

A Look at Some Solar and Lunar Myths

by Bill Warren

Whether gathered around campfires at night or performing basic survival activities during the daylight hours, early humans recognized the importance of the two celestial bodies whose presence dominates the sky. Many of mankind's earliest beliefs were based on what people knew – or thought they knew – about the **Sun** and the **Moon**.

The Sun. Probably the first scientific-type thought that ever occurred to early humans was associating daylight with the Sun's presence in the sky. It allowed them to do things they could not do at night. As a result of the Sun's unrivaled brightness and the heat it produces, most if not all early cultures worshipped the Sun. For example, in 3,000 b.c. the ancient Egyptians revered **Ra, the Sun God**, as the king of their gods. Ra was depicted in hieroglyphics as having the head of a falcon, probably because the Sun "flies" across the sky.

Early on, solar eclipses were thought to be caused by animals attempting to eat or take away the Sun. The Vikings blamed flying wolves prowling the sky, and in what is now Vietnam villagers thought the culprit was a hungry toad or frog in search of a hot meal.

In Peru, ancient Incas shot flaming arrows toward the Sun to drive off a jaguar that was attacking it. And in Korea it was believed that the emperor sent fire dogs to steal the Sun, so people tried to scare them off by shouting and making loud noises. (It worked in both cases, too, because the Sun always came back.)

Some early cultures believed that the Sun god rode across the sky every day in a fiery chariot. When the Sun god vanished below the horizon, he pulled a blanket over the sky to produce night. The stars were daylight seen through tiny holes in the blanket. Some holes were larger than others, allowing more daylight to peek through.

The Moon. Although not nearly as bright as the Sun, the Full Moon is the same size in our view and vastly larger than the stars. Unlike the Sun, though, the Moon regularly changes its shape and brightness. Those changes were considered important enough for most early cultures to regard the Moon as a minor deity – not as powerful as the Sun god, but a god (or, more commonly, a goddess) nevertheless. In some cultures, the Moon was a vessel that carried the gods around the sky.

The Moon has always been linked to romance, and its waxing and waning associated with cycles of human fertility, creation and destruction. (Even today, many people believe that a woman's fertility increases during the Full Moon.) The lunar cycle also formed the basis for mankind's earliest calendars, which were developed by ancient Sumerians around 8,000 b.c.

When the Moon is in the seventh house and Jupiter aligns with Mars,

Then peace will guide the planets, and love will steer the stars.

This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius...

-The Fifth Dimension (The Age of Aquarius [1969])

The Moon and Human Behavior. Originally, people who studied the sky were known as *astrologers*, not astronomers. Ancient astrologers produced the world's first star charts; they gave names to the brightest stars; and they grouped stars into shapes and patterns that were familiar to them -- the constellations. The annual reappearance of certain star patterns told them things like when to plant their crops and when to start preparing for winter.

Over time, however, astrology moved in directions that were decidedly unscientific. When that happened, astrology was replaced by astronomy as a more scientific approach to studying the universe around us.

Modern-day astrology is a pseudo-science. It arose from some ancient astrologers' faulty reasoning that:

- (a) The Moon undergoes dramatic changes during its cycles;
- (b) Humans undergo dramatic changes in their moods and behavior; therefore,
- (c) The Moon influences human activities and behavior.

When astronomers realized that five other celestial objects – **Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter & Saturn** – were also different from everything else in the sky, the astrologers attributed human behavior to the combined influence of the Moon and the planets. Astronomers thought that was silly – we still do – but many people believed it because astrology offered explanations for why people behave the way they do. Even today newspapers and other sources publish daily astrological horoscopes -- guides to human activity based on the lunar phases and positions of the Moon and planets within the twelve zodiac constellations.

There's a bad moon on the rise.

-John Fogerty (*Bad Moon Rising*, 1969)

Blood Moon. The term blood Moon has become fashionable in recent years to describe the Moon's color during lunar eclipses.

Astrologically, lunar eclipses were thought to be omens of bad tidings, since anything that interrupts the Moon's regular cycle would also have a negative effect on human activities and behavior. Bad things are always happening, and since they don't stop before, during or after lunar eclipses, people blamed the eclipses for whatever bad things happened afterward.

