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FEAR LOVE & AWE

The Paradoxical Meditation Technique

A rational mystic's guide to wellbeing and our natural ability to reduce inflammation and pain.

Fear Love and Awe &
The Paradoxical Meditation Technique
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The Paradoxical Meditation Technique

The following is the summary of a pain management technique I developed in 2007 that is deeply rooted in our evolutionary past. I have also included poems that were crafted over the last decade and are thematically woven out of a symbolic language generally pertaining to human evolution within a mythical cosmological timescape. Micro and macro perspectives metaphorically mirroring each other like twins in the womb.
Mark Cartile, March 9th 2021

While unconsciously mirroring the movements and reactions of our ancient forebears, we may live our lives believing that we carve out our own paths with the choices we make. To an extent, this may be true, but whether standing in a crowded grocery line or tucked under warm covers late at night, the instincts, responses and reflexes that have shielded us from extinction lie just beneath the surface. When triggered, what may emerge is anything but what we thought we were.

Introduction

In 2007, a little over eight months before our child was born and in the midst of yet another bout of sciatic nerve pain, I was standing alone in the basement late at night trying to clear my mind. I cannot remember where my thoughts wandered, but my awareness of the sensations that followed would soon change my perspective on a particular neurochemical response or reflex and how it relates to our evolutionary past.

The response or reflex that I am referring to is commonly known as goosebumps, chills or that tingling sensation. On that evening, what I noticed upon experiencing goosebumps was a subtle relief in the sciatic nerve pain I felt down my leg. It was enough for me to take notice as I had been experiencing back pain and sciatic nerve pain on and off for over two decades. Over the course of these years, I had practiced different meditation techniques as well as various exercise regimens while also trying anti-inflammatory and analgesic medications with the hope of managing the pain. These would help to some degree, but in my case, nothing had proven effective in breaking the cycle of chronic pain.

My sense is that goosebumps are but the visible aspects of a neurochemical response that is operating throughout the body and that it is essentially a positive behaviour reinforcement tool that we share with other mammals. We have all seen the raised hackles on our dog or cat companions when they stretch or encounter a potential foe. This response is triggered by just about any context that has potentially high stakes in regards to our survival or fitness. For us humans, the list of triggers is long, in part, because of the complexity of human consciousness. However, I can only guess that a million years ago, the contexts that would have provoked this reflex in our early ancestors would have been the very same ones that would trigger a dog or a cat today. Regardless of the environmental or conceptual triggers, the experience of goosebumps or that tingling sensation feels like a mild electrical shock flowing through the body and importantly, is pleasurable.

“Goosebumps and cold shivers are posited to serve the function of signalling that an event in the environment is pertinent to one’s most deep-seated hopes and fears.” 2012, Maruskin, Thrash and Elliot.

Having noticed in the moment the correlation between goosebumps and my reduced sciatic nerve pain, I began in earnest experimenting to see if there was also a possible causation. My goal was to come up with a technique to produce massive goosebumps on demand and as quickly as possible. Once I could figure this out, I hoped that a connection between the reflex and its anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects could be at least experientially established or discounted.

Fortunately, within only a few weeks of experimentation, I figured out how to trigger this reflex on demand and most importantly, realized that triggering this response proved to be highly effective at eliminating all of my back pain! I have been practicing slight variations

of what I have called The Paradoxical Meditation Technique for over twelve years now and I have remained back pain free!

The following is a brief summary of my thoughts on this response, how learning how to control it cured decades of back pain and how its many triggers are related to our evolutionary past. I also believe that we can build conceptually meaningful bridges with our distant ancestors by considering these response triggers when we experience them in our day-to-day life. By being mindful of our countless predecessors and the near infinite challenges they faced, we situate ourselves in the thread of evolution, grounding us in the present with compassion and honour for those who preceded us and ultimately, for those who shall follow.

At the time of writing this, I have thought about this reflex and benefited from it for well over a decade. Before I begin though, I would like to make it clear that my background is in visual art and not in biology or neurochemistry and although I have researched this subject, my knowledge of what exactly is happening in my body when I experience this response is limited. However, truth be told, over thinking the neurochemistry of this, as would be the case for falling in love, can even get in the way of this technique. All of my conclusions are the synthesis of my own experiential perspective. In other words, I will be describing how my body reacts to this technique and why I think it does so. These are personal musings expressed with the hope of helping others suffering from chronic pain.

As a final caveat, this technique may be problematic for someone suffering from a concussion or even post concussion syndrome, in large part because it stimulates the brain in ways that I feel could compromise the healing process following a head injury. This concern comes from my own experience as well. In the days and weeks following a head injury in 2013, I felt discomfort performing this technique and for a period of time stopped practicing it. Slowly over the course of weeks and months, I gradually reintegrated the practice as I began to heal. Needless to say that every head injury is different and it is best to just listen to your body and your Doctor.

