

## **But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids**

Ghosts And Fairies And Gnomes, On My!

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[Jane] I'm Jane Lindholm and this is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids*. It's a show where you ask the questions and we help find cool people to answer them. We'll tell you how to ask your own question at the end of the episode.

If you live in the United States, the jack-o-lantern on your doorstep might have finally turned to mush and you're at the end of your Halloween candy. Halloween, the season of tricks and treats, is behind us. But all of that talk of ghosts and ghouls has some of you curious about all things supernatural.

Do you remember what that word means, supernatural? It came up in our episode on why there are so many different religions. Supernatural means things that don't exist in the natural world. Today we're going to tackle two questions about supernatural beings. But don't worry we're actually not talking about things that are scary.

Later in the episode, we'll be talking with a guy in Iceland who studies folklore including the long tradition of believing in gnomes and elves in that country.

But first this.

[Avery] My name is Avery. I'm nine years old. I live in Jeffersonville, Vermont. And' I'm wondering if ghosts are real.

[Jane] A lot of people believe in ghosts even though there's no scientific proof of them. We are going to hear now from a professor who studies why some people believe in ghosts. Again there's nothing scary in today's show but we are going to have an open-ended discussion about why some people believe in supernatural spirits. So if that sounds scary to you, maybe you should have an adult listen to this episode first.

[Justin] My name is Justin McDaniel. And I'm a professor and I teach religious studies especially about Asian religions, things in Thailand, in India and China at the University of Pennsylvania.

You know if we study history and we study other cultures, every culture, every religion every race, every ethnicity on the planet Earth, for as long as we have recorded history, has had some belief in ghosts. So people in ancient China, or people in modern India, or people in medieval Ghana, people in Peru, no matter what time period and no matter what religion, no matter what part of the world, every culture has some sort of belief in ghosts, or some sort of belief that we have a life after our death.

Now that doesn't mean that every person on earth believes in ghosts. It means that all cultures have had some form of belief, and all religions have had some form of belief. Certainly some people in Guyana, or Peru, or Thailand, or India, or Poland, or Russia, they don't believe in ghosts, but actually the vast majority of people on the planet when we've done surveys and done studies do believe in ghosts.

And so why is that?

There are many different theories about why humans believe in ghosts. Some theories are that when people die, they have a soul, and that soul goes out of their human body out of their, you know, flesh and bone and that it goes to another place. And that ghosts are those souls reaching out to us because they miss us.

Some cultures, for example in places like India, believe that these beings that exist after death, they want to guide us. They want to give us advice. They want to warn us, they want to protect us. And so that they might not have had a chance to tell us that they loved us in life, that they missed us, and they might not have had a chance to give us all the good advice and wisdom that they had built up in their life and they want to share it with us.

In some places like Thailand, in some places like Cuba, is belief that people, or beings, that live in the afterlife they actually can heal us. And so if we do certain rituals we do in certain ceremonies we offer them certain gifts that they can use in the afterlife that they actually can protect us in this life. They can heal disease or they can even help us win the lottery sometimes, and so different cultures have different beliefs.

Many cultures especially Anglo-American cultures, cultures in the United States and in parts of Europe, believe that ghosts are because souls, when a person dies their soul goes to an afterlife and that they had unfinished business on earth, meaning that they died before they had a chance to tell someone that they loved them. They died before they had a chance to create a great work of art, or they died before they had a chance to resolve a particular issue that they had in their life. And so that they're trying to get back to human life and they're trying to finish that business that was left unfinished.

All of these different cultures have different beliefs about what happens in the afterlife. Some cultures especially what we call the Abrahamic cultures, the Christians, and Jewish people and Muslims. They believe that there is a heaven, that there's a paradise. Other cultures like Zoroastrians, coming out of Persia, or Iran, or Hindus in India or Buddhists. They believe that there's many levels of heaven, that they're sometimes 31 levels, or 33 levels of heaven, and heaven is like a tall skyscraper in a sense. And each floor is a different type of heaven and you go there to particular heavens because of what you did while you were alive on earth. Now also these

cultures have sometimes a belief in different levels of hell and you go to places that are that cause suffering, that are scary.

