

Ode to E Pluribus Unum for Sunday December 24 2023

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Ice Halos Over Bavaria



Image Credit & Copyright: Bastian Werner

What's causing those unusual sky arcs? Ice crystals.

While crossing a field of fresh snow near Füssen, Bavaria, Germany, earlier this month, the photographer noticed that he had entered an ice fog. For suspended water to freeze into an ice fog requires quite cold temperatures, and indeed the air temperature on this day was measured at well below zero.

The ice fog reflected light from the Sun setting behind St. Coleman Church. The result was one of the greatest spectacles the photographer has ever seen. First, the spots in the featured picture are not background stars but suspended ice and snow.

Next, two prominent ice halos are visible: the 22-degree halo and the 46-degree halo. Multiple arcs are also visible, including, from top to bottom, antisolar (subsun), circumzenithal, Parry, tangent, and parhelic (horizontal).

Finally, the balloon shaped curve connecting the top arc to the Sun is the rarest of all: it is the heliac arc, created by reflection from the sides of hexagonally shaped ice crystals suspended in a horizontal orientation.

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Handel's Messiah; Unto Us a Child is Born



[tps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MS3vpAWW2Zc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MS3vpAWW2Zc)

Messiah: For Unto Us a Child is Born

For unto us a child is born
Unto us a son is given
And the government shall be upon his shoulder
And his name shall be called
Wonderful
Counsellor
The mighty God
The everlasting Father
The Prince of Peace.

Sir Colin Davis conducts the London Symphony Orchestra, Susan Gritton, Sara Mingardo, Mark Padmore, Alastair Miles and the Tenebrae choir performing Handel's Messiah.

<https://youtu.be/71NCzuDNUcg>

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Bizarre and Quirky Vintage Christmas Postcards



This collection of strange and fascinating postcards show us quirks of earlier traditions, art, and culture.

“To people from earlier times, our current fascination with robins, carol singers, and snowy scenes might appear as strange as their cards seem to us. However, tastes and traditions evolve over time, and the past is a distinct realm with its own unique customs.”

<https://bit.ly/3GQERDi>

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Christmas Spectacular Starring the Radio City Rockettes



Playbill.com

Founded 1925 in St. Louis, they have, since 1932 (91 years ago), performed at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Until 2015, they also had a touring company. They are best known for starring in the Radio City Christmas Spectacular, an annual Christmas show, and for performing annually since 1957 at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in New York.

There have been over 3,000 women who have performed as Rockettes since the New York Christmas Spectacular opening night in 1932. The Rockettes also conduct the Rockette Summer Intensive for dancers aspiring to be Rockettes.

<https://youtu.be/CPMWaW065bY>

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Elaborate Winter Solstice Costumes from Europe



mossandfog.com

Move over, Halloween. These elaborate, spooky, and bizarre costumes help usher in the winter solstice. These costumes and traditions have been handed down for hundreds of years. Wired has an in depth look at crazy winter solstice costumes of Europe.

Photographer Charles Fréger captures some of the odd and amazing getups of Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, and other European countries.

<https://mossandfog.com/elaborate-winter-solstice-costumes-from-europe/>

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The Economics of the \$2B Christmas Tree Industry



947wls

Every year, before we're rockin' around our Christmas trees at home, Christmas tree farmers are... waiting.

There are 15+ varieties of Christmas trees, ranging from the ever-popular Fraser fir to the eastern red cedar — but most of them follow the same general production cycle. And it's a long cycle: one tree takes 8-10 years to reach a mature six feet.

During that time, it's a bit of a financial black hole for farmers. For starters, investing in land, labor and equipment is expensive. And don't even get us started on the existential threat that artificial trees pose to the industry.

So, how do tree farms make it work?

They've managed to find a way — 25m Christmas trees are sold in the US annually, at an average price of \$78 — and this "Hustlenomics" video, in the holiday spirit of giving, will share it with you.

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree... How profitable are thy branches?

<https://youtu.be/-idfjwFnx70>

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The World's Most Unusual and Strange Holiday Traditions



huffington post

The holiday season, a time traditionally associated with familiar customs like exchanging gifts, lighting candles, and gathering with loved ones, also harbors some of the world's most unusual and bizarre traditions.

<https://mossandfog.com/the-worlds-most-unusual-and-strange-holiday-traditions/>

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SMART ASS ANSWER #6

A Short Request from Robert Newman, a Former Squadron Mate.



Cancer Sucks

It's with a heavy heart and tears in my eyes. Nothing is more painful than trying to smile and remain positive, but after many tests, being poked and prodded, chemo and radiation, the person physically changes and can suffer with sadness. I know many of you care about this message because, the cancer has not affected you. You do not know what it's like to have fought the fight or have a loved one who leads or has led a battle against cancer.

I ask of you a small favor...I know only some of you will do it. If you know someone who has led a battle against cancer, is still struggling, or who passed, please make this your status to support, respect, and remember.

I have faith that many of my friends and family will copy and paste to their newsfeed. Just wanted to say, I despise CANCER!!!

