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Ouija Board

"The ouija board, as is well known, is a device designed to permit human beings to give expression to subconscious thoughts induced by complete muscular and mental relaxation"

- U.S. Pat. 1400791, Dec. 20, 1921 -

Ouija Boards, in some form or another, have actually been around much longer than the above patent would appear to indicate. In fact, such boards, often referred to as talking boards, have been around since the 19th century and there were earlier predecessors known as dial plates or Spiritographs. The fact that they were referred to as "talking boards" was meant to indicate that they were somehow allowing spirits to communicate with the living by means of the board.

The boards with which we are most familiar have an alphabet placed in two curved rows along with answers of Yes, No, Good Bye and the numbers 0 through 9. Also, until recently, one of the more commonly available Ouija Boards by Parker Brothers always included the name of William Fuld, a prolific manufacturer of Ouija Boards until his untimely death in 1927. He was supervising the installation of a flagpole on top of the building from which he fell to his death.

The case could be made that there is nothing inherently evil or demonic about a Ouija Board. After all, most of those we see today are cardboard and printed paper with a plastic planchette (the pointing device). The device itself is simply a patented form of a method of "spirit communication" that was commonly toyed with during the latter 19th century. People wishing to contact spirits would lay out cards with the alphabet and numbers in a circle on a table. An overturned glass would be placed in the center, and each sitter at the table would place a finger on the glass. They would ask questions and the glass would often move around to spell out answers. Despite all of this, there are those who insist that Ouija Boards are evil even though they have long been manufactured by toy companies (Fuld and later Parker Brothers among many others) and sold in a wide variety of toy stores.

Some will tell you it is spirits that are responsible for

the movement of the planchette while other will tell you the pointer moves because of something called the ideomotor response (assuming that the pointer is not being consciously pushed). The ideomotor response is a result of unconsciously driven minor muscle movements. In other words, the unconscious/subconscious mind makes the things move. Some psychologists describe it as a form of dissociation, since the brain sends signals to the muscles directly, bypassing human consciousness. The term was coined by psychologist/physiologist William B. Carpenter in 1852. Yet, does the ideomotor explanation mean spirits are really not involved?

One thing does appear to be true as observed by those who have used Ouija Boards, the answers obtained with the boards are not always correct. People often ask questions about the future during Ouija Boards sessions. When the subsequent realities are later compared with the predictions the boards seldom provide answers that are much better than guesswork. So, does this mean that spirits are not involved or just that the spirits are no more knowledgeable about the future than the rest of us?

The instructions that have accompanied Ouija Boards in the recent past always explain that you need to treat attempts to use the board with a degree of seriousness. That is, joking around with an attempt to use the board is likely to result in a lack of responsiveness from the board. It has also been pointed

out that responsiveness on the first few attempts can be slow in coming. So, people do tend to treat the experience with some degree of decorum and seriousness. As a result, participants do generally try their best to be careful that they are not simply pushing the planchette to a desired answer. Also, in general, the participating pair of users will normally swear that they are not making the pointer move to specific answers.

Normally a pair of Ouija Board participants gently place their finger tips on the planchette and ask a question that they wish the board to answer. Then they wait patiently until the planchette begins to move to either spell out an answer, supply a Yes or No answer, or pick any of the numbers on the board. It often takes quite a while before some kind of activity begins to happen during an initial attempt, but invariably something does eventually happen. In response to subsequent questions or after users have become more familiar with what to expect, the board generally reacts much faster.

My direct personal experience with a Ouija Board happened about forty years ago when I was about 15 years old and my sister was about 12. I don't remember the circumstance surrounding how we happened to acquire the board in our house, but the simple fact was that my sister and I began to "play" with this "toy" from Parker Brothers. As the instructions warned, our first attempt at using the board met with a long

wait and a slow response. However, this wasn't the case for long. By the end of our first session the reaction of the board was quite fast. Subsequent uses of the board also did not exhibit any initial delay in responsiveness.

In our use of the board I knew I was not purposely moving the planchette and I was subsequently convinced that my sister was also not voluntarily moving it. I came to this conclusion because she took to using the Ouija Board by herself (something that is not particularly common). Using the board by yourself wouldn't make any sense if you knew you were pushing the pointer to the answers. So, it seems that both of us were using the board appropriately. We also took it seriously and didn't joke around with it.

The results we obtained were both interesting and inconclusive. During our use, the board claimed that the answers we were getting were coming from someone named Huggins who was a deceased American Indian. We also learned that Huggins was no good at predicting the future. What was more interesting to me were the things that the board did that didn't result in answers.

When we asked a question for which the board did not have an immediate answer it took to doing a couple of rather interesting things. Of course it could be said that it was actually us doing these things. At any rate, we were often

faced with a couple of interesting "moves" by the board. One of the moves was something I called scanning. The planchette under our hands would literally race across the top row of the alphabet then back across the bottom row time after time. Then after several cycles of this it would begin to slow and begin spelling an actual answer. At other times, if an answer still wasn't available, the planchette would begin doing a second interesting move I termed the death spiral. The death spiral began as a large circle slowly reducing in diameter until it reaches the center point. At this point the planchette would return to scanning a few more times before rewarding us with an answer.

To put scanning and the death spiral into perspective, it never occurred to my sister and I that such moves could even be expected from a Quija Board. We knew nothing about how this thing should, could or would work. I remember both the scanning and spirally process surprised us both at the time. It surprised us by the speed and accuracy of the movements which would actually be hard to coordinate between two people who were purposely trying to make them happen let alone between two kids who were not trying to make them happen.

One question surrounding use of a Quija Board tends to be whether or not the answers are coming from a spirit or just from the ideomotor affect of the participants. However, maybe this

is the wrong question all together.

Our muscles are driven by small electrical impulses conducted through nerves. Could it be that when participants purposely relax voluntary control over their muscles these nerves, or perhaps the brain itself, picks up small electrical signals from another source or spirit? Interestingly, having two participants might actually help nullify uncoordinated ideomotor actions by each person while increasing the susceptibility to any coordinated influence by an external source or spirit. In support of this it should be noted that use of a Ouija Board by only one person is notably more difficult. Possibly this is because of the difficulty an individual will have relaxing and suppressing uncoordinated ideomotor actions that would otherwise prevent the board from producing coherent rather than random movements.

Having said all of this, are Ouija Boards evil or just toys? The famous line in the movie Forrest Gump was, "Stupid is as stupid does." Perhaps the same applies here as well. It is what we do with a Ouija Board that is the determining factor.