THE GRAY

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ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

WELCOME TO THE GRAY

Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette
by Vincent van Gogh. Public Domain.

ON THE COVER

Head of a Skeleton with a Burning Cigarette is one of Vincent van Gogh's most unusual paintings. He painted it while studying at the Art Academy in Antwerp. Due to his poor health at the time, it is commonly considered a Memento Mori, symbolizing the transience of life, the futility of pleasure, and the certainty of death.

Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890)
Oil on Canvas, 1886

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ABOUT THE GRAY

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NIGHTSHADES, VESPERTINES, AND VENEFICIUM:
PLANTS AND OUR SHADOW SELVES

WITCH'S FLYING OINTMENT

CHRISTINA WILKE-BURBACH, PhD

The witch riding a broomstick, soaring through moonlit skies, is the ultimate symbol of the occult, mysticism, and Halloween. Behind that image lies a more complex history: a class of topical preparations, variously called flying ointment, green salve, Hexensalbe, or Unguentum sabbati, recorded in European folklore as the substance that enabled witches to "fly" to their nocturnal gatherings, sabbats, and rituals. Witches' ointments were believed to grant supernatural powers. The "flying salve" or witches' flying ointment is one of the most fascinating and eerie legends from medieval European folklore. It was not just a spooky tale—it was a blend of reality, pharmacology, mysticism, and fear.

Flying salve was a hallucinogenic ointment made from extremely toxic plants, many of which contain tropane alkaloids like scopolamine, atropine, and hyoscyamine. These substances can cause vivid hallucinations, sensations of flying, and out-of-body experiences when absorbed through the skin. Rather than true flight, the salve likely induced trance-like states, astral projection experiences, and visions of flying or traveling to distant places. One 15th-century account describes a man who used the ointment and felt himself flying—only to later realize he had been unconscious the entire time. This makes us wonder…do the ointments also induce a dream state?

Witches were said to apply the ointment to their bodies—or even to broomsticks—and then straddle them, leading to the iconic image of witches flying on brooms. Some accounts suggest the ointment was applied to intimate areas for faster absorption, which may explain the broomstick's symbolic role. Plants in the flying ointment recipe include:

Atropa belladonna (Deadly nightshade): Active compounds: atropine, scopolamine, hyoscyamine. Effects: marked delirium, visual hallucinations, confusion, and amnesia; anticholinergic effects such as dry skin and dilated pupils. Historically prized for its potent mind-altering delirium and transdermal activity, belladonna is one of the most commonly cited ingredients in flying ointments.

Hyoscyamus niger (Black henbane): Active compounds: hyoscyamine, scopolamine, atropine. Effects: delirium, vivid and often terrifying hallucinations, sedation or immobilization at higher doses. Henbane appeared frequently in medieval pharmacopoeias and witchcraft lore for its hallucinogenic properties and was a staple in many alleged recipes.

Datura stramonium (Jimson weed/thorn apple): Active compounds: scopolamine, hyoscyamine, atropine. Effects: intense delirium, dream-like visions, confusion, and strong anticholinergic symptoms. Datura's reputation for producing vivid, often nightmarish visions links it closely to narratives of astral journeys and shape-changing, and it is repeatedly named in ethnobotanical lists associated with flying salves.

Mandragora officinarum (Mandrake): Active compounds: tropane alkaloids similar to belladonna and henbane. Effects: sedative delirium and hallucinatory states; mandrake's long mythic history — including beliefs about its scream and magical potency — made it a natural candidate in ointment lore and magical manuals.

Aconitum spp. (Wolfsbane/aconite): Active compounds: aconitine and related alkaloids. Effects: powerful neurotoxic and cardiotoxic action. Historically cited more rarely but sometimes included in lists of poisonous ingredients associated with witches' salves. Aconite appears more often in demonological accusations and folkloric recipes.

Conium maculatum (Hemlock): Active compounds: coniine and related alkaloids. Effects: neuromuscular paralysis and respiratory depression. Historically noted among extreme toxicants sometimes associated with alleged salves and with criminal poisonings rather than ritual psychotropic use.

Potentilla reptans (Cinquefoil / cinquefoil references in sources): Active compounds: not psychoactive in the way tropane-bearing plants are. Appears in some recipes or lists, possibly as a filler, aromatic, or protective herb in folk formulations rather than the primary active agent.

Populus spp. (Poplar) and smallage (Apium graveolens / wild celery): Their roles are varied in records: aromatic base, carrier, or folkloric attribution rather than primary deliriant ingredient.

Many plants historically linked to flying ointments contain potent tropane alkaloids and other strong neurotoxins. These compounds can produce vivid hallucinations, sensations of detachment from the body, and amnesia, and some (notably scopolamine) can be absorbed through mucous membranes and damaged skin, producing systemic psychotropic effects without ingestion. Such pharmacology offers a plausible pharmacological explanation for reports of "flying": users in a scopolamine-induced delirium might experience compelling visions of journeying or transformation and may later have little coherent memory of the episode.

The legend of flying ointment played a significant role in the fear-driven witch hunts and trials of medieval and early modern Europe. The idea that witches could fly—unseen and unstoppable—terrified communities. It suggested invisible threats to church and state, women with secret powers defying social norms, and pacts with Satan undermining divine order. This fear was weaponized, and flying ointment became a symbol of guilt and admission to being a witch, often cited in confessions extracted under torture.

During witch trials, accused individuals were forced to describe how they made the ointment, with accusers often

claiming they used baby fat, graveyard dirt, or blood. Under torture, purported witches often “confessed” to using ointments given by the Devil. These accounts fueled the witch hunts. They confessed to flying through the night, transforming into animals, and consorting with demons. Manuals like the Malleus Maleficarum (Hammer of the Witches) used these accounts to justify executions. However, modern scholars believe the ointments caused hallucinations, not actual flight. Many accused witches were healers or midwives familiar with herbal medicine, and the flying ointment myth was likely a projection of cultural anxiety and hysteria about women, nature, and the unknown. This blend of pharmacology, fear, and theology helped fuel centuries of persecution and shaped the enduring image of the witch in Western culture.

Flying ointments sit at the crossroads of botany, belief, and persecution. Historical evidence makes clear these plants are often extremely dangerous; many have caused fatal poisonings when ingested or improperly handled. Modern herbalists, historians, and folklorists therefore treat the topic with caution: the lore of flying ointments is best understood as a cultural intersection of pharmacology, ritual imagination, female persecution, and mythmaking. ■

Title: Preparation for the Witches’ Sabbath
Artist: David Teniers II (1610-1690)
Date: 1640-1650
Medium: Oil on panel

Preparation for the Witches’ Sabbath depicts a variety of common witchcraft beliefs from the time, including the mixing and application of flying ointments, the use of brooms and cauldrons, and the assistance of demons. The artwork is also loaded with symbolic imagery associated with witchcraft, such as skulls, candles, and bats.

Teniers created several paintings and prints related to the Witches’ Sabbath, blending grotesque fantasy with scientific observation, and often featuring satirical or folkloric elements.