In the Distance

As a third cloud formed above our heads,
each one's shadow cast upon the other in a hierarchy of altitudes
we clasped our frozen hands
and funnelled the rain through our arms

Pools of water gathered at our feet and grew

In the distance
the circumferential horizon contracted
revealing clusters of symbols
carved out of earth,
sun, moon,
water and bone

Rattles, reeds, hides and clubs
hung from branches just above our reach
the presence of which evoked soothing sounds
and corporeal rhythms
warming our hands
and reminding us of our providential birth

Beneath us, rocks rose from the surface
lifting us beyond the watermark
from where floods recede in Spring

The fear subsided

The sky opened
embraced us

and only the backs of our necks
could sense what was beyond.

Goosebumps

Although I have little doubt that The Paradoxical Meditation Technique did cure my recurring patterns of back pain, there were times over the course of these years that I did strain my back. To give just one example, rushing to put our child into a car seat in -20°C had occasionally proven to be a classic back breaker that could take weeks or even months to properly heal. The difference after I began practicing this new technique was that within two days of the injury my back pain was gone, honestly, without exception! Being so excited about how effective this was, I started sharing my experience with a few others whom I knew suffered from back pain. Unfortunately, my case for the healing properties of the goosebump response was generally met with incredulity! Regardless, in 2014, while still recovering from my head injury, I posted a video on Youtube describing the technique. (On YouTube: The Paradoxical Meditation by Mark Cartile)

As mentioned earlier, my sense is that goosebumps, horripilation or “that tingling sensation” are all part of the same biochemical response that we share with other animals. I believe that it is essentially a positive behaviour reinforcement tool and its triggers encompass just about all aspects of survival, though primarily fear and communal bonding. I also believe, (and I speak experientially) that during this response, our bodies release powerful painkillers and anti-inflammatories along with their respective euphoric properties.

Triggers

Being stalked by a bear or having someone whisper sweet nothings in your ear may seem experientially worlds apart, but if one is able to mentally distance themselves from the context and only pay attention to the physiological sensations of goosebumps or chills specifically, they are almost identical! However, with one very important distinction; in the context of fear, we are infused with stimulants and stress hormones and our heart rate goes up, but in the context of a loving and gentle whisper in the ear, we are infused with a sense of relaxation. I dare not even attempt to get into the brain chemistry of this complex process, but our ability to withstand the stressors and even thrive in the midst of prey-predator dynamics is crucial to our survival and equally important is our ability to bond with care-giving individuals and the larger group. My strong belief is that this ancient and seemingly archaic reflex is instrumental to both. In the context of fear, or the anticipation of physical injury, our bodies release anti-inflammatories, analgesics and stimulants to prepare us for a potential conflict and the contraction of the subcutaneous tiny muscles

that produce what we see as goosebumps are but the visual manifestation of this reflex. This infusion of anti-inflammatories, analgesics and stimulants increases an animal's agility, speed and improves its chances of survival. (I wonder if this subcutaneous contraction effects blood loss in the case of flesh wounds?) In the case of bonding, a variation of this cocktail is also infused in the body, but instead, slows the heart rate and increases a sense of safety, wellbeing and affiliation. Surprisingly, the actual feeling of the goosebumps, if disassociated with the context, is identical and pleasurable in both contexts with exception of the change in heart rate. Just think of some of the many triggers that produce this reflex. Of course, fear is the primal one and the easiest to self-induce with the use of visualizations. However, if too much fear is experienced, the body will contract and in so doing, may increase pressure on a misplaced nerve or injury. For this reason, a better understanding of fear and learning how to manipulate it is important for the potential success of this technique.

When I first developed the Paradoxical Meditation Technique in 2007, I saw this neurochemical tool for healing as an emotional integration of fear and love. Recently though, having read a number of research papers on the subject of awe, including Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's paper "Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion" (2003), as well as "The Science of Awe" (2018) by Summer Allen, Ph.D., a white paper prepared for the John Templeton Foundation by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, I believe that this technique is closer to an emotional simulation of the experience of awe.

This hallowed cube

This hallowed cube
crystalline from inception
gently nudging the emplacement of stars
Its shadow anchored in the memory
of a disfigured moon
forgotten
yet not born of a history
dreamt up over merging continents
with vessels adrift between earth and sky

Umber oxen bringing forth tomorrow's harvest

The rhythm of their breath revealed in the gentle sway
of one thousand flowers
we have offered along the way
Pollen beneath their hooves
thrust into the ground with each step
Cylindrical vaults of unknowable possibilities
flowers yet to be
and food for the tiniest of giants

Within days
rainwater will fill these holes
and create oceans to live by
and there
we will build a fire
to warm our hands and feet
and we will sleep

until it is no longer safe.

Awe

*"The tendency to feel awe better predicted lower levels of proinflammatory cytokines, a negative marker of health, than six other emotions.
(Stellar, John-Henderson, et al., 2015)*

"...we suggest that two appraisals are central and are present in all clear cases of awe: perceived vastness, and a need for accommodation, defined as an inability to assimilate an experience into current mental structures...