In ancient Mesopotamia, astrologers learned how to accurately predict lunar eclipses. To protect the king at such times, they installed a substitute king to pose as the monarch during the eclipse, while the real king went into hiding until it was over. Then the fake king was put to death and the true king returned to his throne. (So the eclipse *was* in fact an omen of bad news for the king's temporary replacement.)

Lunatic Illusions. The belief that the Moon strongly affects human behavior was not limited to astrologers. The word lunatic comes from the Latin word for Moon (Luna). It was widely believed as late as the 1500s that the Full Moon was the cause of insanity. (The belief originated with **Aristotle** and the Roman historian **Pliny the Elder**, both of whom believed that, because the brain is the "moistest" part

of the human body, it was subject to the Moon's influence the same way that Earth's tides are. Of course, the Full Moon had the greatest influence, so when people went insane it was thought to be because they spent too much time outside at night during Full Moon.) As one great writer put it,

It is the very error of the Moon.

She comes more near the Earth than she ought,

And drives men mad.

-Shakespeare, *Othello*

The Howling. Native Americans respected wolves for their courage, hunting skills and cooperation. They believed that wolves howled at the Full Moon, and that when the Moon disappeared (during New Moon) they sang it back into existence with their howling. (Actually, howling is a way of communicating over long distances. Wolves howl at night because they are nocturnal pack hunters. They are easiest to see under a Full Moon, and they point their faces upward when howling because it allows the sound to carry farther. But it looks like they're howling at the Moon.)

Combining the beliefs that the Moon causes changes in human behavior and that wolves were thought to react strongly to the Moon's presence or absence brings us to one of mankind's most enduring – but certainly not endearing – myths: *werewolves*, or humans who turn into ravenous wolves during Full Moon and revert to their human states afterward. Over the years, very convincing movies about werewolves have made the myth appear to be a realistic possibility, but it's not something you'd want to sink your teeth into.

Final Thoughts On the Full Moon. Regardless of what else schoolteachers know about the Moon, most of them will tell you in a heartbeat that *during Full Moon their students are more excitable, energetic and prone to misbehavior than at other times.*

My wife and I were teachers for more than four decades. Every year, on numerous occasions we heard teachers say "Better watch out: it's Full Moon. The kids are gonna be antsy today," or something to that effect. In our experience, at least 85% of the teachers we taught with were convinced that children's behavior changes during Full Moon.

That percentage probably is pretty accurate -- and it probably hasn't changed much since we retired. But is it true? And if not, why do so many teachers, who spend so much time dealing with student behavior, believe otherwise?

In fact, children are *always* energetic and excitable, and some of them are always more prone to misbehavior than others. (I certainly was.) But of all the lunar phases, the Full Moon is by far the most familiar and noticeable. News sources remind us when it's due to occur, and we see it shining brightly overhead when we go outside at night. As a result, teachers are more likely to remember and associate misbehavior or other classroom problems with the Full Moon than with other times or lunar phases when the Moon is less visible. And if you're already convinced – as many teachers and parents are – that the Full Moon affects children's moods and behavior, any unusual behavior or misconduct that occurs during that time will be regarded as evidence that it's a fact, not a myth.

Finally, there is this...

“Once in a Blue Moon.” You’ve doubtless heard this phrase many times before; it’s used to describe situations that occur only rarely. But it’s not a myth. On a few occasions, catastrophic events such as volcanic explosions, desert windstorms or raging forest fires have sent abnormally large amounts of ash, dust or smoke particles into the air, scattering the Moon’s visible light and making it appear to be blue.

*In 1883, the explosion of the volcano Krakatoa in Indonesia produced blue Moons worldwide for nearly two years. (It also happened on a limited basis after two other volcanoes exploded, Mt. St. Helens in Washington in 1980 and Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991.

*In 1927, the late arrival of the monsoon season in India sent vast clouds of dust and sand from the Thar Desert into the atmosphere, turning the Moon blue in that part of the world.

*In 1951, smoke and soot from massive forest fires turned the Moon blue over western Canada until the fire was brought under control.

In all of those cases, moonlight was scattered in all directions by the clouds of debris. But light toward the red end of the spectrum was scattered more strongly by large particles in the air than the blue light at the other end of the spectrum, so less red light passed through the obscuring dust, smoke or ashes. (It’s the opposite of what happens at sunset to turn the sky red.) The result was a Moon that appeared blue rather than white.

But as you know, that happens only once in a blue moon.