

# **GHOSTS OF THE TSUNAMI**

by Colin Wilson - Author and expert on the paranormal.

Spectres on the beach, voices calling from empty buildings. On the second anniversary of the tsunami, the extraordinary story of how one British couple set out to bring peace to the victims' spirits.

Half an hour before the tsunami struck Phi Phi island, the sea retreated two miles, making it look as though someone had pulled an enormous bath plug. Locals who had been taught about tsunamis knew what this meant, and many lost no time retreating to higher ground - the island is a plain between two mountains.

But the majority of people on the beaches were foreign tourists, escaping from the winter at home, and they stayed to gaze in astonishment at the mudscape that had opened up before them. Ten minutes later a 25-foot wave struck at 100mph, sweeping away buildings, trees and cars.

What was left on the plain looked like Hiroshima after the nuclear bomb. Bodies were washed up on the beaches for weeks afterwards, and the smell of decaying flesh and rotten fish was everywhere. In all, at least 200,000 people had been killed across the region.

For the first four days after the catastrophe on Boxing Day 2004, everyone on Phi Phi island was too stunned to do anything but clear up the giant piles of debris, seaweed and corpses, and try to help the survivors.

It was just as they were starting to regain some sense of normality that the reports of ghosts began.

There were tales of half-naked people seen wandering among wrecked buildings, of voices calling in distress from empty beaches, of a spectral woman seen walking along the shoreline at night, crying out for her child.

"My staff are getting really panicked," said Chaiyun Trisuwan, general manager of the Phi Phi Island Village resort, which was used as a temporary mortuary for corpses from a neighbouring bay. "There are rumours - some guy saw this, some guy saw that. This is definitely the number one problem."

Trisuwan's workers became so unnerved that he had to hire security guards to accompany them home after dark. Meanwhile, in Patong, on nearby Phuket Island, another security guard quit his job after hearing a woman's voice crying "Help me!" all night from a badly damaged, and utterly deserted hotel.

On one beach, volunteer searchers who went to investigate sounds of laughter and singing, found only an expanse of bare sand. A family in Khao Lak complained that their telephone rang day and night, and that when they answered it, they heard voices of dead friends and relatives begging for help.

Taxi drivers even claimed that they had picked up phantom passengers. BBC news correspondent, Tony Cheng, interviewed the driver of a tuk-tuk minivan named Lek, who recounted how he picked up seven foreign tourists late on the night of January 6<sup>th</sup>, a week and a half after the disaster.

“Go to Kata Beach,” the tourists told him, after agreeing a 200 baht fare. Lek drove for a short distance, but then felt numb all over his body. Looking around, he saw the cab was empty. Lek told Tony Cheng, “I am going to get a new job. I have a daughter to support, but I am too scared to go out driving at night.”

Other drivers spoke of a colleague who had picked up a foreign man and his Thai girlfriend, who asked to go to the airport. After a while, the driver glanced in the rear-view mirror, and found an empty seat behind him.

A Thai psychologist, Piyamanutham Wallop, declared that all these strange reports were simply the result of post traumatic stress disorder. Another doctor insisted that it was mass hallucination, due to the fact that Thais are very superstitious.

Most Thais themselves had a different explanation. They believe that the spirits of the dead need to be laid to rest by relatives, and when this is not done their ghosts remain trapped on earth, unable to escape.

According to the Thais, the ghosts of people who have died a sudden or violent death face particular problems. Like the traumatised survivors of a car accident, they wander around in a state of total confusion. They need help before they can leave life behind.

That, according to local people, is why so few of the tsunami ghost sightings were of native Thais. They had already received the help they needed to move on, from Buddhist priests and relatives, while the westerners did not realise what had happened to them and were lingering behind.

Strange as it may seem, this view would now be endorsed by most western experts on parapsychology. They too have come to believe that ghosts are usually dead people who do not *know* they are dead, and thus become stuck in earthbound reality.