...We propose that two features form the heart of prototypical cases of awe: vastness, and accommodation...

*...The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds)"
(Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's paper "Approaching awe, a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion", 2003)*

Take a moment to consider the times in your life that you felt a powerful sense of awe. Not just wonder, or surprise, or even euphoria, but truly an experience of awe. Personally, a few quickly come to mind.

I remember years ago, standing on some rocks by the shoreline with my wife near Les Escoumins in Québec, when unexpectedly, a huge humpback whale crashed out of the water not 25 feet away. Although we were half expecting to see a whale perhaps half a mile out there, the surprise of seeing this beautiful creature suddenly, so close and for the first time was extraordinary. This was definitely new and important information that needed to be integrated into what I felt was possible. What I experienced in the first seconds of that encounter were a combination of surprise, fear and a sense of being overwhelmed by this new data, followed by a reduced sense of self as a result of being confronted with the grandeur of this majestic creature. This is the quintessential recipe for an experience of awe, but integrating new and important information that is pertinent to an updated worldview is perhaps the most important ingredient. This is what distinguishes an experience of awe from one of just surprise, fear or wonder. However one describes a truly "Awesome" experience, there is always a sense of; "is this possible? How is this possible? I must never

forget this!” Undoubtedly, in the midst of all the cognitive fireworks going off during such an experience, our bodies also instantaneously blast us with neurochemicals to prepare, enhance, and underscore the significance of the information, essentially burning the event into our memory. We rarely, if ever forget them.

This technique that I have developed is essentially a ritual that is performed in order to simulate the experience of awe, with all the experiential and neurochemical benefits that accompany it. In order to achieve the desired goosebump response, it is most effective if performed in a specific set and setting. Though little of the ritual that I propose here is original in its physicality or visualizations, how it all fits together given that one of the primary goals is to trigger goosebumps, distinguishes it from other pain reducing techniques.

The Paradoxical Meditation Technique is a quick and potentially effective additional tool that can be added to your pain management and general wellbeing regimen.

I have qualified this technique as a meditation, but it is perhaps more of a ritual than anything else. This is not about clearing the mind or producing the relaxation response. On the contrary, it is more about supercharging your body with the use of subtle movements and evocative visualizations with the intent of producing intense goosebumps. However we define the terms meditation or ritual, some attention to breath, posture, presence and the ability to maintain focus on the visualizations is essential for the effectiveness of this technique.

For all concerned including myself, my hope is that we approach this with reverence, wonder and imagination. From that point on, the “magical” neurochemical cascade takes over and takes us for the ride and any resulting benefits beyond what we can assess in ourselves is up to the practitioner’s discretion and personal philosophy.

Through Black Water Fury

Through black water fury
the stone sinks always deeper

Receding past the memory
of what holds things together
as we pull ourselves apart

Its girth defined
by the hand that threw it
with an intent disarmed
by the aching beauty of loss

We bathe in this pool
drink from its source
kiss the flooded shores of its reach

Knowing in our bones
their longing for warmth
and mercy

We are of this place

Of clay, of skin and scales

Fear

Fear is by far the most effective goosebump trigger. At its core, fear is the anticipation of physical conflict and/or injury. For the purposes of this technique, I have devised a hierarchy of fear. One that is important to understand in order to reap the benefits of the reflex. Although I begin the technique by stimulating a mild fear response, it is important that this experience remain positive. My sole intention is to trigger the neurochemical cascade and to ride that wave towards a positive conclusion. I think it is safe to assume that from an evolutionary perspective, the fear of being eaten by a predator is primal. Trying to use rational language to negotiate with an angry or hungry bear is futile and such encounters with wild, large beasts with teeth and claws the size of fingers can be terrifying! (For some statistically anomalous reason, I have had many ridiculously close encounters with bears!) So, any fear that falls under this category is NOT the direction that we want to go, and we should be mindful of this. Instead, for the sake of this technique, let us entertain much more recent fears in our evolutionary past. Let us tap into a fear subject or archetype that we can manipulate and conceivably communicate and even negotiate with, at least hypothetically for the sake of healing our chronic pain! Let us mine the concept of The Mystery. In other words, let us consider the imaginary, hypothetical, possible worlds beyond our physical reality that have been an integral part of human cultures for thousands of years. Regardless of where you fall on the mystical, religious, or atheist continuum, let's approach this in a respectful manner, and most importantly, using the imagination that all of us were so capable of accessing when we were children.

The gift

What seed rests behind the glyph
or in the gestured crowd
all quiet through the daily take
off the cuff it flies

Cursed, it spoils the winter broth
where hunger stalks the still
the numb, the dazed, the underwhelmed
the loaf of bread and the ripest plum

This fruit to bare the softest word
a branch to breach the molten crust
with anchored roots in the songs of hope
in trust an oath that mends the cloth

The weave that catches the finest dust
and keeps us warm with the swaddled touch
of fingers reaching through the glass
extending inwards beyond the known

with hoe and axe
pick and shovel
for clearing the space required to grow
the patient soil of the deepest hue
calls us forth to receive its gift.

Ritual

Humans, including our Neanderthal cousins have been performing rituals for, at the very least, many tens of thousands of years. Nearly every one of our ancestors routinely participated in some form of ritual. Early humans undoubtedly began burying their dead to prevent scavengers from devouring their loved ones within hours. Perhaps even to mitigate the deathly smell that, especially in extreme heat, would be as evolutionarily repulsive to them as it is to us, given our gastrointestinal makeup. We definitely do not have the intestinal fortitude of vultures. I do not see that burying the dead is necessarily a sign of a concept of the afterlife. Initially, it could have been for very pragmatic reasons. However, at some point, this act accrued meaning beyond the needs and responsibilities of daily existence. What could have triggered such a reconceptualization? Archaeological evidence from early burial sites seems to indicate that even 40000 years ago, our ancestors had the concept of an afterlife. Everything in my bones tells me that the concept of an afterlife was the result of visionary experiences, beginning with the conceptual integration of information experienced in dreams followed by individual and small group experiences with the ingestion of psychoactive plants. In addition to these possible conceptual seedlings of an afterlife, I would also add, naturally occurring visionary states of mind that, though they are somewhat of an anomaly, are still within the bounds of human experience. Many people today, including myself, can attest to this. If you have never had such an experience, I would urge you to keep an open mind.

I remember reading a quote a few years ago that struck me as it felt so relevant to this technique. I believe that it was written by James Hillman, but if it wasn't, please forgive me because I have not been able to find it since. "...the birth of the audience was the death of ritual". Performing a ritual is light years apart from witnessing one! One of the few exceptions to this is dance. Whether the music performed is live or recorded, when people get up to dance, they are synchronizing their movements to the rhythms and intent of the music. They are partaking in one of the most archaic forms of communal ritual. I will touch on this later when I attempt to tease apart what I believe is at the heart of music.

One could define ritual as a formulaic and reproducible, individual or collective conceptual and physical manifestation of intent largely bound up in a specific set and setting. Set and setting, is a term often referring to psychedelic experiences, ("usually credited to Timothy Leary, but the concept was recognized and made use of by earlier researchers such as Al Hubbard." michaelpollan.com) but I also believe that it is relevant in describing ritual as well. When a ritual is performed sincerely, the experience of context in addition to the intention behind our gestures, words, thoughts and wishes, imbues us with a sense of affiliation with who or what we are attempting to commune with. We may be seeking favour, or expressing gratitude. We may be honouring those deceased or just born. Regardless, these actions and thoughts have profound consequences on our mental and physical states. Not unlike dance, the physicality of ritual can change our neurochemistry in positive or negative ways. Just try standing in complete darkness and slowly begin to move your arms and hands around. Imagine that your hands are receivers and or

transmitters. With your palms open, reach out into the darkness. Do you feel any changes in your body? What if you were to drive these gestures with intent and visualizations? Before I describe the specifics of the simple technique that I am proposing, I would invite you to think about this in a manner that may prepare you for the changes in your body that you may encounter. How we stand, move and gesture, guided by our thoughts, changes our brain chemistry. A ritual is a concise personification of that.

Flight

With both arms
reaching painfully close
to the boundaries of a thought

Singular and ancient

Preceded only
by the hallowed anchored branch

sullen carrier of heads hung low

where once sung
and will sing again

the to and fro

of children

discovering flight

Music

While I continue to muse on these triggers from my layman's perspective, I would like to take some time to riff on what I believe is at the evolutionary heart of music. Although music does not play a part in my Paradoxical Meditation Technique, I have observed, as I am sure many have, that music is a very effective trigger of goosebumps and chills. Why would music provoke this in all of us? Does all music provoke this response? Why some music and not others? I remember that long before I developed this technique I would refer jokingly to J. S. Bach as my Chiropractor. At the time, I was only half thinking this through. What I had noticed was that when I would listen to his fourteen or so minute Chaconne, from his Partita no.2 in D minor, my back pain would diminish. I would lie on the floor in the dark and dive deep into this musical masterpiece. With little exception, at some point, I would experience massive chills or goosebumps (at the time, I did not make the connection). The genius of this particular piece seems to be that it somehow manages to express every conceivable human emotion with one solo instrument. But so many other musical compositions have this effect as well and from every style of music! Every kind of music from every corner of this planet has its musical genius that is expressed with the tools at hand and the musical lineage that it is built on! I can remember vividly and with such excitement the first time that I experienced certain musical pieces and the thrill that followed. John Coltrane's *Interstellar Space*, Eric Dolphy's *Out to Lunch*, Górecki's *Symphony No 3*, and so many more! Those are powerful moments that have so enriched my life! It is often the chorus or the anticipation of a musical climax that brings on the reflex in most people. Regardless of how we define what is going on musically when we get the chills, generally, it is when everyone and everything musically comes together. It is the most communal part of the song or composition, whether the piece is simple or complex. The chorus, for example, clearly reinforces our communal bonds and is among the clearest links between how we experience music today and why it evolved in the first place.

But how and why did our early ancestors develop music? Many have thought about this of course, some thinking that music is just an unexplainable anomaly, an interesting creative human quirk. Others such as Daniel J. Levitin argue that music has important evolutionary benefits (*This is your brain on music*, Daniel J. Levitin, 2006). I am definitely on board with Mr. Leviton.

When it comes to music, my intuition urges me to push the concept as far as I can. Although other primates use tools to some degree, *Homo Habilis* was the earliest of the human genus to build stone tools around 2.5 million years ago. This is known as the Oldowan stone tool archaeological industry. Needless to say, there is yet no evidence of language, music or artefacts resulting from abstract thinking from anywhere near this period. But nonetheless, here lie the conceptual beginnings of what we are today.

The following is the mental exercise that crystallizes in my mind every time I consider our musical evolutionary timeline: Imagine three random number generators (RNG) and each one representing an early Homo Habilis toolmaker around 2.5 million years ago tapping away percussively with their stone tool. Given that three is an important number when it comes to pattern recognition, try to visualize the following; the first RNG is metaphorically tapping away for X hours/day. Can you hear the tapping? Now let's introduce the second and third RNG to the equation. For a clear pattern (from a human perspective) to be established and recognized, we would need all three RNGs to (randomly) synchronize their tapping for a minimum of three beats in a row and for this to clearly happen three times over a relatively short period of time, representing the same individuals. To add a little spice to the mix, the three RNGs would also have to represent three Homo Habilis individuals who share a sharp sense of pattern recognition. This was a tall order and unlikely to happen overnight! What these early folk needed most of all, in order to move them to the next level of cooperative and organizational capabilities, was to cognitively acknowledge the potential collective cohesiveness that could be manifested via the intentional mastery of synchronized rhythms. As a side note, if you've ever worked on a construction site where a few or more people are swinging hammers you have probably experienced this to some degree, albeit, from a contemporary cultural context. Our brains cannot help but react when the hammers unexpectedly strike the nails at the same time and we may even find ourselves, in the contemporary west, consciously trying not to synchronize ourselves with the others, as this may even feel socially awkward! This reaction is so ironic, because in truth, most would enjoy synchronizing the smashing of hammers, and when possible this could even improve productivity and stamina. Working to synchronized rhythms has a long history in human culture, from collective daily food preparation to gruelling forced labour. This original acknowledgment was a game changer. It was the realization that when many individuals hit an object or make a sound simultaneously, that this has the power to enhance their confidence, their ability to work together cooperatively, to intimidate adversaries and most importantly to reinforce their communal bonds. At some point much further down the road, the capacity to produce synchronistic sounds, in particular in the context of communal bonding, would be also used to celebrate, mourn and to add depth to rituals.

Usually at this point of the mental exercise I feel myself confronted with an unimaginable timeline, because in truth, how many times would this entire pattern have to be reproduced in order to be embedded into the culture as a common understanding. Over the course of hundreds of thousands of years, not unlike other aspects of consciousness including language, layers of complexity would be added to the rhythms, along with vocal sounds and language. When we consider the last 2.5 million years, I truly believe that proto-music preceded spoken language and may even have provided the specific methodology for transmitting the information of sounds, patterns and symbols that would eventually lead to language.

If we are to consider this in our contemporary context, think about the music that gives you chills or goosebumps. The powerful feeling that I have when I experience chills triggered by a musical piece is usually the feeling of connection. This connection may be experienced as a sense of communing with the artist, or it may equally be the sense of

communing with a larger group. When in the context of affiliating with a larger group, this feeling is accompanied with a sense of communal strength, will and capability. This has often been used as a tool to manipulate masses, by instilling a sense of invincibility, pride and fierceness, amplifying tribal, ethnic and nationalistic identities.

With all its styles and various complexities, it remains as relevant today as always because it is so intertwined with our evolutionary past. There is a piece of music for every state of mind and we are never alone if we have music.

The Currency of Time

The currency of time
passes through sleeves
and starched collars
through gorges, cleavage
and gripping fingers

Stirring the restless, the quiet

the forgotten forgetfuls and troublesome kind

It clears paths over flat land and bare backs
garnished with bread crumbs, fresh flowers
and the beating hooves of wild boys

gnawing the ankles of the men
they shall become.

