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Buck Bannister: It seems sometimes that paranormal groups become so focused on the paranormal that they neglect the physical. I have read dozens of articles about how paranormal investigators should "protect" themselves from ne'er do well spirits. People have espoused everything from prayers and rosaries to visualizing psychic energy "bubbles." However, what I don't see very often are articles reminding paranormal groups to protect themselves physically during investigations. To me, the threat of physical injury from unsafe practices is much greater than that of a ghost "attaching" itself to you and following you home! What steps can investigators take to protect themselves during an investigation and even before setting out for one?

Here are some simple things you can do to make sure you do not come to harm during an investigation.

Know your fellow investigators! Know with whom you are setting off on the adventure. With the popularity of "meetup" sites, there are hundreds of "paranormal groups" who are collections of fans of TV shows who want to jump into the field. Many have little or no training. In such situations, you are putting yourself in potential danger because you are going to be out with strangers or near strangers at night and often in isolated areas. Obviously, you can see the problems in that scenario. I strongly advise those wanting to get into the field to join a well-respected and established group. You are much safer because the people know one another well and there are no "wild cards" that might show up that someone has never seen before. Established groups also tend to be much more respectful of the law and property rights. This brings me to my next point...

Do not break the Law! Private property is just that, private. You do not have a free ticket into any site, building, or ruin because you are calling yourself a "ghost hunter" or "paranormal investigator". Just recently, a group of young "ghost hunters" was prosecuted for breaking into an abandoned amusement park to "investigate" there.

Likewise, because land is considered "public" that does not mean you have free reign. National and State Parks have set hours. You may not enter them after the posted times without permission. The stories of groups who have scaled walls or jumped fences to investigate a closed state or national park sound impressive. While these feats conjure images of the paranormal equivalent of Indiana Jones, each was an act of trespassing and had they been caught, particularly on National Park property they would have faced federal prosecution involving fines and imprisonment!

Be aware also that some people perceive cemeteries as "public property." They are not public. Almost all cemeteries are privately owned or owned by a city or church. You do not have permission to go into them and conduct an investigation just because you can get through the gate. The same holds true of abandoned property. You must always ask permission. If you do not know who to ask you need to learn one of the most basic functions of an investigator - research. Learn to find the property's owner and how to contact them. If they give you permission, you're all set. If, on the other hand, they tell you no, then graciously accept that decision and stay away.

If you are given permission, never do anything on their property that is illegal or could cause them liability. I don't care if your "cleansing ritual" calls for you to swig alcohol and blow fire or something. Don't do it. Likewise, and I hope no decent investigator would ever do it, do not show up intoxicated or with alcohol or other drugs in you or on you. However, going back to the first point, if you do not know who is accompanying you, you never know what they may be doing!

Watch your step! When investigating old buildings it is imperative that you be careful of where you step. Always be sure you know the layout and the location of any potential hazards. Never go "lights out" before the entire area has been checked for safety hazards and everyone clearly instructed on where they are. Better yet, mark those hazards if possible!

Never work alone! There are two very good reasons for this rule. The first is it helps eliminate the potential for fraud by making sure everyone is accounted for at all times. More importantly, however, it works as a safety rule. Should one person be injured or become ill there is another person available to get help immediately.

Watch the cords! Larger groups will run a lot of cable during an investigation for the remote cameras. These cords should be taped down if possible (be careful of floors and carpets though). Make sure you watch where they are and avoid stepping on them if possible so you don't trip!

Be aware of your surroundings! Always have someone watching the area when you are working in isolated areas or outdoors. You never know what kind of people will be drawn to the activity. Be aware of vagrants in the area, kids looking for trouble and when working in abandoned areas - drug dealers and other unsavory types. It is rare that you will run into problems but it does happen. Be sure you know where all your people are at all times and don't hesitate to get help if needed from law enforcement!

Make sure you have a cell phone and it has service in the area where you are! Everyone these days carries a cell phone but when you are working in outlying areas be sure you have service! It will do you no good to need police or an ambulance and not be able to call 911!

Cut out the Horseplay! As the night wears on it is tempting to get a little silly on those investigations where nothing happens.

This is especially true of young or inexperienced groups and investigators. However, don't give in to the temptation to horse around by trying to scare others. Do not hide behind doors and jump out or put bugs down someone's shirt. The reason is quite simple, suppose you jump out from behind a door and he person you scare leaps back and trips down some stairs. Would the joke be funny then? It's best to leave the joking around until after the investigation is wrapped up.

Use Common Sense! Sure, you really want to get that camera on top of an old shelf but don't have a step ladder. What do you do? Do you find another spot to place it or do you climb on top of the pile of old lumber on the floor and hope you do not slide off? I hope that you will use common sense, find another placement, and learn that a step stool is not a bad thing to put in your kit.

Using common sense will keep you out of a lot of trouble. Think before you do things and remember that no investigation is ever worth a trip to the hospital or worse. After all, you are there to hunt ghosts, not join their ranks because you fell off a table and broke your neck!

Please be careful out there and remember, you will face a lot more threats from every day objects than you ever will from ghosts so please be aware of your physical safety as much as your spiritual safety!

Disclaimer: This column represents my personal views on the Paranormal. All articles herein are my opinion solely and should not be construed to speak for any groups that I work with during investigations.

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