When I heard the accounts of the tsunami ghosts, it seemed obvious to me that this was what had happened to them. At first, conscious of the feelings of those who lost loved-ones in the disaster, I was reluctant to write about the subject - but then I discovered some astonishing work that had been done to bring peace to these restless spirits.

I now believe that this whole story offers inspiring proof of the reality of the afterlife, and the way in which the dead can be helped by the living. To understand it fully, we need to begin not in Thailand, but in Britain.

The key to the modern understanding of ghosts was an observation made by an obstetric surgeon in a London maternity hospital. Her name was Florence Barrett,

and she was the wife of Sir William Barrett, a professor of physics. On the evening of January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1924, she came home with a strange story to tell.

One of her patients had suffered a heart attack after giving birth, and as Lady Barrett held her hand, the woman said, "Don't let it get dark – it's getting darker and darker."

Then she looked across the room and said, "Oh, lovely, lovely!"

"What's lovely?"

"Lovely brightness, wonderful beings," said the woman. "Why, it's father. He's so glad I'm coming." Then she started with surprise. "There's Vida!"

Vida was the patient's younger sister, who had died two weeks earlier, but the woman had not been told in case it upset her. She died an hour later, continuing to hold a normal conversation with the people around her bed, but still seeing her father and sister, and the 'lovely light'.

Sir William Barrett was so fascinated by this incident that he began making enquiries in hospitals, and soon found that most doctors and nurses could tell similar stories. He went on to write a book about it called, 'Death Bed Visions'.

In the 1940's, one of his admirers, a Latvian researcher called Dr. Karlis Osis, had the sensible idea of sending out a questionnaire to hundreds of other doctors and nurses asking for their observations on dying patients. He learned that a huge percentage saw dead relatives. Dying children often saw angels, and were puzzled to discover that they had no wings.

Another researcher, Erlendur Haraldsson, went to India to find out whether people from a different culture would have the same kind of deathbed experiences. The answer was an emphatic yes - and in the 1960s, a third researcher, Professor Douglas Dean, discovered that this holds true across people of all religions, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, even Aborigines. In other words, it seems that a vast percentage of people who die quietly in their beds are guided from this world to 'the next' - whatever that may be - by the spirits of people they have loved or been close to.

But for people who die violently, or under strange circumstances, it seems things can be more difficult, and in their confusion they become 'earth-bound', unaware of where to go next. These ghosts are then dependent on the help of the living - priests, relatives, or (as we shall see) psychic investigators - to convince them of their plight, and to show them how to leave life behind.

The classic book on the subject is by a Chicago doctor, Carl Wickland, and is called 'Thirty Years Among the Dead'. Wickland begins by explaining how, when he was a medical student, he married a nurse who was psychic.

One day when he came home after dissecting a corpse, he found his wife feeling dizzy. Suddenly a masculine voice spoke from her mouth, "Why are you cutting my leg?"

Since Wickland had just been dissecting the corpse's leg, he realised that the voice must belong to its owner. It seemed the ghost had followed him back from the hospital - and because this individual had died suddenly, he had no idea he was dead. It took a lot of argument to persuade the ghost that, since his body was now in the dissecting room, he must really be dead, and to send him off in search of the 'lovely light'.

This light seems to be a kind of portal between this world and the next, and Wickland came to realise that, in the confusion of sudden death, it is easy to miss. The dead person goes on living in a kind of bad dream from which it is impossible to wake up, and has to be encouraged to seek the portal.

Wickland's discoveries caused a revolution among psychological researchers, and led to the formation of dozens of 'rescue circles'. These all used the same methods Wickland had pioneered, that is, they talked to earthbound spirits, and tried to convince them they were dead. Sometimes, spirits who had already been rescued joined in and became helpers. Even so, spirit rescue was slow work. A rescue circle might devote a whole evening to helping just one spirit.

