Sierra Sounds) “the sound of people quarrelling.”<sup>36</sup> Similar vocalizations were heard in the Drummer of Tedworth case.<sup>37</sup> In one of the most famous modern reports, a disembodied voice calling itself Gef—claiming to be a mongoose—took up residence in an Isle of Man home in 1931, chatting at length with the family and lending an unseen hand to household duties. While on its face absurd, parapsychologists widely regard the case as a deceptive poltergeist manifestation, rather than a talking animal.<sup>38</sup>

Class B witnesses report a variety of auditory evidence. Vocalizations and noises shared between poltergeists and Bigfoot include heavy breathing, whistles, heavy movement and laughter, scratching and tearing, and animal noises.

### Odors & Animal Reactions

Foul smells, often compared to hydrogen sulfide (rotten eggs, feces, decay, etc.) are common to both Bigfoot and poltergeist reports.

Joseph Glanvill, witness to the Drummer of Tedworth case, claimed the spirit “left a sulphurous smell behind it, which was very offensive.”<sup>39</sup> The 1974 poltergeist of Bridgeport, Connecticut, generated an odor compared to burning matches and sulfur.<sup>40</sup> In a more modern example, an Englishwoman allegedly cursed by a Bantu shaman returned from South Africa to find her home afflicted by a poltergeist that produced “an unpleasant smell, as of a rotting corpse . . . sulphur.”<sup>41</sup>

Any cryptozoologist will recognize similar odors in Bigfoot literature. The stench of hydrogen sulfide (commonly conflated with sulfur) appears alongside smells of skunk, musk, wet dog, decay, and body odor both in clear sightings and Class B Reports alike. In 1975, a witness and friend noticed “a rotten egg sulphur smell that was over powering [sic]” while

trapping near Waupun, Wisconsin; despite no other Bigfoot activity, it was reported to the BFRO.<sup>42</sup> In another case from 1976, a California witness noticed large footprints outside his cabin accompanied by a smell like a wet dog crossed with rotten eggs.<sup>43</sup>

Animals react identically in other anomalous encounters—including poltergeist cases. The Epworth Rectory Poltergeist so troubled the reverend’s manservant that he took the family mastiff to his room; the first evening in his care, the dog barked violently before the noises began, only to whimper and flee on each subsequent evening.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, watchdogs at Calvados Castle turned to whimpering messes when brought in to scare off potential intruders.<sup>45</sup>

### Apports & Disapports

Though bears and raccoons are most likely to blame for food stolen in the outdoors, some activity brings this assumption into question. Commonly practiced among habituators (those who allege Bigfoot inhabit their property), gifting involves leaving objects outside in the hope of attracting Bigfoot activity. Though mundane wildlife activity may be responsible when gifts like food are taken outright, this likelihood is rendered impossible when items are left in exchange. In one particularly compelling example, habituators on a Washington property—regularly troubled by thrown stones, wood knocks, and suspicious cairns appearing overnight—left a large bag of apples hanging from a tree in 2011. The following morning several apples were taken and, in their place, ten dead field mice were found in woven blades of grass. Suffice to say, this behavior is not attributable to bears or raccoons.<sup>46</sup>

Such activity not only shares strong similarities with Celtic faerie belief (wherein offerings would be left out for helpful spirits), but is also a chief feature in both poltergeist cases and séances. In parapsychology circles, objects that seemingly appear out of thin air are known as *apports*. Every alleged Bigfoot gift has precedent in the psychic literature as an apport: food, fruits, stones, even dead rodents, once produced by 19th century medium Eusapia Palladino.<sup>47</sup>

### Electrical Interference & Anomalous Lights

While other attributes observed in Class B Reports can be chalked up to unseen flesh-and-blood Bigfoot lobbing stones, wood knocking, and vocalizing, it is much more difficult—nigh impossible—to attribute electrical interference to a relict hominoid, yet field researchers nonetheless experience such difficulties.

Such effects are simply expected in poltergeist reports. Researchers investigating a poltergeist infestation in Keene, New Hampshire, recorded “abnormally rapid battery drainage,” an effect noted by ghost hunters in a variety of purportedly haunted locales. Other electrical interference is more dramatic; in one case from 1990s Glasgow, a poltergeist sufferer regularly had lights switch themselves on and off in his flat, in addition to the failure of two refrigerators, five or six vacuums, six stereos, eight televisions, and countless light bulbs.<sup>48</sup>

“Ghost hunters have long lamented the strange ability of spirits to kill electronic equipment, whether it be draining fresh batteries in a matter of minutes, causing camera malfunctions during critical moments, or even straight up frying electronics,” Greg Newkirk wrote. “Turns out, this is something many Bigfoot hunters have experienced as well. In fact, back in 1993, the Bigfoot Research Project, the first serious attempt to capture Sasquatch on trail cameras, made use of a direct video feed fed into an off-site VHS recorder, and was plagued by mysterious problems with its electronic gear, causing numerous issues when it came to capturing evidence.”<sup>49</sup>

Even more confounding are examples where anomalous orbs of light are recorded in sites of heavy Bigfoot activity. As with reports of electronic interference, most cryptozoologists only open up about such peculiarities in confidence. “Ghost lights” are regularly seen on Bragg Road in East Texas’s Big Thicket, an area famous for Bigfoot sightings.

Correlations, as it is famously said, *do not* mean causation—but they may imply a link. In February 2016 Wes Germer, host of the popular *Sasquatch Chronicles* podcast, and his brother revisited the area of their 2012 sighting, only to observe “strange balls of light flying around” the woods near Yacolt.