Title: A Witches’ Sabbath
Artist: Frans Francken II (1581–1642)
Date: 1606-1607
Medium: Oil on panel

A Witches’ Sabbath depicts a fantastical gathering of figures engaging in rituals and magic – a common theme in art from this era. Some art historians interpret the painting as a commentary on the superstitions and witch trials of the time, and the anxieties surrounding them.

The painting offers a dramatic contrast of light and dark, along with Francken’s masterful gift for color and detail, to create a mysterious and chaotic atmosphere.

Both images are in the public domain.

THE BEAUTY IN THE MACABRE

WHY WE'RE DRAWN TO DARKNESS

JESSICA HOCH

Photo courtesy of Jessica Hoch.

As the last leaves cling to the trees and twilight comes sooner each day, there's an undeniable pull toward the darker side of life. Autumn itself is a paradox: breathtaking in color, yet deeply aware of its own decline. This season invites us to look at endings, decay, and impermanence with fresh eyes. It is no coincidence that humanity's fascination with the macabre grows strongest in these months. We light jack-o'-lanterns, wander through haunted houses, and tell stories of restless spirits as though we cannot help but stare into the mystery of death and what lies beyond.

But why are we drawn to the macabre in the first place? And how can something so shadowed hold a beauty that feels magnetic, almost sacred? To answer that, we must step into the space where folklore, psychology, and the energy of the Earth herself intersect. Crystals, with their quiet power and mythic resonance, offer a surprising key to understanding why darkness is not only necessary but also transformative.

A Longing to Understand the Unseen

Humanity's attraction to the macabre is as old as storytelling itself. From ancient epics filled with underworld journeys to medieval tales of ghosts and omens, cultures across time have wrestled with what cannot be explained. Death, decay, and spirits remind us of impermanence, of the mysteries that resist logic.

There is fear, of course, but also awe. In gazing at the macabre, we are really gazing at the unknown — and in doing so, we touch the edge of transformation. Darkness becomes not just something to resist, but something that shapes us.

Crystals mirror this paradox. They emerge from darkness — the heat and pressure of the Earth's depths — and yet they glimmer with light. Stones like Obsidian, formed from cooled volcanic lava, remind us that beauty can come from destruction. Moonstone, with its ghostly sheen, whispers of cycles, change, and hidden truths. Jet, long used in mourning jewelry, holds an energy both protective and somber, allowing grief to be honored without overwhelming the spirit.

Folklore, Fear, and the Season of Spirits

Halloween, rooted in the Celtic festival of Samhain, is one of the clearest examples of how cultures embrace the macabre. At Samhain, the veil between the living and the dead was said to grow thin, allowing spirits to pass more freely. People carved frightening faces into turnips or later pumpkins, not simply for decoration but as protection against wandering souls. Costumes and disguises were donned to confuse whatever might emerge from the other side.

But beneath the fear was also reverence. Ancestors were honored, offerings left at doorways, and fires lit to guide loved ones home. The macabre became a form of communion — an acknowledgment that death is not an end but part of a larger cycle.

Carrying crystals into these practices can deepen their meaning. Black Tourmaline is a modern talisman for protection, creating an energetic boundary much like the carved pumpkin once did. Amethyst, tied to psychic awareness, supports those seeking to connect with spirit realms, guiding intuition without losing balance. Together, these stones echo the folklore traditions that transformed fear into ritual, allowing the macabre to serve as both warning and invitation.

The Psychological Allure of Darkness

From a psychological perspective, our fascination with the macabre also speaks to shadow work — the exploration of what we fear, repress, or avoid. Carl Jung referred to the "shadow self" as the parts of us we keep hidden, the pieces that feel too uncomfortable to face. Yet those very aspects often hold the key to transformation.

When we walk through haunted houses or listen to ghost stories, we are rehearsing for our own encounters with the unknown. We place ourselves in controlled environments where fear can rise and fall without real danger. In doing so, we strengthen our capacity to face the real shadows of our lives.

Crystals can be allies in this process. Bloodstone, with its deep green flecked by red, carries the duality of life and death, reminding us that vitality often emerges through struggle. Onyx, a stone of strength, offers grounding when confronting fears. And Moonstone, with its shifting glow, encourages us to accept cycles of light and dark within ourselves. These stones do not banish the macabre; they help us hold it without collapsing under its weight.

The Sacred Beauty of Impermanence

The macabre is not only about fear; it is also about beauty. A cemetery at dusk, lined with weathered headstones and framed by autumn leaves, carries a solemn grace. The skeletal branches of bare trees are stark yet elegant, reminding us that death has its own kind of artistry.

In Buddhism, impermanence is a central teaching — the recognition that all things change, decay, and eventually pass. Far from depressing, this truth opens us to gratitude, tenderness, and the ability to live fully in the present. Crystals such as Lepidolite, with

its soothing lilac shimmer, encourage acceptance of impermanence, easing anxiety and fostering peace. Smoky Quartz absorbs what is ready to be released, allowing endings to occur with grace rather than resistance.

When we embrace impermanence, we see that the macabre is not just about loss, but about the creative energy released when something dies away. Just as fallen leaves enrich the soil for spring's growth, so too do our endings nourish new beginnings.

Rituals for Embracing the Macabre with Crystals

For those who feel called to explore the beauty of the macabre, simple rituals with crystals can create grounding and meaning:

Nighttime Reflection with Moonstone:

Hold a moonstone under the autumn sky and meditate on cycles in your life — what has ended, what is beginning, and how mystery weaves them together.

Shadow Journaling with Onyx:

Place an onyx stone on your desk as you write about a fear you've avoided. Allow the stone's energy to remind you that strength is born from facing the shadow.

Ancestral Altar with Jet and Amethyst:

Build a small altar with photos or symbols of loved ones who have passed. Place Jet for protection and Amethyst to open intuitive connection, honoring their presence without fear.

Release Ceremony with Smoky Quartz:

At dusk, hold a smoky quartz and breathe out something you are ready to let go of. Imagine the stone absorbing it, leaving you lighter as the night falls.

These rituals invite us not to flee from the macabre but to meet it with reverence, curiosity, and the support of the Earth's quiet wisdom.

Darkness as Teacher

Autumn's decline and humanity's love of the macabre are not accidents of timing. They are reflections of the same truth: that endings, shadows, and death are woven into life's fabric. We are drawn to them because, on some level, we know they are sacred teachers.