Then, in the late 1970s, a talented young psychic named Terry O'Sullivan began to wonder if there was not some quicker and more efficient method. Terry's great grandmother had been a Romany gypsy, who had passed on her powers to her daughter, who in turn passed them on to Terry.

When he went to London in his early 20s, he joined a rescue circle in Richmond, and spent the next few years developing his skills. It was hard, and sometimes frightening work - on one occasion, he reported being attacked by a poltergeist that clung to his back, glued to his powerful human aura like a nail to a magnet, only letting go when they were both exhausted.

It was towards 1980 that Terry stumbled on his new method of working. The root of the problem, he realised, is that earthbound spirits are living in a world that seems real to them. Not knowing they are dead, they may go on hanging around the same place as when they were alive, and be baffled and irritated that other people are now living there - people they feel to be intruders.

Terry has often been asked to investigate a haunting, and found the puzzled and unhappy spirit of the last tenant, who believes that squatters have moved in. Terry then has to explain what has happened, and persuade the spirit to move on.

Crucially, living in their unreal world, 'earth-bounds' see no clear distinction between thoughts and objects, and this Terry realised, could provide him with the basis of a new rescue technique.

The idea came to him when he was gravely ill, and thought he was dying. He seemed to be at the entrance of a tunnel of light, but as he moved towards it, he saw his grandfather standing at the other end and making a gesture as if to say, "No." At the

same time Terry seemed to hear his grandfather tell him, “Go back, it's not your time yet”. After that, he began to recover.

The experience made him realise that if he could only learn to show earth-bound spirits this tunnel of light, it would be far easier than simply talking to them about it.

What he had to do was to try to conjure up his own vision of the ‘lovely light’ then turn himself into a kind of television transmitter to make the earth-bound spirit see it too. When that happened, the spirit would plunge into it, like a stranded fish diving into water.

Sometimes, when he had to deal with more than one spirit at a time - as when, on one occasion, he visited an American Civil War battlefield that was still full of the ghosts of fallen soldiers - Terry would conjure up the image of a staircase, extending between the two worlds. This method proved to be so successful that he now teaches it to all his students.

When I read reports of the tsunami ghosts, I understood the appalling implications of the disaster - thousands of bewildered people who were unaware that they were dead. So it seemed only right that someone should attempt to use Terry’s techniques to help these poor souls.

On the day before the tsunami, a young British couple named Ross Pepperell and Kate Hancock had already decided to take a holiday in Thailand. They eventually set out in mid-March 2005, almost three months after the disaster had struck, and since both had been students of Terry O’Sullivan for three years, neither had any doubt about what to expect.

Their account of what followed is extraordinary, and many may find it hard to believe. But I personally have no doubts about their honesty and sincerity, and believe they may have achieved something quite remarkable on that tragic coast.

Ross and Katie are both natural ‘psychics’. Ross made the discovery when he was 14, and found that he could sometimes leave his body and walk around ‘outside himself’.

Katie realised she was not like other people when she had premonitions of the future which often came true, but she was initially inclined to regard that as some odd kind of coincidence. Then she went to work in a shop selling crystals, and found that the crystals were causing her to develop healing powers.

When Ross and Katie set out from England, they had already heard the reports of the ghost sightings, and even as their plane circled Phuket airport, they sensed the activity was still going on. Ross said later, “I could feel the emotional shock of the disaster in my stomach. The airport itself had a heavy atmosphere that is often an indication of psychic disturbance and of haunting.”

I asked him, “Could you see ghosts?”

“You don’t see ghosts, you feel them.”

I was disappointed. "You don't ever see them?"

"Oh yes, but that's after you learn to feel them. They're like a crowd of semi-visible people, and they're easiest to see in the half light."

Phi Phi was a beautiful island, and still is, in spite of the damage. Nothing can alter the beauty of the dawns and the sunsets, or of the vast seascape stretching towards Sumatra. But for Ross and Katie there was something not quite right - a feeling of tension in the air - and at dusk they discovered, some of the invisible crowd of bewildered ghosts could become more visible to the living.