Anomalous lights are part and parcel for ghost activity, including poltergeist cases. Strange lights were seen in Borley Rectory, witnesses saw “glimmering lights that appeared in the children’s bedroom” in the Drummer of Tedworth case, etc.<sup>50</sup>

As with other signs of poltergeist activity, mediums and séances generate anomalous light phenomena as well. British medium Stella Cranshaw was surrounded by poltergeist phenomena into her 20s, including the movement of small objects, rappings, and flashes of light.<sup>51</sup> At a methodical series of séances in Norfolk, England, in the 1990s—known as The Scole Experiment—researcher Montague Keen recorded lights that would “dart around at great speed and perform elaborately patterned dances in front of us, including perfect, sustained circles executed at high velocity and with a precision which appeared inconsistent with manual manipulation.”<sup>52</sup>

## Counterarguments

Thrown stones, raps, disembodied voices, anomalous odors, frightened pets, apports, electrical interference, and anomalous lights—we are left with a compelling list of similarities, but it is unclear exactly what, if anything, they mean. Before bridging that gap, let us first examine several substantial counterarguments.

Considering the alternative concept of the wildnisgeist renders one vulnerable to charges of “cherry picking” by critics, who might argue such cases are selected only because they fit the hypothesis. It is true the Class B Reports cited here have been selected because they fit specific criteria; however, they represent but a small number of a large subset of alleged Bigfoot cases, and as such deserve scrutiny removed from the baggage of the Bigfoot community. Further, the intention is not to work backwards from an alternative idea, but rather to propose a means of combating confirmation bias and keeping

assumptions in check; to not answer one unknown with another unknown, but to rather open up another path of inquiry when investigating anomalous activity in the wilderness. In this sense we are not cherry-picking, but instead attempting to view Class B Reports from a different perspective.

A major flaw in the wildnisgeist idea is the absence of spontaneous fires, a major signifier of poltergeist activity, in Class B Reports. For example, the Amherst Poltergeist frequently combusted old newspapers,<sup>53</sup> and the Borley Rectory Poltergeist may have actually burned the building down<sup>54</sup>—if any comparable precedent exists in Bigfoot literature, it is highly underreported (in fact, some legends refer to Bigfoot as “Indians Without Fire”).<sup>55</sup> While areas with high numbers of sightings are occasionally ravaged by wildfire, it is specious to assume Bigfoot starts them when plenty of rational explanations exist.

Another stumbling block is a lack of anomalous writing. Poltergeist cases often, but not always, feature writing from unknown sources on walls and mirrors in a variety of media, from lipstick to charcoal and ink.<sup>56</sup> Like anomalous fires, no apparent analogue exists in Class B Reports without drawing extremely tenuous connections to stick structures as some form of primitive communication.

Perhaps the most damning counter to the wildnisgeist concept is that, outside Class B Reports, Bigfoot *are* witnessed engaging in much of the above activity (tossing rocks, vocalizing, etc.). Certainly bringing in a wilderness poltergeist violates Occam’s Razor, i.e. multiplying variables unnecessarily. It is far more parsimonious to simply assume Class B Reports are due to Bigfoot.

But what if large, hairy creatures are themselves physical manifestations of wildnisgeists?



## Hairy Poltergeists

The appearance of hairy limbs—or even full apparitions of hairy creatures—has been noted in poltergeist cases, hauntings, and séances.

In 2001 in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, a family of five claimed to have been terrorized by a poltergeist that growled, rang telephones, spoke in multiple languages, lobbed produce at anyone inside the home, and smeared lotions and detergents on the walls. According to the youngest son, aged 10, the poltergeist appeared as “hairy and ape-like with sharp nails.”<sup>57</sup>

In the 1950s, paranormal author Stan Gooch saw a prehistoric man materialize during a séance in Coventry, England, before vanishing into thin air.

This was a crouching ape-like shape, which became clearer as the moments passed. I guess it approximated to most people’s idea of what an ancient cave man would look like. Yet one could not make out too much detail—the eyes were hidden, for example. It stood in half shadow, watching us, breathing heavily as if nervous. I must say, though, that I sensed rather than heard the breathing. I could not decide whether our visitor was wearing the skin of some animal, or whether it had a rough coat of hair of its own.<sup>58</sup>

Famed medium Franek Kluski also allegedly materialized a “mysterious ape” during the early 20th century,<sup>59</sup> and Nick Redfern also investigated a 1985 case where a Bigfoot appeared following a Ouija board session in Rochester, New York.<sup>60</sup> (As an aside, it should be noted that poltergeist activity was sometimes attributed in English folklore to *boggarts*, hirsute faerie folk . . . further reinforcing the underappreciated similarities between older traditions and modern Bigfoot reports.)<sup>61</sup>

Since the precedent exists, it stands to reason—however unlikely—that some Class B Reports wherein a hairy form is glimpsed may fit the wildnisgeist parameters as well.

## A Series of Hypotheses

Despite so many similarities between poltergeists and Class B Bigfoot Reports, it is quite unclear what connection exists between the two, if any. The wildnisgeist theory is flawed, at best. Even so, a handful of possibilities seem apparent.

1. *There is no Bigfoot or wildnisgeist involved in Class B Reports.* In this scenario, all activity described where no assailant is seen—stone throwing, rapping, disembodied voices, odors, etc.—are entirely coincidental and can be written off in these cases as natural phenomena. Showers of stones might be dropped from birds, wood knocks might simply be breaking limbs or woodpeckers, odors might be unseen rotting carcasses . . . and all might be simple misidentification.
2. *Bigfoot and wildnisgeist just happen to exist in the same locations.* Here we have multiple sub-scenarios

at play. There might be a wildnisgeist attached to an area inhabited by Bigfoot, or a witness finds him/herself in an area known for Bigfoot sightings and generates their own poltergeist activity. If true, it implies Class B Reports come from *both* wildnisgeist and Bigfoot. In any case, this hypothesis is predicated on a complete and utter coincidence between clear Bigfoot sightings and Class B Reports, which remains unlikely.