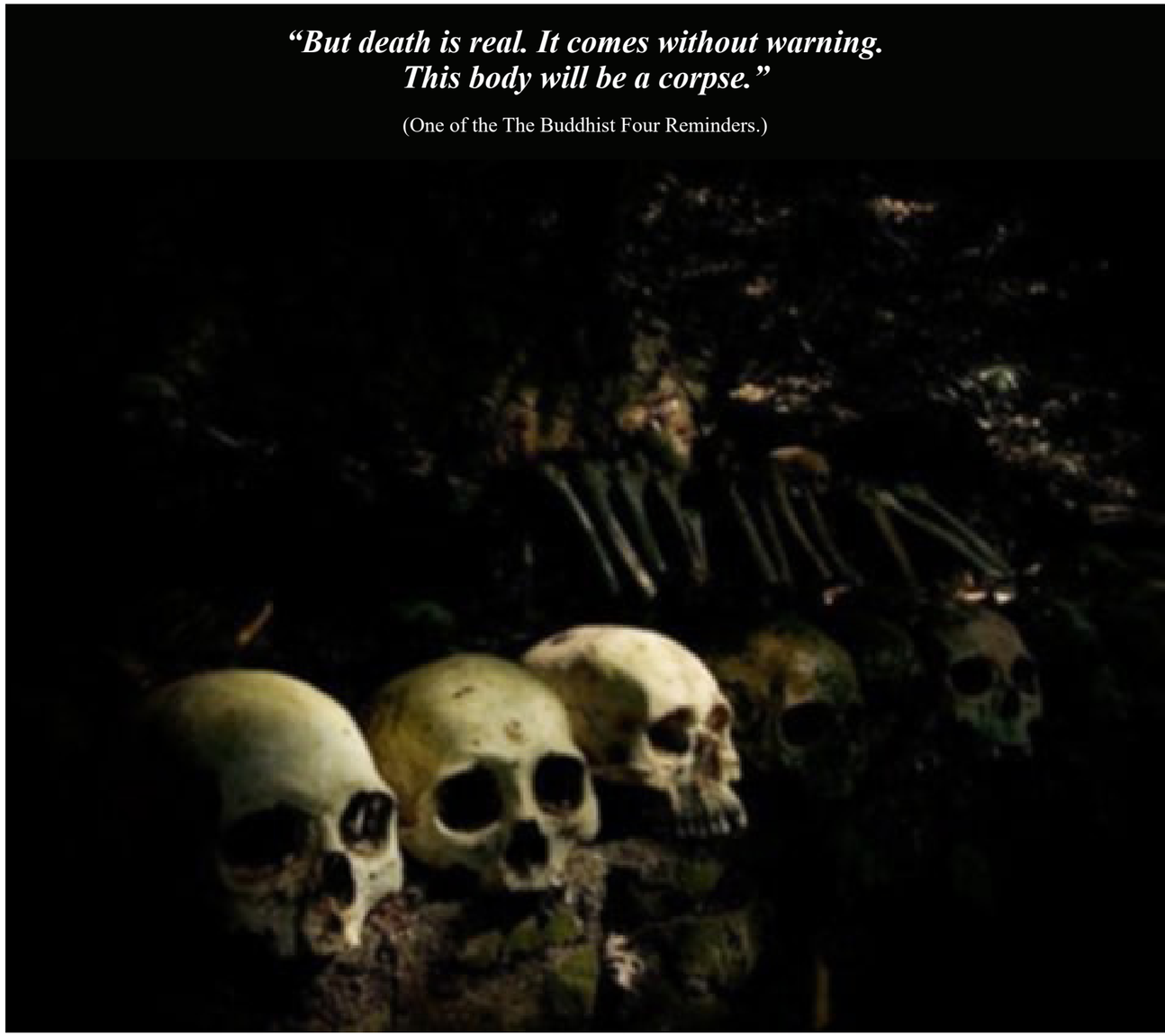
Crystals act as companions on this journey, physical embodiments of resilience, mystery, and transformation. They remind us that even in the deepest darkness, beauty emerges. By honoring the macabre — not as something grotesque, but as a mirror of impermanence and rebirth — we discover a profound truth: it is often in the shadows where the most luminous growth begins. ■

SUPERSTITIONS AND DEATH: CORPSE WALKING

CHRISTINA WILKE-BURBACH, PhD

"But death is real. It comes without warning. This body will be a corpse."

(One of the The Buddhist Four Reminders.)



In magickal traditions, a corpse is far more than a lifeless body—it is a potent symbol of spirit, transformation, and cosmic connection. Often regarded as the fifth element of spirit, the corpse represents a being that has crossed the veil, its soul journeying into the afterlife and accessing other realms of existence. The human body itself is seen as a microcosm of the universe, a vessel of divine energy and vibration, making the corpse a reservoir of spiritual power. Even in death, the body retains DNA that links it to ancestral lines, grounding it in the natural world and the continuum of life. Energetic imprints—personality traits, emotions, intentions, and even the circumstances of death—are believed to linger within the remains, preserving echoes of the individual's essence. In some belief systems, corpses are thought to hold the potential for resurrection or judgment, further amplifying their mystical significance. Shrouded in mystery and reverence, the corpse embodies both the unknown and the divine, making it a powerful focal point in spiritual and occult practices. Its strength grows because death and the afterlife are so mysterious, turning a corpse into a powerful source of superstition and spiritual curiosity.

Corpse walking, the deliberate and intentional procession of the dead across villages, landscapes, and homes to burial grounds, exists in a hauntingly liminal space where filial devotion, sacred ritual, spiritual beliefs, and folklore converge. Practiced in various parts of Asia, this tradition reflects a deep reverence for ancestral ties and the spiritual journey after death. Historical records and oral traditions document the phenomenon, revealing how practical burial practices combine with indigenous beliefs in ancestor spirits, geomantic alignment, and protective rites. It's a ritual that speaks to both the physical and metaphysical, honoring the dead while navigating the unseen forces that shape the living world.

At the heart of corpse transport traditions across many Asian cultures lies a key spiritual belief: that a soul finds peace only when its body is laid to rest in the proper location, the land where you were born. Burial in one's native soil is not merely symbolic—it's seen as essential to the spiritual well-being of the deceased and the prosperity of their descendants. Failing to return a body home risks condemning the soul to wander as a restless, troubled entity. Burial in one's native land was considered essential to prevent the soul from becoming a restless, angry spirit doomed to wander.

Daoism (also spelled Taoism) is a rich spiritual and philosophical tradition that originated in ancient China. It emphasizes living in harmony with the Dao (or Tao), which means "the Way"—a fundamental principle that underlies and connects all things in the universe. To ensure a safe and respectful passage, Daoist rituals were often woven into these corpse processions. These included divinatory checks of birth dates, ritual commands, and the use of talismans, all intended to bind the spirit to the will of the herding party and guide it without disruption. Folklore surrounding these journeys varies. In some tales, the dead are obedient when properly commanded; in others, they resist, requiring repeated incantations and spiritual containment. These practices reflect a delicate balance between reverence, ritual, and the unseen forces believed to govern life and death.

In traditional Asian cultures, corpse walkers were individuals tasked with the responsibility of escorting dead bodies back to their place of origin. This practice, which persisted for centuries and was reported as recently as the mid-20th century, was rooted in the deeply held belief that a person's journey does not end with death. Instead, the deceased must return to the soil from which they came—whether that meant traveling ten miles or ten thousand—to be properly laid to rest.

In rural regions of China, transporting a corpse over long distances was often an unaffordable challenge, especially where trains and cars were scarce or inaccessible. To overcome this, a creative solution emerged: the dead would "walk" themselves home.