That is why Chaiyun Trisuwan, the manager of the Phi Phi Island Village resort, had to hire security guards to accompany his workers back home after dark.

Ross and Katie soon realised that the majority of spirits left on the island were foreigners - English, American, German. Just as the local people said, the Thai dead had been released by religious ceremonies, but the foreigners were unable to understand rituals in the Thai language.

The task of Ross and Katie was to perform the same service for these stranded foreigners. They could sense that, for these unhappy ghosts, merely to have someone who could see them, and understand what had happened to them was a tremendous relief.

So, the following day Ross and Katie walked around the island. They were able to sense the presence of people who needed help, because in certain places there was a vibration of distress and emotional turmoil, trapped like tape recordings by powerful earth energies.

Dowsers can pick up these energies with a divining rod or pendulum, but after three years of practice Ross and Katie no longer needed these tools. By now, both were permanently aware of the 'ghosts', most of them young people between 20 and 30, many of the girls in bikinis, the men in bathing shorts and flip-flops. 'Spirits' see themselves - and are seen by others - in the clothes they died in.

Among the spirits were people who did know they were dead, but had no idea of what to do next, or where to go. Ross and Katie were able to speak to them, exactly as you would speak to another person. They told the spirits to be on the beach after dark, to watch out for a large bonfire, and to pass the word on to as many other spirits as they could.

That evening, Ross and Katie made an enormous bonfire of driftwood on the beach - there was no shortage of supplies - and then performed something called a 'land ritual', using dowsing techniques to purify and redirect the earth's energies.

This is a preliminary ceremony before opening a portal to the spirit world, and also establishes contact with helpers on 'the other side'. Ross estimates that there were over a thousand spirits on the beach.

Now came the difficult part. Ross calls it 'raising your vibrational rate' - clearing your mind of everyday thoughts and desires, and filling yourself with spiritual thoughts and emotions.

He and Katie worked at this in order to become fully aware of the connection between this world and the next, but it had to be done while maintaining contact with the vibrations of the spirits around them. They literally had to become a bridge.

Using the techniques taught to them by Terry, they conjured up the vision of a portal in the form of a staircase, at the point where the land joined the sea. Its starting point appeared as a golden glow, just as Florence Barrett's dying patient had described it.

The crowds began to move towards the light, like an audience leaving the cinema. Ross noted that a few late-comers even ran down the beach towards it. In a surprisingly short time it was all over and only Ross, Katie, and a few of their spirit helpers remained on an empty beach.

Ross asked them if there was anything further they could do, and the answer was no. So, they returned to their hotel room up the hill, with a pleasant sense of a job well done - and for their remaining few days holiday on Phi Phi island they were able to enjoy the sun and the waves in a new atmosphere of relaxation.

I have since read reports of several so-called 'exorcisms' performed by Chinese spiritualists on the tsunami beaches to achieve the same ends. In one, white robed monks from the Pu Ta Gong sect chanted prayers, lit incense and offered sacrifices of food to the spirits.

Special offerings of pizza were included for foreign 'spirits', and paper clothes and money were burned to help in the passage to the afterworld.

Of course, western sceptics will scoff, but the Thai people themselves would see nothing strange or unlikely about such ceremonies. To them, the existence of earthbound spirits is a fact of life - as is our duty to help them find peace.

Two years on from the tsunami, I sincerely hope that this has now happened.

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Notes:

The author refers to Carl Wickland's book as 'Fifty Years Among the Dead', but I looked it up on Amazon, and found that to be an error. Should be 'Thirty Years Among the Dead'.

I made a slight, but important change to the sentence published as: 'The root of the problem, he realised, is that earthbound spirits are living in a world that seems unreal to them'.

"Unreal" seems to make no sense, and I believe the author meant to put "Real" at that point.