3. *Bigfoot is solely responsible for Class B Reports.* Most cryptozoologists endorse this hypothesis. It is undoubtedly the simplest explanation, arguably the most logical. This explanation is not without serious shortcomings, however—specifically the electrical interference and anomalous lights seen in some reports—unless one fully engages with more taboo theories like Bigfoot as ghosts, spirits, or interdimensional creatures, problematic concepts in their own right.
4. *Wildnisgeists are responsible for all Bigfoot reports.* We jump from the least controversial hypothesis to the most. In this scenario, the wildnisgeist is either attached to a location—explaining areas of plentiful Bigfoot sightings—or, in traditional poltergeist fashion, the witness brings the phenomenon with them as an agent. In either case, sightings of large, hairy hominoids are not flesh-and-blood primates, but instead projected representations of wildnisgeists, nonphysical in nature but possessed of the ability to interact with the physical world as any poltergeist can.
5. *Wildnisgeists are poltergeists generated by Bigfoot.* Researcher Rosemary Ellen Guiley wrote that poltergeists seem to be the product of “destructive juvenile or unbalanced adult minds.”<sup>62</sup> Plenty of sightings describe Bigfoot acting erratically or angrily, as well as displaying a playful disposition or childish behavior—is it possible flesh-and-blood primates generate poltergeist activity, similar to emotionally unstable human beings? As noted, poltergeist cases commonly involve spontaneous fires and anomalous writing—but are nowhere to be found in Class B Reports. Is this because any mind generating a poltergeist must possess knowledge of how to create fire and writing? Or perhaps Bigfoot have found a way to harness the psychic effects of poltergeist phenomena to their own ends?

6. *Any mixture of the above hypotheses.*

The exact intersection of poltergeist phenomena and Class B Reports may never be revealed. For all we know, there may be no connection, or the link may indeed be as intimate as points 4 or 5 above. In some sense, it is entirely irrelevant—the important

principle is to engage in critical thinking that challenges our pre-conceptions, forcing us to reexamine the paradigms we impose on objective data and ourselves. *To question everything.*

*Excerpted with permission from* Where the Footprints End: High Strangeness and the Bigfoot Phenomenon, Volume I: Folklore *by Joshua Cutchin and Timothy Renner (2020).*

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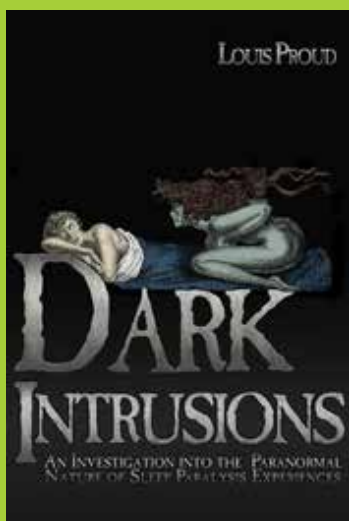
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## Noteworthy Books



*Dark Intrusions: An Investigation into the Paranormal Nature of Sleep Paralysis Experiences*  
by Louis Proud  
Anomalist Books, 2009



*Where the Footprints End*  
*High Strangeness and the Bigfoot Phenomenon, Volume I: Folklore*  
by Joshua Cutchin and Timothy Renner  
Dark Holler Arts, 2020

## ‘BACKSCATTER’

Louis Proud

# In Search of Hungry Ghosts: The Mysterious Death of Joe Fisher

It's now been almost two decades since the unexpected death of Canadian journalist and author Joe Fisher. Known for his best-selling books on spirituality and the paranormal, most notably *Hungry Ghosts*, in which he investigated the dark side of channeling, Fisher's contribution as a writer and researcher—indeed, his life's mission—was to shine a light on the strange and unexplained.

Talented, handsome, charming, athletic, and well-travelled, he lent an air of sophistication to a field not normally associated with anything of the kind. Yet beneath Fisher's appealing exterior and affable personality was a soul in crisis. His suicide on May 9, 2001, in which he threw himself off a limestone cliff at Elora Gorge, in Ontario, Canada, continues to raise many questions—including whether, as he himself believed, the “hungry ghosts” he angered as a result of his investigations played a role in his troubles and misfortune.



Douglas Williams/Riddle Films

Joe Fisher

## Intrusions of the Dark Kind

I became intrigued by the Joe Fisher story when, beginning in my early twenties, personal experience compelled me to investigate sleep paralysis—a strange and disturbing phenomenon whereby, either while emerging from or falling to sleep, you find yourself unable to move, sometimes accompanied by a presence, usually malevolent in nature, that you cannot help but perceive as a spirit, demon, alien, or other supernatural being.

Such nocturnal episodes can be extremely frightening and dramatic; it's not uncommon to hear footsteps and disembodied voices, to feel something touch your body, or to see a shadowy figure near the bed. Nearly eight percent of the population have experienced it at least once in their lives. What's more, the

phenomenon is believed to have contributed to, if not actually spawned, humanity's long and complicated fascination with creatures and entities that go bump in the night.

Convinced by my own sleep paralysis episodes that the phenomenon has paranormal roots and cannot be explained by sleep science alone, I penned *Dark Intrusions: An Investigation into the Paranormal Nature of Sleep Paralysis Experiences*, published in 2009. Writing it proved to be a cathartic experience; it helped me to process the fear and bewilderment that comes with undergoing sleep paralysis on a frequent basis and to try to make sense of the wider reality represented by the phenomenon.

To say that being a sleep paralysis sufferer has had a profound impact on my spiritual worldview would be putting it mildly. Just months before I began work on the book, I kept waking up in the early hours of the morning, shuddering in fear and too anxious to return to sleep, after experiencing what, in my mind, was nothing less than a form of demonic assault. These episodes, which repeatedly featured the same evil presence, stood out as especially violent and disturbing.

On one occasion I felt as though I were being strangled; there was literally the sensation of hands around my neck. Another time, I sensed the entity position itself at the foot of my bed. Unable to break the spell of paralysis and emerge into full consciousness, I was forced to lie there in terror and dread as the bed began to rock back and forth, at first gently, then more forcefully. Yet most frightening of all were the repeated attempts at “possession,” in which it felt as though the entity were trying to invade my mind and body and I had to fight to resist the process.