Coincidence or Synchronicity

I remember years ago, turning on the radio on a Sunday morning and hearing Wagner's Tannhauser Overture for the first time. I was in a rush to leave to do errands but instead just stood there right in front of the radio, listening, transfixed. Of course, somewhere during the 15-minute piece, I experienced massive goosebumps, but as soon as it finished I ran out of the house to get on with my errands with the intention of eventually someday picking up this recording. On the way out I thought I would stop by the local thrift shop to pick up a CD to listen to in the car. I ran into the shop, noticed Strauss' Don Quixote directed by James Levine, paid a buck for it and ran out into the car. Once in the car, I quickly opened up the jewel case, slipped the disc into the player, and accidentally started the recording on the last track. I could not believe my ears! It was Wagner's Tannhauser Overture! This incredible coincidence took place within about 10 minutes from when I left my house with the hope of "someday" owning this recording. Of course, I remember the chills I felt in that moment! Now, if I were to really tease this apart, it isn't terribly surprising that both German composers would be found on the same recording, however given how many works Wagner produced, the coincidence was exciting and so unexpected! The chills or goosebumps that I experienced in this case can be attributed to an abstract feeling of universal connectivity. As if matter and time are somewhat malleable and that we can be occasionally nudged in any given direction by (in this case) benevolent forces. We are seekers of patterns and a coincidence is the acknowledgement of an unexpected and noteworthy pattern. This anomalous occurrence, and our physiological response to it, underscore the experience, and reinforce the attention we give to it. The personal significance of a coincidence is relative to the meaning or proximity of the subject matter. The more significant and unexpected the pattern is, the more we will neurochemically respond to it. The unexpected recognition of something familiar in an unfamiliar context may also be rooted in our capacity for facial recognition. Meeting a familiar face in a crowd far from where you would expect to see them is perhaps one of the most common experiences of coincidence and may be at its root. An unexpected familiar face inspires a sense of communion. As our conceptual tree branches out into the world with its infinite complexity, our minds will seek and find patterns. Some will be trivial and barely noticeable, but others, by their improbability and significance, may inspire us to rethink our worldview.

The chills we may experience in this context are akin to a pleasurable red light going on indicating that there is something important that we need to pay attention to. By being mindful of our goosebump triggers, we can gain insights into our evolutionary past. There is so much information tied up with this response that we can learn from in order to better understand ourselves, including our fears, our motivations and how and why we react to situations.

This State

When we awoke
the lake had frozen beneath us
petrifying our submerged limbs

Sparing those skyward bound

The stillness of this choreography
betrayed the fear in our hearts
and brought us beyond the first Horizon.

We had been waiting a long time.

The enduring scribes among us
that had kept cryptic notes
concealed on the inner thighs of their lovers
were always quick to point out
the inconsistencies in the narratives of our victories.

Fear and failure abound when confronted
with the sight of our own bones.

In this state of aqueous emergence
where thirst concedes
to the prescience of the aether
symbols are sown, harvested and offered as flesh sublimed.

Grace manifested
in the sweet, healing whisperings of a child.

Anomalous states of mind or mystical experiences

Altered or anomalous states of consciousness and mystical experiences are the cornerstone of the very concept of otherness beyond our materialist reality. There would be no sense of the divine, beyond the mortal, without the concept of a non-physical yet tangible and interactive meta-reality. This concept of a non-physical otherness by way of visionary experiences has driven human culture for tens of thousands of years and would eventually lead to the world religions we know today. In our current era, many are still driven to great lengths to access these states of mind. However we define them, they can be as life transforming today as they were 40000 years ago. In order to achieve an altered state of mind in the modern world, psychoactive drugs or plants are the easiest and most predictable pathways, in large part, because of the near absence of well-integrated cultural practices that once were the collective gateway to psychedelic trance states. Although alcohol is readily available and can obviously alter our state of mind, the resulting transformation is anything but psychedelic. Loosening ones inhibitions while rendering a pleasant patina over reality may be just what we hope for at times, but this is not where one is likely to experience the infinite divine. Regardless, sometimes in the course of ones life, we may inadvertently fall down the proverbial rabbit hole without having danced for hours or ingested anything psychotropic. If by chance one should experience this in the modern world, there is very little to prepare them for it. In fact, contemporary Christianity has gone out of its way to dissociate itself from the individual's capacity to have such experiences. Even the most plausible foundational myths are commonly seen as pure allegory now. Hence, when I had my first full-blown mystical "out of body" experience in 1992 while walking along a deserted beach late at night in the Magdalene Islands, I had nowhere to place that experience. When I recovered a few minutes later on my knees with my face in the sand, you bet I had goosebumps. Without going into details of what I saw or felt, suffice it to say that confronting the seemingly infinite is indeed overwhelming, even if it is only infinite in terms of our human capacity of awareness, which is anything but infinite. To commune with the entirety of a small forest would seem infinite relative to our everyday experience! During such an experience, our emotional and cognitive filters that triage our reality dissolve and the influx of data are akin to a tidal wave washing over us. We suddenly find that what little remains of ourselves is awash in a diluvial cascade of information. From having had a few of these experiences, my sense is that wherever our thoughts are, preceding the moment of cognitive overload, from a data perspective, is where our minds will go. It is completely understandable that countless people have described this as an encounter with the divine or god. On a fundamental level, because there is no precedent, I believe that we process this through the lens of our culture. What other tools could we possibly have? The experience itself is near impossible to put into words, as it is often experienced outside of linear time and space. Whether the experience is sublime or terrifying, we have little choice but to condense it into a transmittable data packet that if well communicated to others may travel over time and in the case of the foundational seeds of

