

Not Only the Queen's Spooks but also Shakespeare's

(Swedish title: Professor: Be open for the unknown)

I have the claim to fame of being one of the few academics who knowingly put the career at risk by studying the most forbidden in science: paranormal phenomena. The reason that I did this has mainly to do with being educated at the University of Edinburgh which is one of the dozen or more universities which have research into these phenomena. If only a small portion of the reports published by well-qualified researchers is true, then the advances gained for science are indeed large. In Sweden attitudes are however more polarized. Patrick Lindenfors, who is a representative for the movement "Science and Folk Education" and a group of so-called humanists, wants to forbid the Queen (of Sweden) because of her authoritative position from talking publically about her personal experiences of ghosts existing.

I do however have some sympathy for Lindenfors viewpoint. With my starting point in biological and neuro-science, I first wanted to reject apparitions as examples of the brain's ability to be deceived by ambiguous sensory experiences. If paranormal phenomena were to be taken seriously then they would have to be demonstrated in the laboratory. On the other hand in order to demonstrate that I was ever-so open-minded, I did spend several rather peaceful nights in the most ill-reputed haunted houses.

Over the years the description of reality provided by natural science has changed radically and now includes processes that seem to demand the role of consciousness. Modern physics is no longer represented by either Lindenfors's or my own earlier pre-conceived ideas but is more in tune with the world of Max Tegmark (the well-known American-Swedish contemporary author and cosmologist): a world of black holes, multiverses, and other effects which are completely alien from the reality of our sensory organs.

Along with this change, I like to think I have also changed and have now a younger and a humbler way of seeing things - a process so brilliantly described by Bob Dylan's My Back Pages.

A self-ordained professor's tongue
Too serious to fool....
In a soldier's stance, I aimed my hand
At the mongrel dogs who teach
Fearing not I'd become my enemy
In the instant that I preach
Yes, my guard stood hard when abstract threats
Too noble to neglect
Deceived me into thinking
I had something to protect
Good and bad, I define these terms
Quite clear, no doubt, somehow.
Ah, but I was so much older then,
I'm younger than that now.

Of course there is a large number of "normal explanations" for hauntings and ghosts and there is nothing to suggest they have physical form (despite the access to cameras, not one convincing photo of a ghost exists which does not have a plausible normal explanation). On the other hand, after we have eliminated all the normal explanations there are still a few well-documented cases - especially those occurring in the context of

death - which I cannot explain away and given the lack of interest from science it does not seem that we will ever have an explanation.

Humanism does not have to take on the militant attitude that Lindenfors supports. Last year I worked with the German philosopher and humanist (in the proper sense of human potential) dr Annekatrin Puhle, by writing a book on the cases which are difficult to explain away. The book is called *Shakespeare's Ghosts Live* (playing on the double meaning of "live"). We discovered that Shakespeare's insights still have a striking modernity to them. There are 14 ghosts in Shakespeare's plays and several of them concern how the individuals' own altered state of consciousness is partly responsible for creating the appearances but the really interesting thing is that these apparitions then get their own life and will. This will seem of course totally alien to the Swedish reader but the belief in such phenomena occurs in many cultures under various names such as "thoughtforms", pukas, djiins, tulpas. Shall we stay open-minded or reject everything which seems strange to our time- and culture-bound preconceived idea about reality? Shakespeare's famous quotation in the form of Hamlet's response to the Lindenfors of that time (Horatio) reminds us of how important it is with openness and curiosity: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Haratio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy".