The Beast Within

As anyone in the mental health profession about full moons, and you'll get a surprising answer, something that sounds incredibly like folklore and myth: the full moon has the power to bring out the crazy in many people.

We've believed this for a long time. We refer to unstable people as lunatics, a word that finds its roots in Latin. It's built from the root word luna, which means "moon." For centuries humans have operated under the conviction that certain phases in the lunar cycle can cause people to lose touch with reality.

Just ask the parents of a young child, and they'll tell you tales of wild behavior and out-of-the-ordinary disobedience during particular phases of the moon. Science tells us that, just as the moon's pull on the ocean creates tides that rise and fall in severity, so too does our planet's first satellite tug on the water inside our bodies, changing our behavior.

Today when we talk about the full moon, we tend to joke about this insane, extraordinary behavior. But maybe we joke to avoid the deeper truth, an idea that we are both frightened and embarrassed to entertain. For most of us, you see, the full moon conjures up an image that is altogether unnatural and unbelievable.

That large, glowing perfect circle in the night sky makes us think of just one thing: werewolves.
A Rich Past

Science has tried to explain our obsession with the werewolf many times over the years. One theory is a disease called hypertrichosis, also sometimes known as wolfitis. It is a condition of excessive, unusual body hair growth, oftentimes covering a person's entire face. Think Michael J. Fox in Teen Wolf.

Psychologists actually had an official diagnosis in the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders called clinical lycanthropy. It’s defined as a delusional syndrome in which the patient believes they can transform into an animal. Those changes take place only in their mind, of course.

But delusions have to start somewhere. Patients who believe they are Napoleon Bonaparte have some previous knowledge of who he was. I think it’s fair to assume that those who suffer from clinical lycanthropy have heard of werewolves before. It’s actually pretty easy to bump into the myth, thanks to modern popular culture. Werewolves have been featured in, or at least appeared in, close to a hundred Hollywood films since 1913.

One of the earliest mentions of something resembling the modern werewolf can be found in the two-thousand-year-old writings of the Roman poet Virgil. In his Eclogue IX, written in 40 BCE, he described a man named Moeris who could transform himself into a wolf using herbs and poisons.

About fifty years later, Gaius Petronius wrote a satirical novel called, appropriately, Satyricon (which I think is basically the equivalent of Stephen King writing a horror novel called Frighticon). In it, he tells the tale of a man named Niceros. In the story, Niceros was traveling with a friend when that friend suddenly took off his clothes, urinated in a circle, and transformed into a wolf before running off toward a large field of sheep.

The next day, Niceros is told by the owner of the sheep that one of the shepherds stabbed a wolf in the neck with a pitchfork. Later that day, Niceros noticed his friend had a similar wound on his own neck.

In the Greek myth of the god Zeus and an Arcadian king named
Lycaon, Zeus took on the form of a human traveler. At one point in his journey he visited Arcadia, and during his time in that country he visited their royal court. King Lycaon somehow recognized Zeus for who he truly was and tried, in true Greek form, of course, to kill him by serving him a meal of human flesh.

But Zeus was a smart guy, and he caught Lycaon in the act, throwing the mythological equivalent of a temper tantrum. He destroyed the palace, killed all fifty of the king’s sons with lightning bolts, and then cursed King Lycaon himself.

The punishment? Lycaon would be doomed to spend the rest of his life as a wolf, presumably because wolves were known for attacking and eating humans. Most scholars believe that it is this legend that gives birth to the term *lycanthropy*: *lykos* being the Greek word for “wolf,” and *anthropos* the word for “human.”

**International Renown**

Werewolves aren’t just a Greco-Roman thing, though. In the thirteenth century, the Norse recorded their mythological origins in something called the *Volsunga Saga*. Despite their culture being separated from the Greeks by thousands of miles and many centuries, there are tales of werewolves present there as well.

One of the stories in the *Volsunga Saga* involves a father-son pair, Sigmund and Sinjotli. During their travels, the two men came upon a hut in the woods where they found two enchanted wolf skins. These skins had the power to change the wearer into a wolf, giving them all the characteristics that the beast was known for: power, speed, and cunning.

The catch, according to the saga, was that once put on, the wolf pelt could be taken off only every ten days. Undeterred, the father and son each put on one of the wolf skins and transformed into the beasts. They decided to split up and go hunting in their new forms, but they made an agreement that if either of them encountered a party of men over a certain number—and most translations say that number was seven—then they were supposed to howl for the other to come join them in the hunt.
Sigmund’s son, however, broke his promise, killing off a hunting party of eleven men. When Sigmund discovered this, he fatally injured his son. Thankfully, the Norse god Odin intervened and healed the son, and both men took off the pelts and burned them.

So from the very beginning, werewolves were a supernatural thing. A curse. A change in the very nature of humanity. They were ruled by cycles of time and feared by those around them.

**GOING CONTINENTAL**

Things get interesting when we go to Germany, though. In 1582, the country of Germany was being pulled apart by a war between Catholics and Protestants, and one of the towns that played host to both sides was the small town of Bedburg. Keep in mind that in this era there were also still outbreaks of the Black Death, so this was an age of conflict and violence. People understood loss. They had become numb to it, and it would take something incredibly extraordinary to surprise them.

First there were cattle mutilations. Farmers from the area surrounding Bedburg would find dead cattle in their fields. It started off infrequently but grew to a daily occurrence, something that went on for many weeks. Cows that had been sent out to pasture were found torn apart. It was as if a wild animal had attacked them. Naturally, the farmers assumed it was wolves.