religions, potentially thousands of years! At the very least though, these experiences challenge us to reconsider any pre-conceived notions we may have of the possible limits of consciousness. To bring this back to my goosebump hypothesis, fear and the experience of being profoundly overwhelmed are indistinguishable. In addition, both closely tie in with the experience of awe, especially as we lose our sense of individuality in the moment. Such profound "mystical" experiences often have a combination of the following characteristics: The initial response is that of fear because the subject is suddenly confronted with something profoundly unexpected and unfamiliar, and while the danger assessment is being made, futilely prepares a response. Of course this all happens in a millisecond! This is instantaneously followed by a realization of scale, which is defined by the quantity of information being processed, which far exceeds the subjects' capacity to process. Here, the subject resigns his or her sense of individuality and metaphorically or not fuses their subjectivity to the data stream, becoming experientially one with it. This is ultimately experienced as a powerful sense of communion with "other". As this is the ultimate Awe experience, every one of these characteristics is far beyond ordinary experience. As can be expected, such an experience will definitely trigger the response in even the most cynical of individuals and may likely redefine them from that point on. Thirty years later, I am still trying to make sense of what happened on that beach. Regardless, I am so thankful for having had that experience, as it instantaneously crystallized a life long curiosity about consciousness and inspired me to live as creative a life as I could. This has often come at a cost though, mostly because such an experience seems so much at odds with our modern materialist and market driven cultures and I have had at times difficulty integrating them both. As a side note, interestingly, such experiences commonly have the powerful effect of preparing us for death. In the years since, I have read and heard many interviews of survivors of near death experiences and likewise, their experiences changed their perspective on dying in very similar ways. Why do we have these experiences? I do not know. But as a result of having had them, I openheartedly embrace the possibility that the universe is infinitely more mysterious than we can imagine.

This fall

I welcome this fall
with the trials of birth

The diluvian rhythm
luring driftwood to shore

Asleep as I am
as tall as I'll grow
I welcome this gift
this foot and this claw

Hooves in the cellar
crushing the stone
to the sound of thought
mischief and waste

discarded beneath
this chair on which I stand
innocently reaching
towards the brilliant
blue light.

Nails on a Chalkboard & ASMR

This one may seem like an oddball hypothesis as I continue to grasp at straws, but it goes...

Again, it is important to visualize the experience you probably have when someone drags his or her nails across a chalkboard, or even a fork or knife that screeches across a dinner plate. The experience for many is a mixture of clenching of teeth in spontaneous anger and revulsion felt in the stomach (the abdominal muscles clench as well), while arms and shoulders also contract! Try to recall watching someone else's reaction. There must be more to this than just the sensitivity of our ears to certain sound frequencies. Having spent months in the bush living in tents and campers and on occasion, a few less than desirable flats where mice ran wild, I believe that this acutely visceral goosebump trigger has a very particular evolutionary past. How many times did I wake up at night to the sound of claws, small and not so small, scratching away, trying to get to my food storage! This is where I believe the connection lies. It is associated with our competition with other animals for food reserves and importantly with the potential life threatening contamination of these reserves with their droppings. Whether it be mice, rats, raccoons, or larger beasts, their claws scratching away especially on a hard surface such as a pile of rocks or a rudimentary stone wall is a very close approximation to the sound of nails on a chalkboard. The visceral clenching of abdominal muscles may even be linked to the potential food poisoning that could result from rodent fecal contamination! The next time you have this experience, take a moment to visualize your Neolithic ancestor waking up in a start and scrambling to chase away the pesky four-legged nocturnal thief or much larger predator hoping to make a meal out of them! How many times in the course of our evolution did our progenitors frantically wake up at night to fight off a predator or thief for this to be ingrained into our being.

In our contemporary lives, there are countless triggers for this response. I have but touched on the ones that I find most interesting. Of course, cold is among the most basic triggers. It is a very physical response. In this case, the body is potentially compromised and reacts by infusing itself with anti-inflammatories and stimulants which must increase blood flow to mitigate the pain. Though not nearly enough! Writing this in Montréal in the middle of February, I only wish that our bodies were better equipped for cold! I also remember that when I regularly jogged years ago, there would often be that peak moment when the chills and euphoric sensations kicked in. At that point, I would feel invigorated, one with all, and would feel much less pain. I guess this was what is often referred to as the runner's high. It has been so many years since then but I can still remember key moments having this experience jogging, even the exact location of one such run almost forty years ago!