This illusion was crafted through herding or walking the corpse. In the corpse walking technique, bodies were bound upright between bamboo poles, with one pole on each side of the corpse. These poles were then hoisted onto the shoulders of two men, one leading and one following, creating the eerie impression of autonomous movement. The corpses wore masks, and the walkers operated in synchronized pairs, alternating roles as they moved in solemn single file through villages and landscapes. The visual effect was both practical and deeply symbolic, blurring the line between ritual, necessity, and supernatural belief.

In regions where epidemics or mass migration led to many deaths far from home, the need to transport multiple corpses became a practical challenge. To manage the burden and reduce risk, corpse herders often delayed their journeys until several orders had accumulated, allowing them to carry multiple bodies in a single trip. Yet this logistical efficiency did not diminish the ritual gravity of the event. On the contrary, gathering the dead into one procession heightened communal unease, paranoia, and collective anxiety. The presence of many corpses moving together through villages intensified fears of lingering spirits and misfortune, reinforcing the importance of protective rites and superstitions to safeguard both the living and the dead.

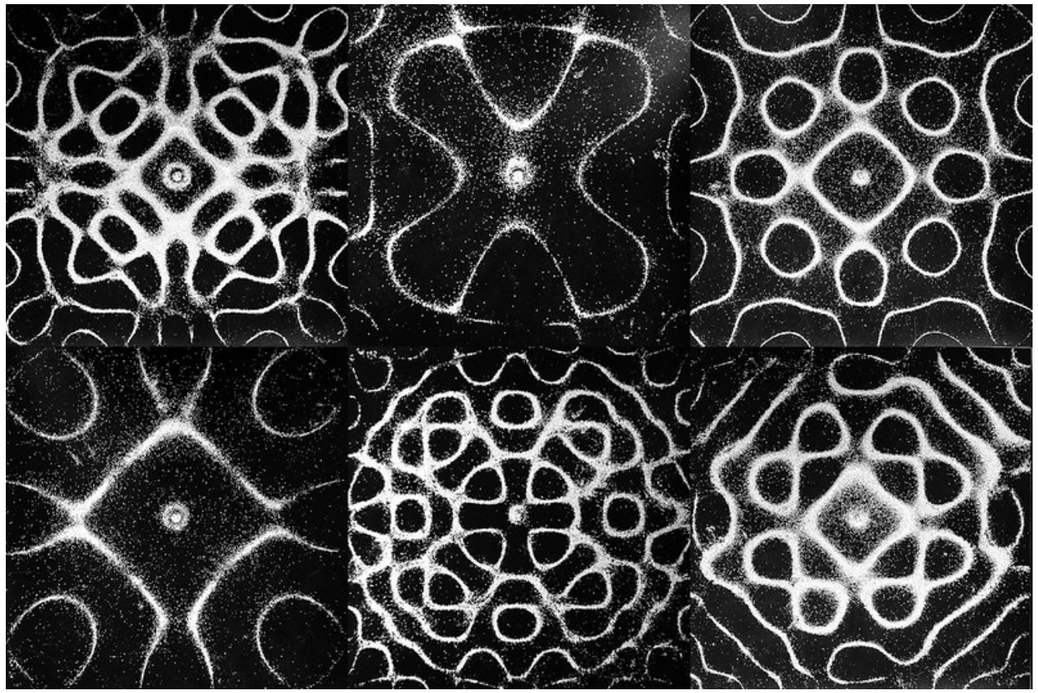
To those watching from the shadows of their doorways, the procession gave the uncanny impression that the dead were walking themselves. At the head of the line, a priest rang a bell or struck a gong, a solemn warning to villagers that the departed were passing through. In traditional Chinese belief, crossing paths with a corpse was considered a serious omen—one that could drain a person's energy or invite misfortune. Locals were urged to hide or turn away. Do not look at the corpse at all. This was believed to shield them from the spiritual residue of death.

The corpse walker carried a white paper lantern to light the way and a basket filled with imitation currency. As he moved forward, he scattered the paper money along the path, a symbolic offering meant to ease the spirit's journey into the afterlife. This act, known as "buying your way into the other world," was both a gesture of respect and a spiritual transaction, ensuring the deceased could cross realms without obstruction. The entire procession blurred the line between the living and the dead. This haunting tradition reflects a profound reverence for ancestral roots and the spiritual journey beyond death, creating one of the most unique funeral customs in history.

With the rise of modern legal systems, urban development, and accessible transportation, the once-common practice of long-distance corpse processions has largely faded away. Government regulations now limit many of the older rituals, reshaping how death is handled in contemporary society. Yet the haunting legacy of traditions like corpse walking continues to echo through folklore and regional narratives. What was once a practical and spiritual rite now lingers as a cultural artifact—an eerie reminder of a world where the dead walked among the living. In some communities, fragments of these ceremonies endure as commemorative performances or heritage demonstrations, transformed from ritual obligation into expressions of ancestral reverence and local identity. ■

CYMATIC THERAPY

ANDREW DEWEY



Chladni plates photography by Chris Smith.

In the late 1700s, the European science world was making strides to understand sound waves. Leonhard Euler and Daniel Bernoulli, two prodigious mathematicians, devised mathematical principles to describe waves numerically. Up to this point, most experiments to study waves looked at sound waves generated by musical instruments or vibrations induced in metal rods. The issue with instruments is that they're too complicated to study, and the issue with rods is that they only show a wave's form in one dimension.

It was at this point that Ernst Chladni did an experiment that visualized waves in two dimensions: he sprinkled sand on a rectangular metal plate, then resonated that plate by running a cello bow along its edge.

The sound was atrocious, akin to a metal screech, which came from the plate vibrating in what is called a standing wave. This means that each point of the plate always rose and fell to the same height (amplitude) each cycle, but not every point had the same amplitude. Some points didn't move at all. In wave terminology, these unmoving points are called nodes. When the plate's vibrations affected the sand, the grains would be compelled to leave the spots that had the greatest amplitude and fall into the nodes where they were least disturbed.

This disturbance of the sand settled it into an enchanting pattern, outlining the nodes of the sound wave. Not only that, but if Chladni bowed along different locations of the plate or placed his finger on certain places on the plate, the pitch he got was different and the sand settled into a completely different pattern. The nature of the wave as it was represented in the sand and the pitch it generated were strongly linked. Thus, the Chladni plate was born.

Since Chladni's experiments, we've developed more ways to generate pitches, including speakers. Speakers have been hooked up to Chladni plates so that, instead of using a bow, the sound being played out of the speaker resonates the plate. As a result, you can see the pitches of whatever instrument is being played on the plate… with some limitations.

All objects have a property known as their resonant frequency. An object's resonant frequency is a frequency that causes an object to vibrate with the wave being imposed on it. If you hold down a piano pedal and play a pitch on another instrument, like a flute, you will hear the strings in the piano tuned to the flute's pitch resonate back. This is because they are tuned to resonate at that frequency when struck by the piano's hammer, but are also inspired to resonate when the sound waves from the flute impact them with the same frequency.

