

# Superstitions and the Paranormal

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The fear of Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> or triskaidekaphobia is the basis for one of my favorite superstitions, which reportedly began with the *Knights Templar*, a monastic military order founded in Jerusalem in 1118 C.E., whose mission was to protect Christian pilgrims during the Crusades. Over the next two centuries, the Knights Templar became extraordinarily powerful and wealthy. Threatened by that power and eager to acquire their wealth, King Philip secretly ordered the mass arrest of all the Knights Templar in France on Friday, October 13, 1307 - Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

It should be noted that while the Knight's legend is true and Philip did order their extermination for heresy, some scholars say that the story only evolved into a full blown superstition in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, possibly through the Knights association with the Order of Free Masons. Nevertheless, to this day, it is difficult to find a building with a 13<sup>th</sup> floor, an airport with a gate 13, or commercial airliners with a 13<sup>th</sup> isle. You will also note that most hotels and hospitals routinely skip room 13, and in Italy you can't buy a lottery ticket with the number 13. For those who scoff at the fear of number 13, one only has to remind them of the ill fated Apollo 13 space mission.

Did you know that in merry old England, there were always 13 steps up to the gallows and tradition called for executions to be performed on Friday? Then again in the same period most folk believed that witches could only do their magik when in groups of 12, with the 13<sup>th</sup> spot assigned to the Devil. Of course, it is commonly accepted that Jesus was crucified on a Friday, while Cabalists believe that Eve tempted Adam with the forbidden fruit on Friday as well. I won't even go near the connections between my favorite bad girl, Lilith and both Friday and the number 13. To that list of bad Fridays you can add the day that the biblical flood of Noah began, as well as the confusion at the Tower of Babel. Of course, not all Fridays are bad, if a child is born on Good Friday and baptized on Easter Sunday, you can expect them to have miraculous powers of healing. Add to that another old English custom, cut your hair on Good Friday and you will not have a headache all year!

Mankind is a superstitious lot, but much of the superstition of old is lost today, and for good reason. For instance, it was considered bad luck to see an ambulance a hundred-fifty years ago, and you would be expected to hold your breath, pinch your nose after one passed, until your path was crossed by a black dog! That being said, there would be an awful lot of asphyxiations in Manhattan on any given day, where ambulances are plentiful and untethered black dogs are not. The meaning of course was lost in history and holds no relevance today, but there was a time when the uneducated might see the logic to these actions. And while it is not common to find people carrying an acorn in their pocket to assure long life and good fortune, it is fairly common to find otherwise rational humans wearing Amber beads

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as a necklace to protect them from illness or misfortune today. Returning to Friday phobias, you might find it amusing that a hundred years ago, changing the linens on your bed on a Friday was believed to be the cause of bad dreams.

I know, you personally are not superstitious, but try these old wives tales just for fun. If you are a single female, think of five or six names at random who you may someday marry. Now take an apple by the stem and begin to twist the fruit while reciting those names in any order you please. The custom suggests that when the stem breaks off and the apple falls, the name being recited is that of the intended. Silly, right? Then I won't give you the names of people whom this has worked for over the years, for good or bad! Just as silly, if you want to know the sex of your unborn child, suspend a wedding band from a piece of thread and hold it suspended over the palm of subject. If the ring moves in a circular motion or an oval, the baby will be a girl, but if it swings in straight lines, it will be a boy. Hmmm.

Many times superstitions can be found in bountiful numbers surrounding common household objects. One of my favorites is the broom. For instance, if you are of child bearing age and want to have kids, don't stand too close to someone sweeping... if the person sweeps over your feet, you will have no natural offspring. Likewise, when you move, you should never bring your old broom along, buy a new one and you will have better luck. And I love this one, if you have had an unwelcome guest, sweep out the room after they leave and throw the dust out the door or window... they will never stay in that room again! Of course, they could return to sleep in your room, there is no superstition for that.

Superstitions also hold sway over Magik in many cases. (and yes, before we go further, it is Magik... Magic is an illusion but Magik is supernatural). Many rituals require the lighting of candles, but did you know that if a candle blows out during a ritual, it suggests that evil is in the room? If you are a little unsettled with the concept of magik and how it can affect you, simply take a small flower pot and plant some clover in it. As long as one stem has a four leafed clover, you are safe from outside interference. This is basically the same principal as growing shamrocks in your home, if you are a Celt. Only good luck and positive magik can exist in the same space as the clover or shamrock! And if you find a cricket in your house, do it no harm, like the clover, it wards off negative energy and brings good fortune.

Superstitions concerning house and home are obviously the most common. In Asia, a picture of an Elephant is good luck, as long as its head faces the door. Probably more interesting, there are cave paintings and relief carvings of elephants in the same regions and while sometimes thought to be thousands of years old, all the animals are facing the entrance.

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Doors are often significant, for instance western cultures believe it is bad luck to leave through the back door of a home, if you entered through the front. Doors also play into the death rituals of many cultures, in many places a dead body is never carried out through a door, it must be passed through a window instead. Likewise, the Celts believe that at the moment of death, all the windows of the home should be opened fully, so that the soul can begin its trip without any obstacles. Likewise, a soul finds it difficult to leave if the doors or windows are locked at the time of his or her death.

Good luck and bad luck are obviously in the eye of the beholder as well as the time in which they live. In most of the world, the horseshoe is considered good luck if you hang it over the doorway to your home; in most of Europe the horseshoe is hung with the open side down, but in Celtic countries the superstition calls for the opposite, with the open side up, so that the good luck does not run out. In Eastern Europe you might find a horseshoe hung in the bedroom... there they believe it will prevent nightmares. Of course, Europe has many enlightening tales, for instance, all of those ivy covered cottages you see are more than just picturesque. Ivy is cultivated to grow on homes because it creates a barrier to reflect any evil or negative magik (what it does to the structure of the house is another matter).

