

UNEXPLAINED PHENOMENON

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Today, as I will remind you every year, is the ultimate religious mash up. The time where the naughty fun of our modern Halloween traditions smushes together a bit with the religious traditions that mark the conclusion of the cycle of life that we inherit and share with the other cultures, past and present, in the Northern Hemisphere. The mix of Trick or Treating, decorating the graves of ancestors, ghost stories, and culling of herds is the best example of syncretism, or borrowing, we have. We have all noticed that the light is starting to go down earlier, if we were paying close attention, as the location of the sunset is moving north. Even here it is starting to get a little cooler. To the Celts, further north and further back in time, the change was obviously more profound, scary even.

For our Northern European ancestors, the climatic shift and the journey from fall to winter, from life to death, probably led them to suggest the veil between our world and the underworld was at its thinnest. With just a touch of imagination this became the annual moment when the spirits of the dead could rub shoulders with the living. These are all captured in their Samhain (pronounced "Sow-in") festivals.

Rev. Alison Cornish smartly describes Samhain as the "grandmother" of all our Halloween, the Day of the Dead, All Saints or Souls day traditions. I like that.

Let's take a pause for just a minute to appreciate, to stretch, how visceral, ominous, and scary being a people who were further north, had no indoor heating, and were about to face the cold, and no naturally available fresh food might be. You probably wouldn't be worried about your costume as much as getting the flu, which you would have thought of as an evil spirit.

In the spirit of that thin veil, Halloween, with its tradition of costumes and trick or treat is a good time, the time to bring up other things that just might go bump in the night. Bigfoot, the Lochness monster, UFOs, aliens, and ghosts. Today is about what—at least some of us—still see lurking behind that tree, just under the surface of the water, or speeding through a worm hole. Sorting out what of all the fanciful things that might be the most plausible feels like a good UU thing to do. And in good UU fashion, *separating truth from fiction may not be all that clear.*

If you saw the newsletter this month you saw the opportunity to rank the likelihood, or plausibility, of what you might think of as supernatural creatures. This list that I have turned into a quick survey that comes from an interesting article by Kathryn Shulz called "Fantastic Beasts and How to Rank Them." Never mind, for a moment, whether or not you actually believe in any of these creatures. We are interested here not in whether any of the following do or did really exist, but to what extent they seem as if they could.

—Angels —Demons. —Leviathan —Dragons —Pixies —Ghosts —Harpies

—Elves —Mermaids —Giants —Vampires. —Genies —tLoch Ness Monster

—Werewolves —Zombies. —Pegasus —Centaur —Unicorns —Tooth Fairy

__ Phoenix (a bird born from the ashes of a fire)

They all might look ridiculous to you. Maybe some seem possible. We as humans certainly believe in some of them more than others.

I don't believe in any of the above. I have, however, narrowed our list down today to a handful of what I think are a more plausible list of unexplained species or phenomenon.

If your inner humanist thinks I am crazy to bring such fanciful creatures into this dignified architectural wonder of ours and dedicate a service to considering them, please take another look at the percentages of people, maybe you among them, who believe in the things we can't touch pictured on the back of your bulletin.

For the imaginative creatures that we are, I find the above mental candy. As you hear about them and reflect on your opinion of them, I want you to consider how you "feel" as we go along.

In no particular order, I present my five favorites for your consideration as real.

Crop Circles

Crop Circles, although not always circles are generally patterns created by flattening areas of singular mono crops. These sometimes-ornate geometric shapes are most often created "mysteriously" overnight. Here are a few of them.



Seemingly mostly designed to be seen from the air, perhaps because they were designed there, up close crop circles are plants and soil designed in a systematic way. Mostly the crops are flattened in one direction, occasionally the designs are burnt into the ground.

The first modern reported crop circle was recorded in 1966, when an Australian sugar cane farmer claimed to see a saucer-shaped spaceship rise up from a swamp before flying away. When he investigated the landing site, he said he found the reeds intricately woven in a clockwise direction on top of the water.

The conventional-rational answer is that humans are always the creative force and actors behind these of these frequently beautiful patterns. Like with all our unexplained phenomenon, certainly some, perhaps all crop circles are creative human ruses. The speculative explanation for these unquestionably created patterns is that they are made by aliens either as efforts to communicate with us, or as part of the results of their space craft landing or hovering near earth.

Ok, quick show of hands, for those who believe that at least one, of what we call a "crop circle was created by an alien or UFO?

Loch Ness Monster

How about the Loch Ness Monster? Nessie as this proposed reclusive fresh water "sea serpent" has been dubbed is thought to be an undiscovered creature that lives in the very large, very deep lake or Loch Ness in the Highlands of Scotland.

Frequently Nessie (or perhaps Nessies) is thought to be a living holdover from the dinosaur era.