Keep at it Old Shoe. You're an inspiration.

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The Dawn of Photography: Capturing the First Ever Photograph



MossandFog

In the annals of human history, the invention of photography stands as a monumental leap in the way we capture and remember our world. The very first photograph, a pivotal moment in this journey, was taken by [Joseph Nicéphore Niépce](#) in 1826 or 1827, marking the birth of photography as we know it.

<https://bit.ly/4711Kyz>

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Spike Jones+PDQ Bach=The Nitwits



youtube

Sid Millward led his British group "The Nitwits." They entertained all over the world, with their prime being the 1940's through the 60's. Charlie Rossi, Wally Stewart, Cyril Lagey, Arthur Calkin, Sid Flood, Harry Coles, Ronnie Genarda and Tony Traverci were the best known members of the group.

<https://youtu.be/1UrqMyPO8Ys>

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Dress for Success



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Morning Sickness Breakthrough



emedhealth

Cambridge researchers discovered a single hormone produced by the fetus is the major cause of "morning sickness," the persistent, first-trimester nausea and vomiting that affects more than two-thirds of pregnant women. The breakthrough is expected to help

prevent the condition as well as hyperemesis gravidarum—the severe form of the condition—which often leads to weight loss, dehydration, and miscarriage.

The GDF-15 protein, produced by various cells throughout the body, signals cellular stress and sends a message to the brain to reduce food intake. Researchers have known that GDF-15 prompts pregnancy nausea, but it wasn't clear whether the mother or the fetus was the source. The study tracked the increased GDF-15 to the placenta and fetus for the first time.

The research also showed a woman's previous exposure to the hormone determined her response during pregnancy. Participants with a type of blood disorder that elevated their GDF-15 levels had few symptoms, while women with pre-pregnancy deficiencies in the hormone typically had severe reactions. The findings are expected to lead to further clinical trials.

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Cannabis Use In Pregnancy Linked To Poor Outcomes

A study suggests that using cannabis in pregnancy may raise the risk of pregnancy outcomes that are linked to placental dysfunction.



*Using cannabis during pregnancy may increase risk of certain poor outcomes.
(Image credit: BSIP / Contributor/Getty Images)*

<https://bit.ly/48iLr1c>

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**Do y'all remember,
before the internet,
that people thought
the cause of stupidity
was the lack of access
to information? Yeah.
It wasn't that.**

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Dreamlike Surrealism by Aaron Elliott

The work of Aaron Elliott



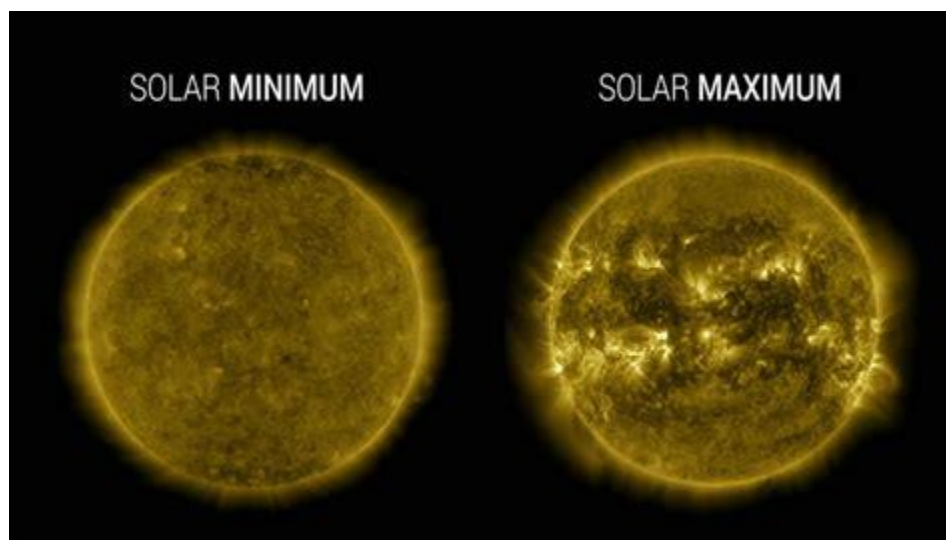
<https://bit.ly/47AzTX3>

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Min Vs. Max...Solarwise



videos.space.com

The surface of our Sun is constantly changing. Some years it is quiet, showing relatively few sunspots and active regions. Other years it is churning, showing many sunspots and throwing frequent Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) and flares.

Reacting to magnetism, our Sun's surface goes through periods of relative calm, called Solar Minimum and relative unrest, called Solar Maximum, every 11 years.

The featured video shows on the left a month in late 2019 when the Sun was near Solar Minimum, while on the right a month in 2014 when near Solar Maximum. The video was taken by NASA's Solar Dynamic Observatory in far ultraviolet light.

Our Sun is progressing again toward Solar Maximum in 2025, but displaying even now a surface with a surprisingly high amount of activity.

