

Mark James Miller: Melted Lead, Horseshoes, White Butterflies — Welcome to the New Year!

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Some people will melt lead in an old spoon, then drop it into a glass of cold water. Others will sleep with a horseshoe beneath their pillow. Some will leave money outside their front door, tucked away in a shoe. Others will hope that a tall, handsome man will be the first visitor to enter their home, while some will open all their doors at midnight.

Some will burn nearly life-sized dolls, and others will hope the first butterfly they see will be white. Still others will eat black-eyed peas, have a chimney sweep rub ash onto their forehead or hope that the wind blows from the south.

Celebrating the new year is the most venerable and the most universal custom on the planet. All over the world, people welcome the start of another year with parties, noisemakers, resolutions — and superstitions. The new year brings with it many hopes and good intentions, but it also brings a great deal of uncertainty. Superstition helps people believe they can make good things happen in the new year and prevent bad things from taking place.

One-half of all Americans admit to believing in superstitions of one kind or another. Belief in the supernatural — in ghosts, witches, magic and haunted houses — has actually increased over the past decade. Companies report business is down on Friday the 13th, and airlines admit that fewer people fly on that day.

Many hotels do not have a “13th floor” because guests refuse to stay on it, so they simply skip that number and the 12th floor is followed by the 14th. According to **Otis Elevator Co.**, 85 percent of elevators do not have a “13th” floor designated on their control panel.

Animal shelters tell us that black cats are adopted less often because they are thought to bring bad luck. In one online survey, two-thirds of respondents admitted to crossing their fingers to bring good luck. Millions of others knock on

wood when making a prediction. Many people do not want to walk under a ladder or step on the cracks in a sidewalk.

Belief in superstition runs deep, and the origins of many of these beliefs and practices go far back into our past. In Europe, New Year's Eve was known for centuries as the "Sylvester Night," in honor of **Pope Sylvester I**, who was pontiff from 314 until 335. Because he died on Dec. 31, the last day of the year was named for him, and the Sylvester Night became a time of feasting, celebration — and the practice of superstition.

Sylvester was pope at the time **Constantine the Great** was overturning the old pagan gods and ushering in the Christian era. But in the minds of many Romans, the ancient gods were not so easily vanquished. They hung on in the form of evil spirits, and the best way to drive away evil spirits was with loud noises. During Sylvester Night celebrations, mummers dressed in outlandish costumes beat drums, tooted horns, cracked whips, shouted and screamed — and ever since, New Year's Eve is celebrated by making a racket, a racket originally meant to chase away the goblins.

In Central Europe, many people still practice the bleigiessen, the tradition of melting a spoonful of lead and then dropping it into a glass of cold water. The shape the lead assumes will foretell what the coming year has in store for you. If the lead forms into a ball, good luck will roll your way. If the lead forms the shape of an anchor, help will come to you when needed. A cross, however, means death is coming.

Another Central European superstition holds that having a chimney sweep rub ash onto your forehead will bring good luck in the coming year. But in Ecuador, people hope for good luck in a very unique way — with the custom of burning Los Anos Viejos. Large dolls, representing the old year and sometimes dressed in an individual's old clothing, are burned at midnight all over the country, getting rid of the old and lighting the way for the new.

In many parts of the United States, people will leave money outside their front door on New Year's Eve, often in a shoe, to bring about a more prosperous new year. Others sleep with a horseshoe under their pillow to bring good luck. Some people will open all their doors at midnight to let the old year out and the new year in.

Some believe that if the first visitor to your home in the new year is a tall, handsome man, good luck will follow. Others believe that if the first butterfly you see in the new year is white, good luck will come your way.

The Pennsylvania Dutch eat sauerkraut at new year's, thinking this will bring them wealth in the coming year. In the South, many people eat black-eyed peas on new year's for the same reason.

Green vegetables — such as spinach, lettuce or cabbage — are also thought to bring money because of their color. In Greece, people eat St. Basil's cake, which is baked with a silver or gold coin inside. Whoever finds the coin in their piece of cake will be especially fortunate in the coming year.

If there is no wind on New Year's Day, it is said that a dry summer will come that year. A windy day means there will be rain in the summer, and strong winds mean floods are coming. A wind from the north means bad weather all year; a wind from the south means prosperous times are ahead.

Why do people practice superstition when there is no rational reason to support it? According to psychological research, superstition gives a feeling of control in situations in which people feel they have none. A new year arrives amid much disquiet and anxiety as people wonder what lies ahead, and superstitious practices provide them with a way of managing those feelings.

For most people who are superstitious, the answer is probably like that of having chicken soup when you don't feel well: It may not help, but it can't hurt.

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