While, understandably, notions like possession and demonic assault are difficult to swallow, except as products of religion, superstition, mental illness, or an overactive imagination fuelled by horror movies, the fact remains that many who've experienced the phenomenon first-hand come away convinced that the episodes signify genuine encounters with demons and evil spirits.

But now to Fisher's story and his own particular demons.

## Deceived by the Spirits

In *Hungry Ghosts*, Fisher relates how, in July 1984, he became acquainted with an Australian-born medium and laboratory technologist named Aviva Neumann (a pseudonym) and the small group of men and women who gathered around her every Friday night in the living room of her Toronto townhouse. Aviva, while in a trance state during which her normal personality was absent, had the apparent ability to “channel”

the respective spirit guides of those in the group, adopting a distinct voice and personality for each, much like a radio set with the “other side.”

His curiosity piqued, Fisher continued to attend the sessions, applying his expertise as an investigative journalist to the mystery. The voices, he concluded, were neither a product of fraud nor aspects of Aviva’s subconscious mind but represented genuine contact with the spirit world. “Even the most sceptical of observers had to concede that Aviva—who was incapable of successfully imitating a foreign accent in her waking state—could never consciously produce the stream of accents that flowed so effortlessly from her lips...If she was acting, she was not only brilliant, she was inhumanly so!”

Fisher was delighted when, before long, his own spirit guide emerged through Aviva: a sweet and affectionate entity named Filipa Gavrilos who claimed they’d spent seventeen incarnations together, most recently as passionate lovers in 18th century Greece—she a simple peasant girl who toiled in the fields and he a soldier who fought against the Turks.

Over the course of many channeling sessions, coupled with attempts on his part to establish a form of mind-to-mind communication with his guide, Fisher found himself falling in love with Filipa, even breaking off his relationship with his flesh-and-blood girlfriend in order to be closer to her. “If Filipa could have assumed a physical body, I’m sure I would have married her. But she was only a voice, a voice that resonated with more love, compassion and perspicacity than I had ever known.”

On a mission to find evidence in support of reincarnation—a concept in which he’d come to believe wholeheartedly while researching and writing his 1984 book *The Case for Reincarnation*—Fisher sought to confirm the guides’ claims that they’d once existed on earth in corporeal fashion. More importantly, if he could find tangible evidence that Filipa had lived on earth in 18th century Greece, then it would prove that their love had a legitimate basis.

Fisher soon discovered, however, that the former earthly existences claimed by the guides, despite sounding historically legitimate, had no basis in reality. One of the guides, named Ernest, who spoke with a “proper British” accent and who claimed he’d fought in World War II with the Royal Air Force as a bomber pilot titled Flying Officer William Alfred Scott, provided an abundance of information of his alleged former life as an airman. But when Fisher paid a visit to the Public Records Office at Kew where the War Office records are located, he found no listing of a Flying Officer Scott with the squadron that Ernest had specified.

As for his beloved Filipa, she too had betrayed and deceived him. Upon travelling to Greece to locate the ruins of the little village of Theros where Filipa said they’d once lived together, Fisher found to his dismay that no such place had ever existed. Nor were any of the locals with whom he spoke familiar with the surname “Gavrilos.”

This left Fisher in a difficult position. Forced to accept on the one hand that the guides weren’t who or what they claimed to be, he was unable to deny on the other hand that behind all their ostensible wisdom and benevolence existed a cunning and

sophisticated intelligence, perhaps singular in nature yet able to assume a multitude of personas that had managed, over a period of many years, to manipulate both himself and the other members of the group into swallowing a vast and elaborate lie.

From Fisher’s point of view, the conclusion was inescapable: the entities that had communicated through Aviva were in truth demons or hungry ghosts—vampiric beings who, attached to incarnate existence, use their talent as master manipulators to latch onto people and in a sense live through them.

Overwhelmed by feelings of fear, anger, betrayal, and disillusionment, Fisher split with Aviva and the group, and so too with Filipa. Channeling, he decided, was a dangerous game and no longer would he dabble in it. Determined to tell his story and expose the lies of the spirits, he wrote *Hungry Ghosts*, dedicating the book to his mother, Monica, “who has always insisted that demons do exist.”

Although writing, as mentioned, is a cathartic process, penning *Hungry Ghosts* brought Fisher no such catharsis. Or if it did, it was very short-lived. The troublesome saga of the spirits remained an ongoing part of his life. Right up until his death at the age of 53, Fisher remained convinced that, by exposing and criticising the spirits in a very public way, he’d incurred their anger and revenge, unleashing a curse on his life in which dark forces were persecuting him, plaguing his existence with misery and bad luck.

Readers of *Hungry Ghosts* as well as friends and family members of Fisher have suggested, naturally, that his suicide was in some way linked to his prior involvement with alleged spirits, the assumption being that these malevolent entities influenced his mind in such a way that he acted not wholly of his own accord when he took the plunge that ended his life.

As indicated earlier, I was drawn to Fisher’s story in part because of my own encounters with “demons,” in my case experienced via the twilight state of consciousness that accompanies sleep paralysis. While reading *Hungry Ghosts* at a time when I myself was battling with forces that I perceived as demonic, I found much of value in his account. It seemed to offer additional proof, if not outright confirmation, that demons and evil spirits are a very real part of this world and that they can, under certain circumstances, target the living. Having since reassessed my own experiences and, consequently, Fisher’s, I’ve come to recognise that the factors which led to his demise had more to do with his internal demons than the supposed demons outside of himself.

### A Lover of Beautiful Women

The son of a Baptist minister father and a Jehovah’s witness mother, Andrew Joseph Hilton Fisher was born on June 18, 1947, in Bristol, England. The family moved around a lot on account of his father’s occupation, and Fisher—the eldest among his three siblings—attended some thirteen schools between the ages of five and eighteen.