The resonant frequency of an object can be calculated using an equation that has two primary inputs: the mass and the stiffness of the object. This means that two objects made of the same material but with different masses will resonate at two different frequencies. If you look inside a piano, you'll notice that the piano strings jump up in thickness when you get to the lower pitches. Rather than increase the length to get a lower resonant frequency, the piano makers increase the mass so they can use shorter strings. Otherwise, the piano would have to be inordinately long to achieve the pitches it needs.

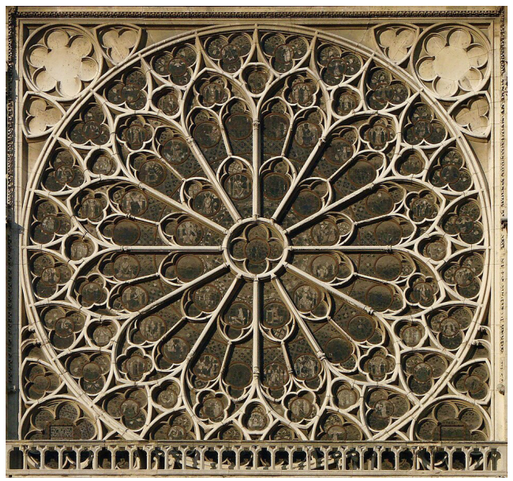
Chladni plates have their own resonant frequency. When a plate is bowed, it's compelled to resonate at its resonant frequency. The pitch heard is a sound wave at that frequency. When Chladni placed his finger on certain points on the plate, he changed its stiffness. This changed its resonant frequency and the resulting pitch.

When Chaldni plates are hooked up to speakers, the plates' iconic shapes only appear when the plate's resonant frequencies are played. A plate made of brass has a different stiffness than one made of steel. A triangular brass plate has a different mass than a square brass plate. Each of these plates will resonate at different frequencies as a result.

The beauty and intricacy of the patterns formed on Chladni plates have caught the attention of some health specialists. They have raised the question: if sound is affecting the sand in this way, how is it affecting our bodies? This is the premise of a field called Cymatic Therapy – cymatics being the study of how sound vibrations create visible patterns.

Cymatic Therapy's general theory is that sound has healing properties, and Chladni plates can be used to find the most effective frequencies for healing. While some frequencies make intricate patterns, some don't form any patterns at all. The lack of pattern is interpreted to mean that those sounds are destructive. However, the patterns (or lack thereof) are a result of properties of the Chladni plates more than anything else. Even comparing the effect a specific frequency has on a larger plate to a pattern on a smaller one can lead to misguided conclusions about a certain frequency's abilities. Applying the same extrapolation to the human body is questionable.

One parallel that has been explored is the similarity between Chladni patterns and rose windows in gothic cathedrals. These are circular windows with intricate patterns or pictures, often made of stained glass. It is speculated that the creators of these windows might have believed specific frequencies had spiritual significance, and therefore wanted to display the frequencies' geometric representations to affect worshippers and impact the acoustics of the space.



Rose du transept Sud Notre-Dame de Paris. Public Domain.

However, the primary source of the rich acoustics associated with churches is their vaulted ceilings and hard walls. These were likely constructed primarily to amplify the preacher in an age before microphones. If rose windows were designed to contribute to amplification, and were designed with one frequency in mind, then they would only amplify that one frequency. However, nothing about the shape of these windows suggests they would amplify anything. If Chladni plates indicated that a certain windows' pattern resonated with a certain frequency, the fact that they're made of glass and not metal (like Chladni plates) means they wouldn't resonate at that same frequency. Even if the windows were actually resonating with a pitch in a meaningful way to create amplification, it would be at risk of shattering. Chladni shapes are a result of waves running through a medium, and glass is a fairly inflexible material. Resonating glass is risky, as seen when the rim of a wine glass is resonated too much, leading to cracks.

Maybe the windows aren't there as an acoustic contributor, but as an aesthetic one to impart the effects of a frequency on visitors. There are a number of side-by-side comparisons between Chladni shapes and rose windows, but there are no direct matches. The main resemblance arises from the two shared traits: radial symmetry and fractal patterning.

Radial symmetry is a trait many objects share. Most matter collects into a spherical shape (i.e. planets, stars, etc.). Gravity is the biggest cause for radial symmetry because it pulls all objects equally from all directions. Its symmetrical force is bound to create a somewhat symmetric object. In Chladni shapes, the primary force is the sound wave which radiates from the generator of sound, equally in all directions. This is why the resulting patterns are radially symmetrical. Gravity pulls consistently in all directions from a singular point; sound radiates a series of waves in all directions from a singular point. Any resulting manifestation of these two forces is a sign of the underlying point-source nature.

Rose windows, on the other hand, owe their circular nature to their predecessor, the oculus: a round opening that was put at the top of domes to let in light and air. Oculi were made circular to fit into the circular nature of the dome. As architecture evolved, the tradition of the round window migrated to be above entryways of buildings. As a result of this change, the oculi no longer needed to be open to let air in, and mosaics took their place. These mosaics began with pebbles but evolved to incorporate glass. The roundness of pebbles meant they fit well into the round windows, so when the shift to glass was made, round shapes were still prominent. This resulted in the fractal-like nature of rose windows: round shapes within a round window.

Chladni shapes' fractal-like patterns are the result of sound being a wave. Similar patterns occur throughout nature in undeniably beautiful ways. We see fractal patterns in snowflakes from crystallization, cells from their different organelles, and eyes from their structural collagen. To say that these objects are connected by their fractal-like structure focuses on the effect, and not the cause. The causes are all very different. There is a stronger case for rose windows' fractal-like design being more closely tied to mosaic tradition than cymatics.

With repetitive patterns appearing in so many places, could the repeating waves of sound be influential to human health? Rupert Sheldrake, an author in the field, sums up this connection well in the video "Of Sound Mind and Body: Music & Vibrational Healing":

The forms in nature are not due to vibrations being imposed from outside on passive particles, they're owing to the whole vibratory structure of activity which makes up part of itself. Atoms are vibratory structures of activity. Molecules are vibratory structures of activity. Crystals are. Now in the case of a living organism… [w]e have the breathing cycles, the heartbeat cycles… [W]e have biochemical cycles, many of them per second. And then within those biochemical cycles, vibratory patterns in proteins, very fast vibrations there. And then vibrations within the atoms inside those. So there's a nested hierarchy of vibrations within vibrations.

It's a fine theory, but two things being cyclical doesn't inherently make them related. The medium the cycle is in and the phase of the cycle are also important. The best example is pushing a child on a swing. If you're pushing someone on a swing, you will push them at the same rate that the swing is at. You don't think of it this way as you do it – you think of it as, "I push when the child is closest to me." But if the child swings once every five seconds, then you're pushing once every five seconds. Not only do your frequencies align, but your phase aligns. If you push every five seconds but when the child is furthest from you, that's considered "out of phase" and you will have no impact on their swinging. Not only that, but you push with your arms, a force that is bound to help the swinging. You don't just push the air and hope that it will push the child. Nor do you place a speaker playing a pitch with a cycle every five seconds and hope is helps.

Proponents of cymatic therapy say that a sound's manifestation on a Chladni plate is indicative of its impact on our cycles, cells, proteins, and atoms. You're making a beautiful image on the plate, and it could make a beautiful image within you. But the cycles are completely different entities. The vibration of the air is too slow and large to impact your atoms. Nor is it made of the right medium to impact brain rhythms. It might be able to vibrate the water within some cells, but how do we know if those vibrations are in phase with the cell's own cycles? Or that the resonant frequency of the plate that helped create the compelling shapes are anywhere near the resonant frequency of our cells? Or that resonating our cells is even helpful?

This is the Achilles heel of cymatics: abstraction. The argument lies on objects sharing cyclic properties, radially symmetric properties, and semi-fractal properties, and this is not indicative of two meaningfully impactful substances. Sound, as we experience it every day, cannot interact with human biology in a meaningful way. This isn't to dismiss that music can be special or that someone can have a transcendent experience with sound, but that's a matter of psychology, not biology. Trying to link sound to biology using strained abstractions only does damage to any claim that sound can just be a wonderful experience in its own right. ■

THE MAGIC OF TIME

OUR EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP WITH TIMEKEEPING

JASON BLOCK

Understanding the progression of time is one of the most fundamental aspects of living as a mortal. It is a surprisingly abstract concept, malleable in its presentation and fundamental structure, but ultimately homogeneously conceptualized by all of humanity in its nature. That is to say: how we measure time varies greatly, what we're measuring remains quite constant.

Humans have reckoned and recorded the passage of time since at least the Neolithic age, and perhaps even earlier than that. Long before the written word, human beings were organizing time into patterns, and almost universally they used the motion of objects in the sky to delineate time's ceaseless progress. The specific increments used are quite varied, but most calendar systems are based on the intuitive cycle of night and day, the cyclic changes in seasons and positions of the sun and stars in the sky, and the phases of the moon. While some calendars create novel adjuncts to solar and lunar time, the basic structure of temporal measurement comes from our observations of celestial bodies.

Of course, these cycles of cosmic motion and darkness and light lend themselves to mythologizing, affecting human life in a very mystic way. When to plant and when to reap and the changes in weather and the fertility of animals all seemed magical and interconnected with the greater universe. The solstices and equinoxes proved to be divine demarcations in many calendars, affecting humanity's ability to survive the vastly variable temperatures of more extreme climates in Pagan Europe. Within the solar year, Mayans developed an entirely novel second calendar of two hundred and sixty days that intermeshed its mystic tools of divination and destiny with the science of the observable cycle of seasons. The Xhosa calendar used in Southern Africa used descriptions of notable natural events, like the appearance of a specific star or the blooming of a certain plant, as the names of the lunar months, providing a predictive account of the year to come. The early Hebrew calendar was built around magical numerology, with certain numbered days being quite auspicious and lucky, and others being devastating to one's fortune. The Early Muslim calendar with specific lunar months set aside for peace by God's divine edict prohibiting battle were manipulated by secular leaders to indulge their political machinations and earned the ire of Muhammed who declared that the structure of time had been set by Allah Himself.

Even in our modern calendar, the roots of magic still persist. Our days of the week are named after the sun and moon and gods. The ordinal names of our months are off by two because Julius Caesar was all but deified after his death and the reigning emperor Augustus wanted to be immortalized as well, thusly July and August were inserted into the midst the ten month year, shoving December, the tenth month reflected by the "dec" in its name to the twelfth position. If you ever wondered why October isn't the eighth month or November the ninth, it's because of an arrogant Caesar trying to achieve immortality by forcing the world to remember him every single year.

From the position of the stars on your birthday assigning you a predestined astrological personality to the year of your birth setting your destiny, mankind has probably believed in a mystical connection to time since we were first able to conceptualize the idea. For beings wholly aware of their mortality, knowing our time is limited, there is some comfort in attaching ourselves to the great cosmic wheel, tethered to the order of things just as naturally as the sun setting every dusk. ■

Aztec Mexican calendar sundial. Public Domain.

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
A CONVERSATION WITH PSYCHIC MEDIUM SARAH LEMOS

ERIKA BLOCK

For most people, the supernatural lives on the edge of imagination, but for psychic medium Sarah Lemos, it's a daily dialogue. She has built her life's work around standing between two worlds, translating the unseen into words of comfort, and offering evidence that consciousness does not end with death.

Sarah doesn't speak about death the way most people do. For her, it's not an ending, it's a door she's been walking through since childhood. Growing up in Salem, Oregon, Sarah initially thought everyone could interact with ghosts. She quickly learned that wasn't the case. Her story begins with a childhood near-death experience, which did not trigger her psychic abilities, but rather expanded them. "I don't think it actually led me to the discovery of my psychic abilities. I believe I was born with them. What it did do was bring me closer to my mediumship abilities, because it brought me closer to the veil." That veil—the boundary between the living and the dead—is often viewed by psychic mediums as an overlapping frequency that is always present.

Sarah Lemos has built an international reputation for helping people connect with their loved ones who have passed, and giving a much-needed voice to the departed. A familiar face on several paranormal television shows, Lemos combines credibility and compassion in equal measure. Publicly, mediumship can appear glamorous—TV sets, dramatic revelations, weeping reunions... Privately, it demands constant discernment. The challenge lies not just in hearing messages, but in choosing when and how to deliver them. "Sometimes I give people answers to questions they don't even know they have yet, and I have to be careful to share only what others are ready to hear." That restraint is part ethics, part empathy. The dead may be ready to speak, but the living may not be ready to listen.

Mediums often trade in knowledge that can feel invasive—predictions, warnings, glimpses into the future... Lemos takes that responsibility very seriously. "Most of the time, I will share a message that is given to me. But with very close friends, sometimes I see things that I will not share, because until it is time for them to experience that, it is not my place to stop something from happening or affect an outcome. Unless someone is in a 911-type emergency, I need to be careful. I need to be respectful. And I need to understand that there is karmic flow here. So yes, sometimes I can't say what I've seen — at least not the way I saw it." It's a boundary she holds firm: insight doesn't equal interference. Her approach suggests that mediumship, at its best, honors the autonomy of both the living and the dead. Not every revelation is meant to be shared.

Working in front of the cameras adds another layer of complexity. Paranormal television compresses countless hours of research and investigation into a digestible episode. "When I'm reading a space, I'm reading everything in that space. I'm also reading the people who are there, because they're connected to the sound guy or someone else." A psychic medium, who innately channels freely, must adapt to production procedures. "During a reading with me, I get to tell you everything — I get to just let it flow and let it go. It's just me and you. When I'm filming, it's a room full of people that need to talk, so we each need a turn. I can't just say it — I have to wait and then share everything I got."

While science has yet to reach a unified understanding of mediumship, its presence across cultures and centuries points to something enduring in the human experience—a sense that consciousness reaches far beyond the limits of life and physicality. For Sarah Lemos, there's no question that it does. ■

Photo provided by Sarah Lemos.

Ichabod Pursued by the Headless Horseman, 1849, F.O.C. Darley. Public domain.

Title: Ichabod Pursued by the Headless Horseman
Artist: Felix Octavius Carr Darley (1822-1888)
Date: 1849
Medium: Illustration

Felix Octavius Carr Darley, often credited as F.O.C. Darley, was an American illustrator known for his illustrations in the writings of well-known 19th-century authors, including Charles Dickens, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Washington Irving. His work was so widely distributed and greatly respected that he is often called the Father of American Illustration.

Washington Irving's 1820 short story *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* resides among the classics of American literature, and resurfaces every year just in time for Halloween. The tale of a headless horseman who terrorizes the village of Sleepy Hollow is considered one of America's first ghost stories—and one of its scariest.

For over 200 years, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* has captured the imaginations of both children and adults, inspiring countless creative works including stories, illustrations, paintings, sculpture, music, films, television shows, and even advertising campaigns.

F.O.C. Darley's illustration was the first depiction of the headless horseman ever to be published.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow was the first ghost story to impact my life. I experienced it for the first time as an animated film in early grade school—a Halloween treat that was more of a trick. I recall the fear that washed over me upon hearing the title alone, as I'd often heard my dad refer to our town by the nickname Sleepy Hollow, and instantly began wondering if they were one in the same. I sprinted home from school that day, and just like Ichabod Crane, I was convinced I heard a horse galloping not far behind me.

THE CELESTIAL MAP

HOW STAR CLUSTERS MIRROR ANGELIC ORDERS

CHAPLAIN JODI DEHN

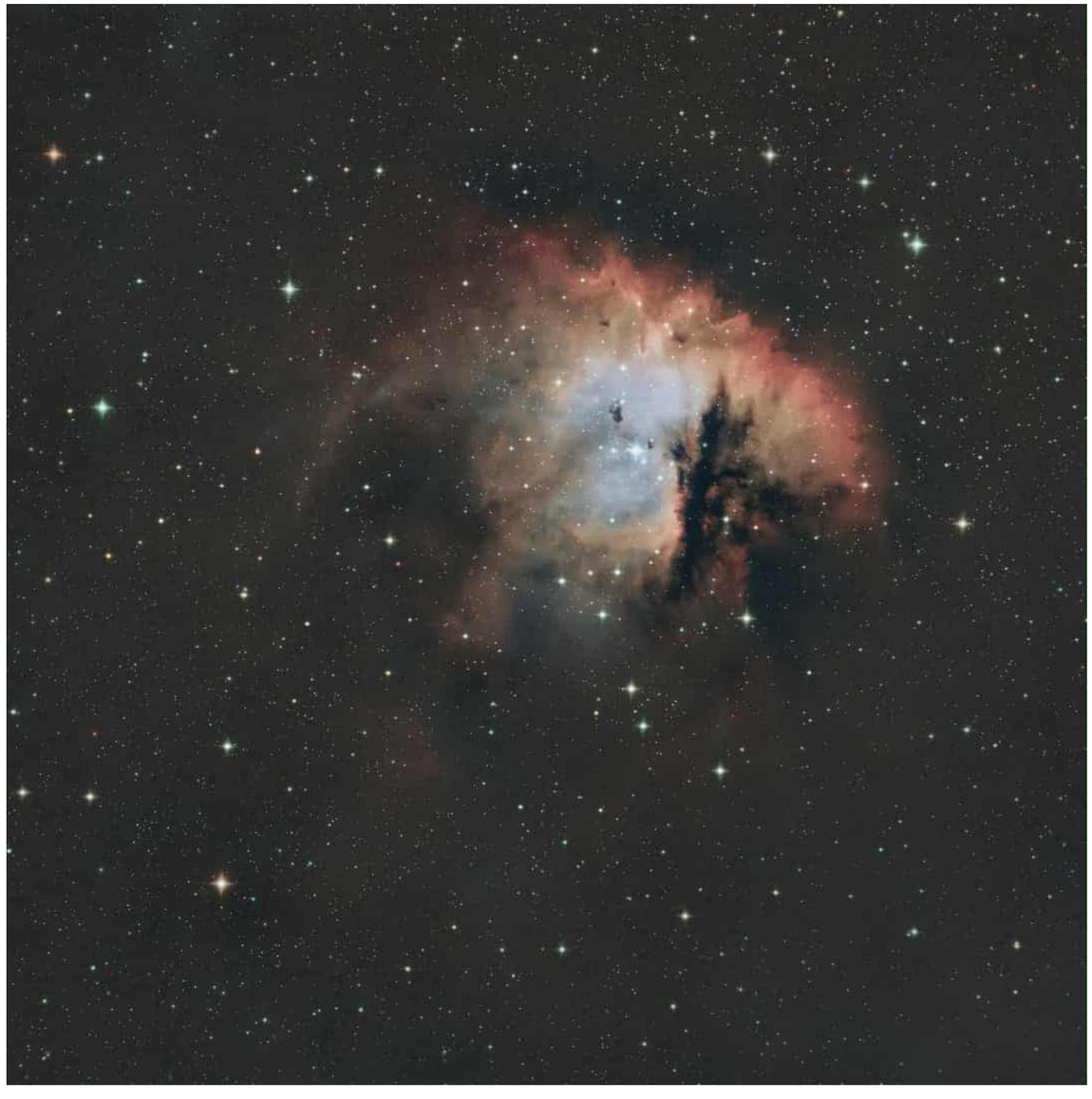


Image courtesy of Chaplain Jodi Dehn.

Since the dawn of time, humanity has lifted its eyes to the night sky in search of guidance, meaning, and connection. What if the constellations above us are not just clusters of burning gas, but a celestial map—a reflection of a grand spiritual order? What if the stars themselves, gathered in cosmic communities, mirror the divine structure of angelic hierarchies? This ancient and mystical notion is resurfacing today, revealing deep symbolic truths that bridge heaven and earth, science and spirit.

Across cultures and millennia, stargazers have noticed patterns not just in the stars themselves, but in the energies they evoke. These radiant configurations have long been interpreted as divine messengers—encoded with wisdom, guidance, and echoes of something far beyond our physical reality. And increasingly, mystics, astrologers, and spiritual seekers are beginning to perceive that the vast order of the heavens might actually mirror the very angelic orders that guide the unseen realms.

The Sky as Sacred Scripture

In ancient times, the heavens were not inert objects to be studied—they were living scrolls. For the Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and early Hebrews, the night sky was alive with meaning. Celestial bodies were believed to be the domains of gods, goddesses, and celestial messengers. The Bible itself declares, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1). But what are they proclaiming? Could the constellations be reflections of the angelic realms—visible expressions of an invisible order?