But it didn’t stop there. Children began to go missing. Young women vanished from the main roads around Bedburg. In some cases their bodies were never found, but those that were had been mauled by something horribly violent. Finding your cattle disemboweled is one thing, but when it’s your child or your wife, it can cause panic and fear. The community spiraled into hysteria.

When we think of historical European paranoia, we often think of witchcraft. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were filled with witch hunts, burnings, hangings, and an overwhelming hysteria that even spread across the Atlantic to the British colo-
nies, where it destroyed more lives. The witch trials of Salem, Massachusetts, are the most famous example.

But at the same time, Europe was also on fire with fears of werewolves. Some historians think that in France alone, some thirty thousand people were accused of being werewolves, and some were even executed for it, either by hanging or by being burned at the stake. The fear of werewolves was real.

For the town of Bedburg, it was very real. One report from this event tells of two men and a woman who were traveling just outside the city walls. They heard a voice call out to them for help from the trees beside the road, and one of the men stepped into the trees to give assistance. When the man did not return, the second man entered the woods to find him, and he also did not return.

The woman caught on and attempted to run, but something exited the woods and attacked her. The bodies of the men were later found, mangled and torn apart, but the woman’s never was. Later, villagers found severed limbs in the fields near Bedburg—limbs from the people who were missing. It was clear something horrible was hunting people in the area.

Another report tells of a group of children playing in a field near the cattle. As they played, something ran into the field and grabbed a small girl by the neck before trying to tear her throat out. But the high collar of her dress saved her life, and she managed to scream. Cows don’t like screaming, apparently, and they began to stampede. Frightened by the cattle, the attacker let the girl go free and ran for the forest.

This was the last straw for the people of Bedburg. They took the hunt to the beast.

The Face of the Monster

According to a pamphlet from 1589, the men of the town hunted for the creature for days. Accompanied by dogs and armed for killing, these brave men ventured into the forest and finally found
their quarry. Interestingly, though, they claimed that they had spotted a wolf, not a man, and quickly chased it down.

In the end it was their dogs that cornered the beast. Dogs are fast, and they beat the men to their prey. When the hunters did finally arrive, they found the creature cornered.

According to the pamphlet, the wolf transformed into a man right before their eyes. While the wolf had been just another beast, the man was someone they recognized. It was a wealthy, well-respected farmer from town named Peter Stubbe (whose name is sometimes recorded as Peter Stumpp).

Stubbe confessed all, and his story seemed to confirm their darkest fears. He told them that he had made a pact with the Devil at the age of twelve. The deal? In exchange for his soul, the Devil would give him a plethora of worldly pleasures. But like most stories, a greedy heart is difficult to satisfy.

Stubbe admitted to being a “wicked fiend with the desire for wrong and destruction,” and he acknowledged that he was “inclined to blood and cruelty.” To sate that thirst, the Devil had given him a magical belt of wolf skin. Putting it on, he claimed, would transform him into the monstrous shape of a wolf.

Sound familiar?

He told the men who had captured him that he had taken off that belt in the forest, and some were sent back to retrieve it, but it was never found. Still, superstition and fear drove them to torture and interrogate the man, who confessed to decades of horrible, unspeakable crimes.

Stubbe told his captors that he would often walk through Bedburg and wave to the families and friends of those he had killed. It delighted him that none of them suspected he was the killer. Sometimes he would use these walks to pick out future victims, planning how he would get them outside the city walls, where he could “ravish and cruelly murder them.”

Stubbe admitted to going on killing sprees simply because he took pleasure in the bloodshed. He would kill lambs and goats and eat their raw flesh. He even claimed to have eaten unborn children ripped straight from their mother’s wombs.
RATIONALIZATIONS

The human mind is always solving problems, even when we are asleep and unaware of it. The world is full of things that don't always sit right with us, and in our attempt to deal with life, we rationalize.

In more superstitious times, it was easy to lean on old fears and legends. The tuberculosis outbreaks of the 1800s led people to truly believe that the dead were sucking the life out of people. The stories that gave birth to the vampire mythology also provided people with a way to process the existence of a disease such as TB and its horrible symptoms.

Perhaps the story of the werewolf shows us that same phenomenon, but in reverse. Rather than creating stories that help explain the mysteries of death, perhaps we created the story of the werewolf to help justify the horrors of life and human nature.

The tale of Peter Stubbe sounds terrible, but when you hold it up to accounts of modern-day serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer or Richard Trenton Chase, it's par for the course. The difference between them and Stubbe is simply four hundred years of modernization. With the advent of electric lights pushing away the darkness, and global exploration exposing much of the world's fears as just myth, it has become more and more difficult to blame our flaws on monsters. The beast, it turns out, has been inside of us the whole time.

And Peter Stubbe? The people of Bedburg executed him for his crimes. On October 31, 1589—Halloween, mind you—he was given what was thought to be a fair and just punishment. He was strapped spread-eagle and naked to a large wooden wheel, and then his skin was peeled off with red-hot pincers. They then broke his arms and legs with the blunt end of an axe before finally turning the blade over and chopping off his head.

His body was burned at the stake in front of the entire town, and then his torture wheel was mounted on a tall pole, topped with a statue of a wolf. On top of that, they placed his severed head. Justice, or just one more example of the cruelty of mankind?

Perhaps in the end, we're all really monsters, aren't we?