I was fortunate to get in touch with Fisher’s only surviving sister, Jane Mason. An artist whose paintings encompass spiritual themes, she revealed via email that theirs was a “strongly religious and dogmatic household.” She attributes her late

brother's searching spirit, open-mindedness, and strong interest "in other descriptions of reality" as "probably a reaction to our upbringing. All of us disagreed with our parents about their beliefs..."

Though Fisher got along well with his mother, "a staunch Christian whose psychic ability left her fretful lest God be displeased by her involuntary visions," he had a less harmonious relationship with his father. While stating that he disliked his father's "lack of warmth" and "overweening brittleness," he also admitted that "there are times when I feel his spirit lives inside me."

When, later in life, his spiritual search evolved to include an acceptance of reincarnation, psychic phenomena, and other beliefs that clash with Christianity, it had the effect of distancing him further from his parents. "The fundamentalist Christianity and the psychic seem to be at war within my family," he commented. "And they're still at war because my parents don't like what I do."

A natural writer, Fisher was drawn to a career in journalism. After being hired, at the age of eighteen, as a junior reporter with the *Staffordshire Advertiser*, he excelled in the role and just four years later was promoted to editor, making him the youngest news editor in England at the time. Always eager to broaden his horizons, he immigrated to Canada in 1971, settling in Toronto, where he continued his career in journalism. As a reporter and feature writer for the *Toronto Sun*, his assignments were many and varied but never dull; among the stories he covered were train and car wrecks, violent crimes, murder trials, and interviews with prime ministers and rock stars.

In his book *Cotopaxi Visions: Travels in Ecuador*, published after he'd retired from journalism yet compiled from journal entries he wrote during his time in the South American country in the late-1970s, where he taught English at the Colegio



Jane Mason

Americano, he reflects unflatteringly on his job as a reporter, describing it as "an endless succession of incidents: primarily, crises, tragedies and celebrations... Although exhilarated by the whirl of activity, I was psychologically spun dry by the ceaseless wind of events."

*Cotopaxi Visions*, which is part-travel journal, part spiritual diary, gives an intriguing glimpse into Fisher's inner world, revealing a mind in conflict with itself, continually striving for spiritual attainment yet weighed down by the challenges of work, relationships, health (while in Ecuador he contracted hepatitis) and other aspects of mundane life.

Romantic relationships were, in particular, a profound source of pain and frustration to Fisher, if not his Achilles heel. Like a dog chasing its own tail, his desire for romantic fulfilment could never be attained, causing him endless angst. According to David Kendall, who became best friends with Fisher in the early-1970s when the two of them worked as fellow reporters for the *Toronto Sun*, Fisher was the very definition of a ladies' man; he attracted women almost effortlessly. "Women loved Joe. He was smiling, chatty, articulate, attractive, and not super-macho."

Kendall, the author of *Lázaro* and several other "ecological thrillers," told me during a telephone interview that his friend's great problem in the realm of romance is that, while he managed to fall in love with many women, he failed to *stay* in love with a single one of them. Bubbling with geniality and wry humour, Kendall went on to relate a story in which Fisher, having fallen in love with a particular woman, went up north to stay with her and her family in a cottage, only to return from his trip declaring that he didn't love her after all.

In an email he wrote to me from his home in the north Sydney suburb of Manly Vale, Malcolm Fisher, a conservationist and copywriter, expressed the opinion that he felt his older brother "was looking for a soulmate... He just really loved women and they seemed to be enthusiastically drawn to him. Many maintained their friendships long after he had moved on to someone else. Maybe it pained him that he couldn't maintain the initial intensity of a relationship."

"Joe did love beautiful women," confirmed Jane. "I met many of his girlfriends and they were all lovely. Even though he didn't seem able to keep a long-term commitment to any of them he still kept them as friends... I don't think he would ever intentionally hurt anyone. The person he most hurt was himself. He was looking for a perfect love and had such strong expectations of both himself and his partner. In the end, he only seemed able to find it through a 'spirit guide' which to my, more psychological way of thinking, was a projection of this ideal and which led him more deeply into his 'paranormal' adventures."

### Paranormal Adventure Seeker

It was because of his desire to embark on "paranormal adventures" that, in 1981, Fisher retired from full-time journalism to focus on investigating and writing about metaphysics. Thinking it held the key to the answers he so badly sought, he gave his full attention to the mystical and paranormal and was



irrevocably seduced by it. He chose to gaze into the abyss, and the abyss gazed back.

In his first non-fiction book, *Predictions*, published in 1980, he examined the evidence for “predictions made by prophets, sages, and soothsayers throughout history.” Yet he came into his own as a metaphysical author with the publication, in 1984, of *The Case for Reincarnation*. Well-researched and graced with a preface by none other than the Dalai Lama, the book proved a win for Fisher, becoming an international bestseller and establishing his reputation as a serious and respected advocate for belief in reincarnation.

Long out of print, I was forced to order a second-hand copy from the UK, its cover faded and well-worn as a result of its former existence as a library book. While reading it, I was struck by the extent to which Fisher had gone to try to prove reincarnation. Though he presents the evidence in an ostensibly balanced way, it’s clear the subject was one in which he was emotionally invested. In the book’s final chapter, he argues, almost fervently, that widespread acceptance of reincarnation would transform society for the better:

“Wars, crime, racism, nationalism and sexual chauvinism would be radically diminished... The nagging fear of death would be eliminated and replaced with acceptance of the opportunity for transformation... Few would be so rash as to attempt either suicide or abortion...”

Interestingly, for someone who would eventually take his own life, this isn’t the only instance in the book in which Fisher denounces suicide, arguing that it’s a bad idea from a reincarnational perspective. In a chapter dedicated to suicide, particularly as it pertains to the samurai tradition and other warrior groups, he writes: “As much as the suicidal personality feels able to escape the world by getting rid of the body, reincarnation’s revolving door ensures that all hope of dissolution is short-lived. Those who learn, under hypnosis, that they have killed themselves in past lives are quickly brought to the realization that suicide, far from being an answer to life’s problems, is, at best, a stalling tactic born of ignorance.”

