

Spirits in the time of our lore

By Ruth Ostrow

I RECENTLY went out to dinner with a dear friend who is now an academic at a university abroad. We spent much of the evening discussing his views on world events, given that one of his subjects of expertise is history. It was a lucid, intelligent and stimulating conversation.

Then the topic changed to religion. I explained that I had become interested in Eastern spirituality. He flushed, before admitting that he too had dabbled in Eastern prayer and ritual in recent years.

What happened next was most extraordinary. "I didn't like ... I became a bit nervous when ..." He began clearing his throat. Then the sanest man I know took a sip of his red wine and explained that during one of his prayer sessions, the room suddenly filled with entities that he recognised as the dead.

"Dead people? You mean ghosts?" I asked incredulous.

"Yes," he said, soberly. "Look, they do exist. They were there in the room. Many of them. They were translucent and some of them had bits of clothing on, patches or whole sections of coloured and patterned cloth, presumably from what they once wore. Others had nothing on. They were just faded forms but with some prominent feature - like eyes or one arm more pronounced. I don't know why.

"I was very nervous. It was during a prayer to help souls move on, and Ruth, I swear, they exist."

Of course I asked if he was under any stress. This conservative, middle-aged man assured me that he was not mad. He now believes, despite a thoroughly scientific background, in ghosts.

I could have walked away in sceptical disbelief but he happens to be one of several credible people who've revealed ghost stories to me, including a medical doctor I know, and a well-respected teacher I've spent time with, who recently told me matter-of-factly that she'd been "contacted" by some entity.

"I was doing the garden a few months ago when suddenly this swirling ball of mist like a cloud came and hovered in front of me. I felt a lovely feeling. I wanted to be scared but I knew there was nothing to be scared about.

"It followed me for quite a while, it performed graceful movements in the air, dives, twirls, and then it left. I've never seen it since," she said, with a dismissive wave of the hand.

Though I do mix in unusual circles, I recently read a book by Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, respected academic with degrees in anthropology and psychology from Columbia University, who worked as a science editor for the American Institute of Physics, and the American Museum of Natural History.

While on tenure with the United Nations in Vienna, she began researching her book *A Kabbalah for the Modern World* (Llewellyn). She writes that she decided to experiment with a ritual said to evoke ancient spirits.

To her shock, while performing the ritual, loud banging noises filled the room, the ceiling above began to warp and weave, she felt an "indescribable presence" as the walls threatened to cave in.

"Many people ... find it impossible to believe that spiritual forces may take material form. I know from personal experience ... it is quite within the realm of natural things for energy to be materialised quite suddenly in front of our eyes," she says.

The truth is that many people I respect have had close encounters of the non-material kind.

Seeing ghosts isn't something discussed in polite circles. But many of my readers write of experiences with angels or forces supernatural.

When I was working as a finance journalist, a well-known businessman told me of his encounters with a friendly "being". A fellow journalist recently found herself being watched by a strange, other-worldly figure.

I, myself, lived briefly in a home that made me feel like weeping. One day a tradesman came over and said: "Did you know the last owner died tragically in here?" and I broke out in goose pimples because I'd felt a disturbed presence.

The late scientist, Carl Sagan, in his excellent book *The Demon-Haunted World* (Headline) claims we are susceptible to beliefs that are prevalent at the time of history in which we live. That we get gripped by a sort of mass hysteria.

One person sees a flying saucer and then suddenly there is an epidemic of sightings because the story unconsciously stirs something in others. "Perhaps when everyone knows that gods come down to earth, we hallucinate gods ... when fairies are widely accepted, we see fairies; in the age of spiritualism, we encounter spirits," he argues.

Which is all very rational. But when academics, doctors and science editors tell you with a straight face of other dimensions, even the sceptics have to wonder.

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