

Paranormal

<http://skeptdic.com/paranormal.html>

An event or perception is said to be paranormal if it involves forces or agencies that are beyond scientific explanation. Many paranormal events are said to be experienced only by those with psychic powers, such as extrasensory perception or psychokinesis.

Some events are perceived as paranormal due to ignorance or magical thinking. For example, parapsychologist Charles Tart explains how he first got interested in the paranormal:

"There was a time, years ago, when I was highly skeptical of any paranormal claims of any kind. One of the things that convinced me that there must be something to this is a strange experience that I personally went through. It was wartime. I was at Berkeley, California, and everybody was working overtime....the young lady who was my assistant at the time worked with me until very late this one night. She finally went home; I went home. Then the very next day she came in, all excited....She reported that during this night she had suddenly sat bolt upright in her bed, convinced that something terrible had happened. "I had a terrible sense of foreboding," she said, but she did not know what had happened. "I immediately swung out of bed and went over to the window and looked outside to see if I could see anything that might have happened like an accident. I was just turning away from the window and suddenly the window shook violently. I couldn't understand that. I went back to bed, woke up the next morning and listened to the radio." A munitions ship at Port Chicago had exploded. It literally took Port Chicago off the map. It leveled the entire town and over 300 people were killed....She said she had sensed the moment when all these people were snuffed out in this mighty explosion. How would she have suddenly become terrified, jumped out of bed, gone to the window, and then - from 35 miles away, the shock wave had reached Berkeley and shook the window?" (Randi 1992)

There is no need to perceive this event as paranormal, according to James Randi, who recorded this story. A shock wave travels at different speeds through the ground and through the air. The difference over 35 miles would be 8 seconds. Most likely the shaking earth woke up the young lady in a fright and 8 seconds later the window shook. She and Tart assumed that the explosion took place when the window shook, making her experience inexplicable by the known laws of physics. This explanation only makes sense, however, if one is ignorant of the known laws of physics.

note: The Randi article suggests that Tart is the one working in Berkeley with a lab assistant. Tart was born in 1937 and the Port Chicago explosion occurred in 1944. Tart may have been a prodigy but I doubt that at age seven he had his own lab. The point of the story is that Tart preferred the paranormal explanation to the mundane one, as do many true believers.

Randi's talk was given without notes or text, and was edited by the publisher of Skeptic magazine. I asked him about the story and he very kindly sent me a transcription of what Tart said. The gist is that Tart told the story about the girl much as Randi recollected it. However, the girl was working for Tart at the time he was telling the story and she had worked in an electronics factory at the time of the explosion. Here is a bit of the transcript:

"One night she had gone to bed exhausted as usual, in the middle of night, she suddenly found herself awakened and she jumped out of bed, being overwhelmed by a feeling of

absolute horror. She knew that something absolutely horrible was happening that she desperately wished she could stop and she didn't have the slightest idea in the world what it was. She was not used to jumping out of bed in the middle of the night with feelings like this. So, this was very puzzling to her. Such incredibly strong emotions. As she stood there, about a minute after she got out of bed, the windows rattled, the house shook a little bit. Well, it turned out it wasn't one of those things – California earthquakes. But that what had happened, she found out the next day, was that about 30 miles away in a little town called Port Chicago a munitions ship had exploded and killed several hundred people simultaneously. It takes about one minute for a shock wave to travel from Port Chicago to Berkeley. She felt in retrospect that somehow some part of her mind had reacted to the horror of all those people dying simultaneously."

Tart tells the story as one that doesn't "make sense in terms of physics." He goes on to say that many people have similar stories and that "What you make of them depends very much, I think, on your prior convictions."

Tart uses the story as an example of the kind of thing that he thinks justifies doing parapsychology. Many others, however, get involved because they assume that if they can't perceive a naturalistic cause for an event, it must be paranormal. Parapsychology, we might say, is the science that looks for things it can't explain and then explains them as paranormal.