Later, as though having a conversation with himself, he adds: “How to stifle the self-destructive impulse? The only lasting antidote lies in the recognition that life, not oblivion, waits beyond the last heartbeat. As seductive as suicide might be to the deeply despairing, evolution will not be denied so presumptuously.”

The notion that each of us is spiritually evolving, learning important lessons in each lifetime, so that eventually we might achieve some form of enlightenment or liberation, appealed strongly to Fisher.

In his next book, *Life Between Life*, written in collaboration with the late psychiatrist Dr. Joel Whitton, a proponent of past-life regression therapy, he turned his attention to the “timeless, spaceless state” between lives—what the Tibetan Buddhists call the *bardo*—in an attempt to uncover more evidence in support of reincarnation.

Fisher’s interest in Dr. Whitton’s research coincided with his other, complementary interest in channeling. While working on the book, he was also spending his time in the company of Aviva and the guides. So important did he consider the latter

aspect of his research that, in the book’s Acknowledgments section, he credits Filipa and the guides as “eloquent ambassadors of between-life consciousness.”

Drawing from his many years of research into reincarnation plus what he’d learned from the guides about channeling and the spirit world, Fisher set himself the goal of writing a book that would prove to the public that the spiritual worldview he’d so carefully assembled and in which he’d become deeply invested was not fantasy but fact. On the line was his very reputation as a journalist, author, and researcher.

As so often happens to those who champion belief in the metaphysical, Fisher found himself under intense scrutiny from the media. During a 1989 appearance on the current affairs program *CBC Crossfire*, he was subjected to a brutal grilling from the two skeptics brought onto the program to debate him, leaving him feeling humiliated but also more determined than ever to prove the reality of reincarnation by demonstrating, through his new book, that the guides had led historically verifiable lives.

What happened next we already know: his efforts to prove the existence of the guides were met with failure and disappointment. Almost everything he believed up to that point—that he’d been conversing with benevolent entities from the other side, that Filipa was his spirit guide and that she loved him unconditionally, and that his research would lead to profound and inspiring revelations, including with respect to his own spiritual quest—came crashing down around him.

While the blow sustained to Fisher’s ego as a writer and researcher was undoubtedly severe, just as significant, if not more so, was the detrimental impact it had upon his spiritual and philosophical worldview. Commented Canadian author Kelly Watt, who knew Fisher personally and was familiar with the intimate details of his betrayal by the spirits, “I think on some level he really wanted it to be real... He really needed to believe that there was some spiritual truth in the world, perhaps a different truth, a better truth, than what his parents had told him.”

### The Downward Spiral

To those of a fiercely skeptical mindset who accept only that which has been proven scientifically, Fisher’s story comes across as utterly absurd. That a respected and intelligent investigative journalist and author would deem trance channeling genuine; then, having met his alleged spirit guide as a voice speaking through the medium or channel, proceed to fall head over heels in love with her, sounds like the plot of a very bad New Age romance novel. It calls into question not only his credibility as a journalist and author, but, more seriously, his ability to discern fact from fantasy and thus the state of his mental health.

In my conversation with Kendall, a proud atheist and complete non-believer in anything remotely spiritual or paranormal, he assured me that Fisher was not only of sound mental health but that he believed wholeheartedly in everything he claimed, including that he’d fallen in love with Filipa and was devastated by her betrayal. Others close to Fisher have vouched for his sincerity and honesty, while simultaneously pointing out his

tendency towards blindness when confronted by evidence that contradicted his spiritual beliefs.

Fisher, indeed, *believed*. But now, instead of believing in benevolent spirit guides, he believed in their very antithesis. His angels had become demons. Kendall told me how, about a year before the publication of *Hungry Ghosts*, during a canoe camping trip to Northern Ontario's Manitoulin Island attended by himself and Fisher, along with author Ronald Wright and *Toronto Sun* head photographer Jac Holland, the four friends were seated around the campfire one night when Fisher related his incredible story. Disillusioned with the so-called guides and the book he planned to write about them, both his spiritual quest and career had hit a dead end. It was Kendall and the others who convinced him to commit his story to print. Thus, in a highly paradoxical way, what was supposed to be a book about love and guidance on the other side instead became a book about spiritual darkness and deception.

First published in 1990 then subsequently retitled and republished in 2001 as *The Siren Call of Hungry Ghosts*—the term “siren” referring to the dangerous enchantresses of Greek mythology who lured sailors to their deaths with their singing—it remains a classic in the field of the paranormal. Even among those who have little belief in such topics, the book is appealing for the simple reason that it's so well-written and entertaining. Ironically, given Fisher's disdain for Christian fundamentalism, it also holds appeal to Christians who, convinced the paranormal and occult are “of the devil,” consider Fisher's story confirmation of this belief.

Whether what Fisher encountered was of the devil or not, his life after the publication of *Hungry Ghosts* was never the same again.

On 15 June, 1991, a year after the book was released, he finally married, walking down the aisle with Emily Zarb, a successful fashion designer and photographer some seventeen years his junior. The ceremony took place in an old country church of stone construction. Malcolm related to me that he, along with other guests, sensed during the occasion a spooky, malevolent presence—perhaps the very “hungry ghosts” that his brother had written about.

Gazing up at the clouds outside, Malcom noticed that, eerily, they seemed to be “scurrying across the sky in four different directions.” Later during the reception at a house just a short walk from the church, a number of people left, “saying . . . they felt uncomfortable inside because of some form of presence. I think Joe just laughed it off at the time—he was normally a pretty genial guy.”