If you look at the different cultures throughout the earth and you look at the history of religions, it's really complex to see all these different beliefs, between Buddhists and Hindus and Christians and Jews and Muslims and other religions.

Scientists have no proof that ghosts exist. There might not be any ghosts. It might just be a belief that humans have, but there actually is no scientific proof of ghosts.

There has been some studies of it but we have no definitive proof that there's ghosts. We have no facts that there are ghosts. And so if there is no scientific proof and there's no facts then, then why do we continue to believe in ghosts? You know, why do we hold onto this idea? Well some people believe even if there's no factual reason that we have ghosts, is that it can't hurt. That the belief in ghosts can't hurt, why not believe in it? It's nice to believe that if your grandfather, or your aunt, or a friend, or friend's mom or dad passes away, is that we can contact them that they don't fully disappear, that they can hear our prayers, or they can hear our voices, or that we can reach out to them. And there's many people in different cultures called mediums. People that are able to be like a bridge between the world of living in the world of the ghostly realms. And so why not? Why not have, be able to reach out to them if helps us understand more about the value of our own life?

And also some scientists believe that actually believing in ghosts makes us in a sense different from animals. Believing and hoping that you have a life after death makes you work hard in this life.

Different historians and different scientists and different specialists in religion have kind of wondered about your question and asked the exact same question you have and have come up with different ideas and different theories, we call them for do ghosts exist or not. And so I would say that it's a great question and I think that you know, it makes us think that ghosts aren't necessary scary, they're not necessarily haunting us.

Is that belief in ghosts meaning that your belief is that there is hope afterlife and that maybe in this life and in the afterlife we have a lot more people to communicate with us. And a lot more people that care about us even if they're ghosts.

[Jane] That was Justin McDaniel, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. As you heard Justin didn't have a definitive answer for you, Avery, about whether or not ghosts are real. So here's what I would say: ghosts mean different things to different people and in different cultures. It's OK if you believe in ghosts and it's OK if you don't. But as for the science, there is no way to disprove the existence of ghosts and no way

scientists have come up with to actually prove the existence of supernatural beings either.

If believing in the kinds of ghosts that Justin was talking about makes you feel comforted that's great. But if ghosts are making you scared that's another thing altogether. So Avery and others if you're feeling scared about ghosts I want you to talk to an adult that you trust because ghosts should not be something that's making you worried.

We had another question about the supernatural and different belief systems from Aurelia.

[Aurelia] Hi. My name is Aurelia. I live in St. Paul, Minnesota. I'm five years old. My question is why do some cultures believe in fairies and elves and some don't?

[Jane] We just heard from Justin McDaniel about different religions and cultures that incorporate ghosts into their belief systems. Well, fairies and gnomes are kind of the same but often these creatures have less to do with religion and death and more to do with landscapes.

One country where there's still a strong cultural belief in things like gnomes and elves is Iceland. Iceland is a small island in the North Atlantic just below the Arctic Circle. It's a mostly rural country and it has a long tradition of believing in elves and other spirits.

So in Iceland you have to be careful about things like moving big rocks to build a new road because it might disturb the elves. I got in touch with a man named Terry Gunnell. He lives in Iceland and he studies folklore, cultural stories and beliefs and customs.

Terry says there are two words in Icelandic that typically describe the supernatural beings that inhabit the landscape.

[Terry] Alfar and huldufolk. Huldufolk means hidden people. Alfar means the elves. Although, they're not live the kind of elves we imagine in England and America. They the same size as us, they look like us but many people who say that they have experience of these things beings, they talk about imaginary friends that they have to play with when they were children. And that's a phenomenon that I think many kids know themselves even nowadays, imaginary friends that they played with. But in Iceland and they'll be called alfar, the elves. We're living in a country here that is very alive. I think that's a good way to put it. My house can be destroyed by something that I can see in the shape of an earthquake. I can be knocked off my feet by the wind. I turn on a tap and I get boiling hot water coming out of it with the smell of sulfur, which tells us that out of sight below the ground there is lava running there. You look at the sky and you have the northern lights flickering right across it like the biggest television screen in