Angelic hierarchies, particularly those laid out by early Christian mystics like Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, describe three celestial spheres containing nine choirs of angels—Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones in the highest; Dominions, Virtues, and Powers in the middle; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels closest to earth. These divine groupings are not arbitrary—they are tiers of spiritual function and proximity to the Divine Source. What’s remarkable is how this triadic structure echoes through many star systems as well—particularly in the symbolic and mythic interpretations of prominent star clusters.

The Pleiades: A Cosmic Messenger

Among all star clusters, the Pleiades (also known as the Seven Sisters) has captured the imagination of nearly every ancient culture. In Greek mythology, they were nymphs pursued by Orion, saved by being lifted into the heavens. In Japanese tradition, they are known as Subaru, a word meaning “to unite” or “to gather together.” Indigenous peoples from North America to Australia hold their own stories about these glittering beings, often describing them as ancestors or spirit guides from the stars.

The Pleiades sit like a jewel in the shoulder of Taurus, shimmering as a tight-knit cluster of blue-white stars—visible even to the naked eye. Metaphysically, they’re often associated with the idea of spiritual family, galactic origin, and divine mission. Many lightworkers and starseeds feel a strong resonance with this system, claiming intuitive memories of being connected to the Pleiadian energy. Could this intense affinity be because the Pleiades embody an angelic order—one closest to humanity, like the angels and archangels who act as personal guides and protectors?

Interestingly, many esoteric teachings link the Pleiadians to the angelic choir of Principalities—those who govern nations and inspire earthly leaders, offering divine wisdom through intuition, art, and innovation. Their influence is subtle yet powerful, just as the Pleiades shines delicately yet unmistakably in the night sky. Their tight formation also resembles the coordinated energy of an angelic team—working together in unified light, guiding with beauty and purpose.

Star Clusters as Angelic Choirs

Astrophysically speaking, star clusters are families of stars born from the same cloud of gas and dust, bound together by gravity. They are often categorized as either open clusters (like the Pleiades) or globular clusters, which are older, spherical groups containing thousands or even millions of stars.

Now imagine globular clusters as the angelic triads of the higher realms—Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones—those closest to the Divine. These are vast, ancient, and incomprehensibly radiant collectives, orbiting the galactic core, much like the upper spheres of the angelic realms encircle the Throne of God. Their sheer number and tight symmetry evoke awe. They are guardians of divine order, holding the structure of the cosmos itself. We can barely glimpse their full light, much like we cannot fully perceive the might of the Seraphim who continuously sing "Holy, holy, holy" before the Creator.

Open clusters, by contrast, tend to be younger and more loosely organized—perhaps reflecting the middle angelic spheres, like the Powers and Virtues, who serve as energetic regulators of creation. They channel cosmic light into form, much like these star clusters ignite new stars and birth systems. They are spiritual architects, working in cooperation with divine intelligence.

And then there are the individual stars—solitary, brilliant, and often acting as beacons or way-showers. These can be likened to Archangels, each carrying a unique vibrational blueprint, mission, and message. Think of Archangel Michael's fierce blue sword of truth or Archangel Raphael's emerald green ray of healing. Sirius, the brightest star in our sky, has long been associated with spiritual illumination, and in some channeled traditions is seen as a gateway to higher angelic knowledge.

As Above, So Below

The Hermetic axiom "As above, so below" reminds us that what is reflected in the cosmos exists within us as well. If angelic orders mirror star clusters, then we too are microcosmic reflections of both. Within our energetic anatomy are inner realms—chakras, auric fields, and soul layers—that correspond to angelic and cosmic orders. Just as stars cluster together, we attract kindred souls into spiritual communities, missions, and shared purpose.

This mirroring isn't simply poetic—it's functional. Many mystics believe that certain people are "mapped" to specific star clusters or angelic orders, and that recognizing these patterns can unlock dormant gifts. Some may feel drawn to the Pleiades and sense an innate mission to bring unity consciousness and healing. Others might resonate with Orion, linked to warrior angels and higher discernment. Still others may feel deeply connected to the constellation of Lyra, often viewed as a realm of ancient wisdom and harmony—akin to the Thrones, who carry the divine justice codes of the universe.

When we understand our star heritage alongside our angelic blueprint, we gain insight into our path, our challenges, and our soul's evolution.

The Celestial Choir Continues

Modern science continues to explore and map the universe, uncovering ever more precise structures of galaxies, clusters, and dark matter filaments that connect them like a vast cosmic web. Some scientists now describe the universe as having a "cosmic microwave background" that hums at a measurable frequency—an echo of the Big Bang. Sound, light, frequency—these are the same building blocks mystics and seers have long attributed to angelic communication. The concept of the "music of the spheres" now finds resonance not just in poetry, but in physics.

Is it too far-fetched to imagine that these heavenly patterns are harmonized by conscious beings of light—those we call angels? Could the divine design we see in the heavens be an expression of the same sacred geometry encoded in angelic hierarchy?

The sky is no longer silent. For those who listen with their hearts, it sings.

Reclaiming the Stargazer Within

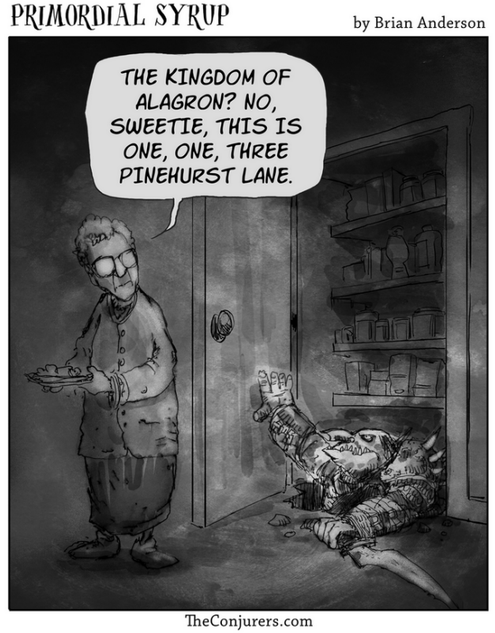
In a world increasingly saturated with digital distractions, the ancient art of stargazing offers us an embodied way to reconnect with the cosmos and ourselves. It isn't just about astronomy—it's about

spiritual remembrance. When we look up at the Pleiades, Orion, or the Milky Way stretching across the night like a river of light, we are not simply witnessing burning gas—we are seeing messages from the angelic realms, invitations to remember who we are and where we come from.

The ancients built temples aligned with the stars. They traveled by them, worshipped under them, and named their gods after them. Somewhere deep within, we remember this too. We are star-born and spirit-guided. We are the living bridges between angelic wisdom and earthly embodiment.

And perhaps most importantly, we belong to the choir. Not just watchers of the sky, but participants in its unfolding symphony.

So the next time you step outside under a velvet night, take a deep breath and look up—not with questions, but with awe. Let the light of those star clusters remind you that you are part of something vast, ancient, and luminous. A divine map exists above you—and within you. One that, if followed, might lead you not just through the stars, but into the very heart of the angelic. ■

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