Unfortunately for Fisher, long-term romantic fulfillment eluded him yet again, the couple divorcing in 1999. “Joe advised that his marriage to Emily brought him a certain calmness and stability,” Malcolm told me. “But I don't think that they were particularly well suited . . . When they met, she was a successful fashion designer and he was a successful author and everything seemed rosy, which was why the downward spiral in fortunes was particularly notable.”

That Fisher's fortunes took a downward spiral in the final years of his life is undeniable. Along with the emotional pain of divorce, he suffered another kind of pain after sustaining a

debilitating back injury. Once an excellent marathon runner, he was forced to stop running altogether. The injury also impacted his ability to write. “He told me he'd write sitting in a chair 15 minutes, then standing 15 minutes, then lying on the floor 15 minutes,” revealed Kendall.

Put on a long waiting list for surgery, Fisher suffered greatly in the interim. After undergoing a spinal fusion in January 2001, an operation in which the vertebrae are permanently joined together, he reported that the pain had vanished. However, speculates Kendall, the operation may not have been entirely complication free, perhaps causing post-surgery depression. “I personally believe the long suffering ignited a despair—he whose body had always performed so admirably.”

Fisher's woes were compounded by the likely possibility of having to file for bankruptcy. Writing is hardly a lucrative profession, and to cope with the growing pile of bills he at one point got a job picking strawberries. Kendall informed me that the lowly nature of the work depressed the once successful author and journalist, who expressed his frustration at the sight of frivolous teenagers throwing strawberries at each other while on the job.

In March 2001, just a couple of months before his death, Fisher made plans with Dr. Whitton to collaborate on a new book. Aptly, their project was to concern “the dark night of the soul,” a Christian term from St. John of the Cross that describes a state of spiritual desolation and hopelessness, a



A scene from Elora Gorge, Ontario, Canada

period of darkness through which the spiritual seeker must pass on their way towards the light and glory of the dawn. In Fisher's case, however, the dawn hadn't arrived; around him there existed only darkness and despair in the form of poor health, broken relationships, and poverty. "He was terrified of getting older," observed Dr. Whitton. "He was dead broke. And the book we were working on wouldn't see any monies coming in for upwards of a year."

As well as dealing with money woes, Fisher was deeply saddened by the untimely deaths of several people close to him. In 2000, a friend of his committed suicide by jumping from a cliff at Elora Gorge—the same cliff that, a year later, he himself would jump from. Some two years prior, he lost his nephew Sol to suicide. A victim of sexual abuse by his father, the teenager jumped off a cliff near Brighton, United Kingdom. A year later, his nephew's mother, Helen—Fisher's younger sister—overcome by grief, committed suicide by jumping from the same spot. In a final letter to Malcolm, which Fisher posted on the morning of 9 May before taking his life, he declared, "now I have much more sympathy for Helen's plight and realise that the depths of despair cannot be easily vanquished."

In the same letter, Fisher added, "I know the immortal penalty for taking one's own life is steep indeed" and "all avenues out of this nightmare I am in seem blocked and poisoned." The letter in question is one of several that Fisher wrote to various friends and relatives in his final hours. Malcolm told me that his brother, having penned the letters, "walked down to the post office to get stamps. He then had a friendly conversation with staff before posting the letters and walking to the edge of the gorge. It seems that he had made a rational decision which he then carried out."

### "A Harsh Judge of Himself"

The possibility that Fisher died as a result of foul play cannot be entirely ruled out. The police report of his death notes that there were "skid marks" in the ground on the clifftop from which he fell at Elora Gorge, as well as broken branches above, suggesting either that he hesitated at the last moment, perhaps involuntarily, digging his heels into the ground to stop himself while holding onto the branches for added support, or, alternatively, that he was pushed or dragged from the clifftop, during which a brief struggle ensued between him and his hypothetical murderer.

If we accept that Fisher died by his own hand—as strongly indicated, if not proven, by the letters he penned shortly before his death—the question arises as to whether the hungry ghosts he exposed in his book, or rather his belief in them, played a role in his untimely demise.

Kendall, in keeping with his atheistic leanings, attributes his friend's suicide to entirely mundane causes. "I believe that his circumstances—physical, financial and emotional—were what drove him over the edge." In an email to me he elaborated, "I'm a boring rationalist—there is no God. So the idea that upon dying I become more than worms to feed the trees and in that sense reincarnate as a tree is outside my realm of thinking. Self-perception hurled Joe over the cliff, not niggling

marauder spirits."

In my discussions with Malcolm, he expressed bewilderment at his brother's suicide, stating that he was normally a happy person and that his actions were inconsistent with his sincere belief in reincarnation. While acknowledging that physical and emotional factors were undoubtedly influential in his death, he is certain that spiritual factors also played their part and admitted that what happened to his brother is strange and inexplicable.

He remains baffled by the run of bad luck that plagued his brother following the publication of *Hungry Ghosts*. "Everything in his life did take a downturn from work and writing opportunities to relationships to physical health to aggravated sleeplessness and financial worries... He was upset at being deceived by the spirits."

In an email to me, his sister Jane wrote: "I do remember Joe saying that he felt persecuted by spirits and he was worried for his 'immortal soul.' My feeling is that he was persecuted by self-recriminations. Although he was able to extend his love and kindness and wonderfully ebullient personality to entertain and touch other people, he was a harsh judge of himself which was, in my view, the key element that led to his destruction."

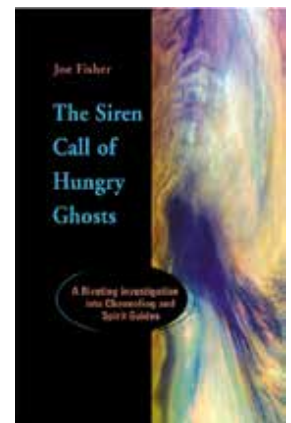
That Fisher was prone to self-recrimination is well-recognised, and in *Hungry Ghosts* he admits to a tendency to "lapse, occasionally, into self-loathing." The violent manner in which he chose to end his life is evidence that he harboured feelings of deep self-hatred. The cliff at Elora Gorge from which he jumped curves up at the bottom, forming a lip. Though his body was discovered floating in the Grand River below, he died not as a result of drowning but from hitting the rocky cliff face itself. Regardless of one's personal thoughts on the morality of suicide, it cannot be denied that Fisher, when he jumped, did so with determination and conviction.