Even the simple act of knitting has its superstitions. It is bad luck to leave a project unfinished, the intended recipient will have bad luck as long as the project goes unattended. Stabbing your needles into the balls of yarn you are working with is equally unlucky for anyone you might make something for from that yarn. If you don't want to have your lover walk away, simply do not knit him a pair of socks, if you do he will wander, the old wives tale goes. On the other hand, if you want to tie someone to you, simply weave a single strand of hair into something you are knitting for him and he will be bound to you as long as he has the garment. Finally, you are admonished from ever knitting something intended for the use of a child before that offspring is conceived.

Even a visit to the garden is filled with superstitions. Lettuce for instance is believed to be magik. It has healing powers, can be used to arouse love and counteract the effects of too much wine. It can promote child bearing and mixed with other greens can help to bring on labor in the expectant mother. The onion is also filled with magik, it can cure a person suffering from a fever, simply cut the onion in half and put it under the patients bed; or it can be used to grant wishes, if burned properly by the light of the full moon.

This of course brings us to the more mysterious of herbs, beginning with the Mandrake, which can cure sterility in men and cause barren women to conceive. It can be used as an aphrodisiac as well as a fertilization herb, and was used by clairvoyants to increase their ability to see the future. Mistletoe

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is equally powerful, is believed to ward off damage from lightening, can cure many diseases not to mention the fact that any fair maid who stands under it can't refuse the amorous advances of a man who claims the privilege of a kiss and sometimes something more.

Mirrors are of particular interest in superstitions in history; young women are warned not to look at themselves in a mirror illuminated only by candle light and mirrors should be covered in thunderstorms because they attract lightening strikes. Of course the broken mirror is 7 years bad luck and the mirror is most often said to be a gateway between this world and the next, but only those strong in character should tempt fate by looking to the other side.

Even the simple act of sneezing has superstitious meanings. "If you sneeze on a Monday, you sneeze for danger; Sneeze on a Tuesday, you will kiss a stranger. Sneeze on a Wednesday, sneeze for a letter; sneeze on a Thursday, something better; Sneeze on a Friday, sneeze for sorrow, but sneeze on Saturday see your sweetheart tomorrow. But never sneeze on Sunday, fore the Devil will dominate over you all week. " And remember to always place a guarded hand over your mouth as you sneeze or your soul may escape your body, thus the custom of saying "Bless You!" to drive the Devil away.

Do you believe that a wild bird flying into your home is a harbinger of death? If not, you are probably not Italian. On the other hand if you think it might be true if the bird were specifically a robin, then you are probably of Greek ancestry.

Then we have the "rules" of the dead and dying! Did you know that in most European cultures, burying a woman in a black dress will only cause her to return to haunt her family? Did you know that the tradition of placing coins on a recently deceased person's eyes is to keep the eyes shut, because if he can still see, he will do all in his power to take someone he sees with him? And mirrors are always covered when a family member dies because there is too great a possibility that the deceased will return to watch the family through this portal between worlds. Ironically, throughout the globe, to dream of death is a sure sign of birth, but to dream of birth is a sign of death. And if you touch the corpse of a loved one before burial, you can be sure you will not dream of them in the future.

Here are just a few more on the topic of death. You should never count the number of cars in the funeral cortege, it is bad luck. You should never hold a funeral on a Friday and thunder after a funeral is a sign that the soul has successfully completed it journey to the next world. And never ever wear new shoes to a funeral. If the gravesite is found covered with flowers, the recently interred had lived a good life, but if you find only weeds, the body buried there has sins to pay for before the flowers will grow. If you dream of the dead, and they only are speaking to you, pay careful attention, he or she has something important to say that you should act upon.

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Hopefully, you have heard enough by this point. So what does any of this have to do with the paranormal? If you are interested in the question of life after death, survival of the human consciousness, etc. it all has a place. There are no unreasonable superstitions; it is not a good idea to walk under a ladder and virtually every superstition has some fact based belief associated with it. The trick here is to play the devil's advocate, or at least the anthropologist, and look into the "why" of a given superstition, remembering that at the time it was conceived, there may have been plenty of good reasons to believe it was sound advice and not just make-believe. As an example, covering your mouth when you sneeze is a good practice today, not because it keeps your soul in place, but rather keeps your germs to yourself and prevents to some degree widespread infection of those around you. Somewhere in time the reasoning became muddled, but the advice is still very good.

Being wary of Fridays that fall on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the month was probably good practice once, given what was known to happen on that day. If I were a midwife in merry old England in the burning times, you would probably find me all comfy in a shallow cave on that day, knowing the sheriff was abound with writs of witchcraft in his back pocket. It was certainly not a bad idea or unfounded.

But does this really have anything at all to do with the paranormal? Again, that depends on what you find in your research. We can't take anything at face value, but we can expect that some of those seeds of truth do indeed reflect practices that grew from their understanding of some paranormal occurrences. Local superstitions are a great example of this; I certainly would think it more logical to begin an investigation at a site where locals centered a superstition than a place where there were no reports, although I would want to be open minded to accept other explanations for what they believe. The superstition surrounding the "Jersey Devil," sounds farfetched, but recent claims that a bigfoot has been seen in the area actually are lent credence by those earlier tales.

The world is filled with stories that on the face of it are unbelievable, yet there is always that little seed of truth; that is what we have to focus upon in our work. The existence of an old wives tale or superstition only helps to magnify and clarify, if we do the job correctly. All too often "Facts" are discarded for lack of corroboration, when in truth we simply did not work hard enough to find it. So enjoy the superstitions at hand, but don't disregard them entirely; they could be the key to new discoveries.