the world. And the snow makes shapes in the wind side. And as you walk into the landscape the land is made of lava and it has strange shapes in it which encourage people to see things within it. You know certainly that the land you're standing on was once upon a time of life. So Iceland is very much alive. You, you go out to the hot springs you can hear the water glubbing to itself. You go to a glacier and you can hear it grinding as it moves forward. So the landscape is very much alive and will talk to you and it's in its own way. And you can understand why farmers believe that they need to work with it. They need to show respect for it, for the nature around them whether they do it personally in terms of elves or simply in the sense that they need to show respect for the landscape which is in a sense personified all turned into the idea of the elves.

[Jane] If you've never seen pictures of the landscape in Iceland you should. It is stunning and bizarre and very much alive as Terry said. There are glaciers and lava fields and volcanoes that still erupt, frequent earthquakes, geysers that shoot water 100 feet into the air, and hot springs all around the country. Some of them are the right temperature for swimming or soaking in, kind of like a giant bathtub. It's an amazing place and it makes sense with a landscape that changes so frequently that people think of it as alive. That understanding of the world as alive translates into a cultural belief in things like elves that live inside the rocks and trees. But Terry says it's not quite as simple as saying that everyone in Iceland believes in elves.

[Terry] We did a big national survey of what people believed, ranging from God down to nature spirits and dreams and things. And we had about a thousand people answering questions. We talk about the belief in elves and things of this kind. The figures are that maybe only 10 percent believe in these beings but then only about 10 percent of them don't believe.

[Jane] That leaves about 80 percent, most of the people in the country who fall somewhere in between. Terry says here's an example of how this cultural belief might express itself in a typical person in Iceland, somebody who is in that 80 percent.

[Terry] Speak to an Icelander and ask them, tell them that they have a rock in the garden outside and they're thinking of getting rid of rock to put in a small swimming pool or a hot pot. And as they are getting ready to get rid of this rock that neighbor looks over the wall and says what are you doing? And they say I'm going to build a Jacuzzi out here. And the neighbor says, but you know what that rock is don't you? That's an elf rock. And then comes a question will the person who owns the garden remove the rock or not?

And I would say 90 percent of people won't touch it. Partly because it's part of Icelandic culture and partly also because there's a sense of maybe something will go wrong if I do it. And when you live in a country as close to natural power as Iceland you don't mess

with it. So there's a strong superstition. I think it's more of a sort of superstition rather than anything else. And it adds magic to the landscape and what's wrong that?

[Jane] So don't move an elf rock if you live in Iceland. Terry says he's never seen a ghost or an elf, but his wife has and he's open to these ideas. He told me we should respect each other's beliefs no matter what we personally believe. As for why some cultures don't believe in elves and gnomes. Terry says most original cultures actually did have a belief in the supernatural but in some cases those beliefs have been lost. A lot of times that's actually because a group of people arrived in an area and kind of took over and imposed their beliefs on the people who were already living there. A lot of times those beliefs were influenced by a particular religion and the church and the people in charge of the church didn't want native beliefs to take away from a belief in God, so they tried to discourage, or even forbid native people from their belief in spirits.

That happened to the Native American beliefs for example and to a lot of native cultures in South America when European explorers came in and took over the land. In our modern culture, some people believe and some don't. It might be based on what your parents think are your friends or your opinions might be built on your own experiences. Aurelia, I hope that gives you something to think about at least. Thank you for the fantastic question

But Why is produced by me, Jane Lindholm and by Melody Bodette at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We had other music this week from Simon Waldren and XX.

If you have a question that you'd like us to tackle on this show have an adult in your life record it on a smartphone and then send the file to [questions@butwhykids.org](mailto:questions@butwhykids.org). Be sure to tell us your first name, where you live, and how old you are. We'll be back in two weeks with a whole new episode about food just in time for Thanksgiving. We'll be exploring this cool question from Alex.

[Alex] Why do we like to eat certain foods? For example why do some people like spicy foods and like some people not like to eat their vegetables and that stuff?

[Jane] Answers in less than two weeks, until then, stay curious!