### Haunted by Dark Forces

In examining Fisher's perplexing demise, one question in particular remains: Was he troubled by thoughts of vengeful hungry ghost when he took the plunge that ended his life or were financial and other worries the primary concern on his mind at the time?

Intriguingly, an obituary on Fisher that appeared on the news website *The Anomalist* alleges that, shortly before his death, he revealed to his editor Patrick Huyghe "that the spirits were still after him for having written his final book."

Huyghe, who was editor of Paraview Press at the time, was in contact with Fisher via email until April 9, 2001, regarding the production and publicity of their reprint, re-titled *The Siren Call of Hungry Ghosts*. While it's true that Fisher related to him an incident of apparent "psychic attack" by spirits, the incident itself occurred in 1988—as he was finishing up the manuscript that would be published in the U.K. and Canada in 1990. On



Huyghe's urging, the incident made its way into the U.S. edition as an epilogue.

This epilogue, which Fisher wrote sometime between June 26 and July 24, 2000, is the best insight we have into his final thoughts on hungry ghosts. In it he describes how, in 1988, while living alone in a small, remote cabin on the northeastern side of Lake Ontario and still struggling to come to terms with his terrifying brush with discarnate entities, he noticed signs of redness and swelling in the region of his navel. The unusual infection persisted, becoming engorged with pus. After visiting three baffled physicians, the last of whom drained the pus from the abscess using a wooden-shafted swab, Fisher was left wondering if he was "under some kind of psychic attack. Were the various entities, who had ultimately failed to win me over, trying to ensure I would not reveal who they are and what they do?"

As the weeks passed and the worst of winter descended on his cabin, Fisher continued to treat the wound by regularly changing the dressing. Promised the abscess would eventually heal, it came as a surprise to him when, one evening, the pain in his navel abruptly flared up, prompting him to make an emergency visit to the nearest hospital. Diagnosed with omphalitis—a condition in which the umbilical stump becomes infected and which rarely affects adults but occasionally infants—he was escorted to the operating room under general anaesthetic for immediate surgery.

Shortly after the operation, while lying groggily in his hospital bed, Fisher was roused to alertness by a sudden phone call. On the other end of the line was Claire Laforgia, one of the mediums he'd consulted during his investigations into channeling, wanting to know how he was doing. Since neither she nor anyone else had been informed of his admission to the hospital, he inquired as to how she'd known. Her reply was simple but chilling: her guide had told her.

Fisher notes that, had he neglected to seek emergency medical treatment, the abscess may well have exploded internally, causing peritonitis and consequently death. "The site of the abscess was symbolic indeed; the navel, the very core of my being." Afraid that the guides had tried to end his life by means of psychic attack in order to prevent him from writing about them—and that they might strike again—he nonetheless managed to complete the manuscript. Yet his deep-seated fear of the guides persisted long after the book was published. "Because my belief system had been turned inside out, I was nervous, self-doubting and a dyed-in-the-wool insomniac. My face and figure, people would tell me later, looked disturbingly gaunt and haunted."

In the final pages of the epilogue, Fisher goes on to mention how the publication of *Hungry Ghosts* sparked a flurry of correspondence from readers keen to share their own disturbing experiences of channeling and involvement with discarnate entities, after which he concludes, "I am simply grateful to have survived my confrontation with the liars and deceivers of the spirit world."

Like Kendall, Huyghe speculates that Fisher's spinal fusion surgery in early-2001 might hold the key to understanding what drove him to take his own life. "I wonder if its [the surgery's] success, or lack thereof, may have contributed to his suicide..."

To better understand Fisher's psychological state and the factors that led to his suicide, I sought the expertise of Dr. Sabrina Martin, a senior clinical psychologist based in Devonport, Tasmania. After familiarising herself with his story, she concluded: "The experiences both of his upbringing and adult life, as well as the circumstances and events closer to his death, are more than sufficient to explain his suicide without the need to bring in paranormal explanations. My feeling is that his yearning for love and attachment—given his personality and his problematic attachments to parents—which played out in his relationships made him vulnerable to Filipa and the betrayal he then felt. Whether Filipa was indeed a demon/hungry ghost or the product of a very cunning Aviva we will never know."

Martin is of the opinion that Fisher "suffered from depression in his last years," and that "his view of suicide clearly changed at the end." Referring to the fact that he took his own life after losing several people close to him from suicide, she pointed out that "the suicide of loved ones significantly increases suicide risk. Also, that he was friendly and of sound mind when he posted the suicide notes is quite common for people who suffer for a long time once they have made up their minds about ending their life. The relief of that decision lifts the mood."

Mention has been made of the fact that Fisher's belief system, with its place for demons and evil spirits, was hardly conducive to sound mental health. "Joe did express to me that he felt haunted by dark forces," revealed Dr. Whitton. "I don't know if he was actually possessed when he killed himself... But he did speak of being haunted."

Fisher was a deeply spiritual person and it's clear that the demonic occupied an important place in his belief system. Yet he believed just as strongly in reincarnation and in the "non-physical plane of existence between lives" called the bardo. Indicating that he equated earthly existence with suffering and the bardo with freedom and peace, we find in *The Case for Reincarnation* that he considered death "something to look forward to—a sustained cosmic adventure that, in dissolving mortality's frustrating limitations, surveys the grandeur of innermost being."

Was it Fisher's longing to return to the bardo more so than his desire to escape from demons that spurred his decision to take his own life?

This, of course, is impossible to answer. Like anyone, I can only speak of my own demons.

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