I will conclude this brief overview of triggers with one that has millions of videos online and viewers praising the benefits they have experienced with it. The Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR). I first came across these videos in around 2012 while researching the goosebump response. At first glance, these videos seemed like a bizarre fetish tucked away in one of countless youtube niche markets, but after only a few minutes of watching, I felt that I understood exactly what was going on! This was not a fetish, but rather, these performers were hacking into their audiences' evolutionary software. Before continuing to read, please take a moment to watch and listen to one of these videos. If you haven't seen one before, these videos will undoubtedly seem a little unnerving. There are as many variations as there are videos, however the core thread remains the same. A person whispers something at very close range into a microphone and or makes crackling sounds, also recorded at very close range. The sonic experience is one of non sexual intimacy and triggers in many people a sense of relaxation, comfort, mild euphoria and the experience of goosebumps, chills, frissons, etc... However one defines the response, we are essentially describing the same thing. From an evolutionary perspective, what experience does this sound like? Well, in less time than it took me to memorize the name of the phenomena (ASMR), I concluded that the closest experiential approximation of what one experiences in these videos is that of a newborn infant's first minutes, days and weeks bonding with their care giver, usually a mother, whispering truly sweet nothings into her swaddled child's ear. The closeness of the sounds, the pampering, along with the warmth and smells, instill a sense of comfort and safety. It is the tone of the words and not so much the content that matters, because this experience of bonding at such an early stage of our lives is so crucial to our survival, to our physical health and brain development, our bodies underscore this significance by flooding our senses with a warm cascade of euphoric chills, reinforcing the significance of the experience. This memory, though buried deep inside of us, remains with us our whole lives, and as the cycle of life repeats, as eventual caregivers, we hopefully do the same with our offspring. It is the primal and beautiful cycle of nurturing. So, regardless of our age, the success of these videos should be a reminder of our need to bond with others, to care and be cared for. I remember whispering into my mother's ear in the last hours and minutes of her life. Just sweet gentle words of love and gratitude. May we all be blessed with entering and leaving this world with love and tenderness.

Beyond Memory

Within this indefinable particle
Scuffling about in the absence of sound

Beyond memory
and even our farthest stones throw

rests the quiet

yet unpredictable nature
of your awakening gaze

The Paradoxical Meditation Technique

The time spent going over the various triggers will hopefully provide you with some context as to why I have chosen to do the technique this way. Every step has a reason and it provides the most effective environment, state of mind, physicality and visualizations. The visualizations are somewhat emotionally paradoxical, hence the name, as we play with a mild fear response followed by one of love.

To begin with, find a dark place in your home where you can be undisturbed for ten minutes. Late at night just before going to bed has always worked best for me. The basement is my favourite spot, but any room or even a closet could do as long as it is dark. Remember, we will be attempting to trigger archaic emotional responses! Once you have found the spot, move slowly around. Find the location in that space where you feel most vulnerable. As odd as this may sound, how we move through space, especially in the real or metaphoric darkness, affects our brain chemistry and this can be anywhere. At its core, this is about how we present ourselves to others but as importantly, how we position ourselves defensively, offensively or neutrally. All of these variations of posture can be effective. So, you have found the perfect dark location in your home. You are aware of your posture and general physicality. Take a deep breath. Be mindful of your feet touching the floor and everything infinitely beneath it. With great care and attention, slowly move your hands outward with palms open. Mentally visualize that your hands are receivers and transmitters. (For a moment, consider the hand gestures in various religious traditions especially pertaining to prayer. Our hands are elemental communicative tools.) Try whispering these words; "We acknowledge our blessings, and we amplify the gift of love" (Speaking these words collectively on behalf of yourself and others mildly decreases your individuality while increasing your sense of communion with the greater community). As you slowly repeat these words, gradually raise your hands into the darkness. If after a few times you still don't feel any changes in your body, try to visualize the hands of loved ones from generations past reaching out of the darkness to touch you with their loving arms. Imagine all of your ancestors, your loved ones, living and passed on, and those yet to be born. Repeat this a few times. Declare with confidence, "I am open to you". Smile and with arms raised high, slowly turn counter clockwise while whispering, "love". As you slowly turn, visualize yourself as a blinding light of love shining onto the people you love, and with every slow rotation, you expand this circle of love wider and farther away. Finally, consider blowing a kiss in loving gratitude to the infinite and then, make your way to bed.

Will this technique produce massive chills for you? I can only hope. I have read that some people can access this response quicker than others. But whether you experience them or not, pay close attention to how you felt prior and after the ritual. Every time that I have performed this, I have always felt better afterwards, physically and mentally. It always feels like an emotional reset and although it does wind me up a little, it has never prevented me from getting a good night's sleep. Should you choose to try this, experiment with different gestures and words, but I would urge you to finish it off with a loving visualization. How could we possibly go wrong with that! May this simple ritual be as beneficial to you as it has been to me.

Mark Cartile has been working as a visual artist for over 35 years. Complementing his fine art career, he also paints and illustrates for corporate and residential clients. He studied illustration and design, has travelled throughout North America and Europe, worked on farms, planted countless trees as a silviculture worker in British Columbia, worked as an emergency firefighter in the Yukon and collaborated on music projects as singer-songwriter. Mark and his wife and daughter live on the island of Montreal where he continues to paint, write, and record music. Mark recently released the album "Weep Red Rising Flood" under the name One Trillion Galaxies.

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