Here is the most famous photo of Nessie. This photo, taken by a surgeon in the 1930s, is the most famous piece of "hard" evidence to accompany the multiple claims of "eye-witness" testimony to exist from people who claim to have seen the friendly serpent, or serpents, dubbed "Nessie." Legend has it that the Loch Ness Monster was first witnessed in the sixth century by an Irish monk who saw it while preaching by the lake. In modern times, the idea of this reclusive serpent first hit the presses in 1933 when a visiting Londoner reported seeing "a most extraordinary form of animal, the nearest approach to a dragon or pre-historic animal that I have ever seen in my life." In the early 1960s, an aeronautical engineer filmed a hump crossing the water in Loch Ness. This guy took his shot and has since spent nearly a portion of every day looking for it.

The evidence for Nessie or Nessies is the two unexplained photos combined with the eye-witness testimony of presumably reasonable people. The evidence challenging that these images are not some unexplained lost dinosaur, most commonly thought to be a living plesiosaur, generally the suggested dinosaur, is that the lake has only existed for ten thousand years, and for the twenty thousand years before that the area was frozen in ice.

Ok, quick show of hands, for those who believe that there is some kind of unknown living creature or creatures, from the past, or even an undiscovered species that does or has lived in that large deep Scottish lake. Fun, isn't it.

Bigfoot/Sasquatch/ Yeti

Next up, the West Coast's own Bigfoot, or Sasquatch, and/or the Himalayan Yeti.

"Bigfoot," (as if he, she, it, they) need describing, is a large erect, bi-pedal, ape-like creature, covered in dark brown or reddish hair. Bigfoot or Sasquatch is generally depicted as standing roughly seven or eight feet tall and weighing in at more than four hundred pounds. Bigfoot's "cousin" who we are dealing with in the same category and manner is the Yeti, who is of a similar size and description, but a little lighter in color. Here is the most famous Big Foot photo, clipped from a roughly twenty-second video dubbed the Patterson-Gilman film.



Scientists consider Sasquatch to be the result of a mix of folklore, misidentification, and a whole lot of hoaxes. The greatest challenge to a seemingly endless supply of eye-witness testimony that "I saw it" being that it would be almost impossible to have no verifiable physical evidence like bones, or hair, to have come from such a large creature who, in addition to being undiscovered, would have a large enough population of its kind to successfully sustain itself.

Those who believe in Bigfoot note that the vast size of Bigfoot's terrain, and the multitude of sightings, *footprints, and film like the Patterson-Gilman film are enough to make the existence of Bigfoot probable.*

Ok, I will make this as hard as possible to say no too. Show of hands, how many people believe any one of these undiscovered humanoid creatures exist or like creatures reported in Sumatra or Russia have existed anywhere in the world they are reported to have existed at any point in the last fifty years.

UFOs

Not counting the Bible's wild tales we heard in our reading, the first reported modern UFO sighting happened in Texas in 1878, when a local farmer reported seeing a large, dark, circular flying object flying ". . . at wonderful speed." Another famous early sighting occurred in the UK in 1916, when a pilot reported seeing a row of lights that rose and disappeared into the sky. Maybe the most impressive UFO encounter took place over the skies of Tehran when multiple respected military planes claim to have encountered and interacted with a *craft that moved quickly and inexplicably.* These are the tip of the iceberg. There are endless accounts of UFOs, particularly around the undisputed experimental military base at Area 51.

The standard theory explaining these odd experiences/encounters is that aliens are visiting us from another planet.

There are of course unidentifiable things in the sky. That's a fact. Few would argue that most UFO accounts are best explained as *either unidentified airplanes, experimental military equipment, helicopters, weather balloons, comets, meteors, simple blurs in in photos or video, and hoaxes.* But my question to you is, are all of them mistakes?

I want to see those who believe that at least one of the accounts or "encounters" or witnesses who have seen strange things in the sky have actually seen an object or spaceship that came from outer space? I do, maybe?

And now for a similar, different inquiry about your belief in aliens. Frequently, the aliens we see are gray or green and depicted as having slight bodies but big heads. I'm not going to hold you to anything resembling ET. Regardless, and separate from whether you believe they have visit us, I am going to simply ask for a show of hands from those who believe we share the universe with any other population of complex intelligent creatures? Hands up if you believe that we do.

Now, do you believe they have visited Earth or that we have been contacted by any of them? Hands up for a yes.

Ghosts

How about ghosts. People across time have experienced ghosts, spirits, non-physical or corporal, as the term goes, *spirits of formerly alive humans.* Sometimes these spirits are known and friendly. *Dead loved ones.* Sometimes they are malicious spirits that "haunt" us. This matters little in our survey. Indicate by a show of hands, do you believe that there are non-corporal characters that can come visit us on the earthly plane?

I have my opinions about these matters. I don't think my views are particularly unique, but I will share them next week, in this 'dun, dun, duh!' cliffhanger of a Sunday service. What I want to hear about now is you. Your personal encounters with the unexplainable, and your respectful opinions about these matters. Humanists and Spiritualists, skeptics and believers, are all welcome here.

AMEN