<https://youtu.be/JqH0diwqcUM>

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Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)



concerto.com

The French composer and pianist's compositions include songs, solo piano works, chamber music, choral pieces, operas, ballets, and orchestral concert music. Among the best-known are the piano suite *Trois mouvements perpétuels* (1919), the ballet *Les biches* (1923), the *Concert champêtre* (1928) for harpsichord and orchestra, the *Organ Concerto* (1938), the opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), and the *Gloria* (1959) for soprano, choir, and orchestra.

In his early works Poulenc became known for his high spirits and irreverence. During the 1930s a much more serious side to his nature emerged, particularly in the religious

music he composed from 1936 onwards, which he alternated with his more light-hearted works.

In his later years, and for decades after his death, Poulenc had a reputation, particularly in his native country, as a humorous, lightweight composer, and his religious music was often overlooked. In the 21st century, more attention has been given to his serious works, with many new productions of *Dialogues des Carmélites* and *La voix humaine* worldwide, and numerous live and recorded performances of his songs and choral music.

A.Malofeev and S.Nebieridze -- F.Poulenc. Concerto for Two Pianos and Orchestra
<https://youtu.be/MHP2YFC3U-0>

Concerto for organ, strings and timpani in G minor (Iveta Apkalna, organ)
<https://youtu.be/HsFsBNAmCd0>

Dialogues Des Carmelites (final scene / Salve Regina)
<https://youtu.be/Cd9EFJaURmI>

Concerto in G minor <https://youtu.be/bv2Z3oIHwLE>

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1903-The First Flight



clickamericana

Since 1899, Wilbur and Orville Wright had been scientifically experimenting with the concepts of flight. They labored in relative obscurity, while the experiments of Samuel

Langley of the Smithsonian were followed in the press and underwritten by the War Department. Yet Langley, as others before him, had failed to achieve powered flight.

They relied on brute power to keep their theoretically stable machines aloft, sending along a hapless passenger and hoping for the best. It was the Wrights' genius and vision to see that humans would have to fly their machines, that the problems of flight could not be solved from the ground. In Wilbur's words, "It is possible to fly without motors, but not without knowledge and skill."

With over a thousand glides from atop Big Kill Devil Hill, the Wrights made themselves the first true pilots. These flying skills were a crucial component of their invention. Before they ever attempted powered flight, the Wright brothers were masters of the air.

https://www.nps.gov/wrbr/learn/historyculture/thefirstflight.htm?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email&utm_placement=newsletter

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Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861)



Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning is perhaps best known for her 'Sonnets From the Portuguese' and 'Aurora Leigh' as well as the love story between her and fellow poet Robert Browning.

Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning published her first major collection, *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, in 1838. Her collection, *Poems* (1844) caught the attention of fellow poet Robert Browning, whose admiring letter to her led to a lifelong romance and marriage. The couple moved to Italy, where Elizabeth became interested in Italian politics and released her monumental work, *Sonnets From the Portuguese* in 1850.

In 1826, she (anonymously) published the collection *An Essay on Mind and Other Poems*, which became a touchstone in her writing career. Unfortunately, fate would throw more obstacles her way soon after its release. Barrett's mother died two years later and her father's business foundered, forcing him to sell their estate. The family eventually settled in London, but the interruption never gave Barrett pause. Soon after the estate was sold, she published her translation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (1833), and in 1838, she published *The Seraphim and Other Poems*.

In 1849 Barrett Browning released *Sonnets From the Portuguese*, a collection of 44 love sonnets that would become one of her seminal works and one of the greatest sequences of sonnets in history. The collection was dedicated to Browning and written in secret during their courtship. "Sonnet 43" begins with "How do I love thee? Let me

count the ways," a line that itself would have sealed Barrett Browning's place in the literary canon if all else had somehow failed to do so.

A more detailed account of her life can be found [here](#).

Grief

I tell you, hopeless grief is passionless;
That only men incredulous of despair,
Half-taught in anguish, through the midnight air
Beat upward to God's throne in loud access
Of shrieking and reproach. Full desertness,
In souls as countries, lieth silent-bare
Under the blanching, vertical eye-glare
Of the absolute heavens. Deep-hearted man, express
Grief for thy dead in silence like to death—
Most like a monumental statue set
In everlasting watch and moveless woe
Till itself crumble to the dust beneath.
Touch it; the marble eyelids are not wet:
If it could weep, it could arise and go.

The Lady's Yes

" Yes !" I answered you last night ;
" No !" this morning, Sir, I say !
Colours, seen by candle-light,
Will not look the same by day.

When the tabors played their best,
Lamps above, and laughs below —
Love me sounded like a jest,
Fit for *Yes* or fit for *No* !

Call me false, or call me free —
Vow, whatever light may shine,
No man on your face shall see

Any grief for change on mine.

Yet the sin is on us both —
Time to dance is not to woo —
Wooer light makes fickle troth —
Scorn of *me* recoils on *you* !

Learn to win a lady's faith
Nobly, as the thing is high ;
Bravely, as for life and death —
With a loyal gravity.

Lead her from the festive boards,
Point her to the starry skies,
Guard her, by your truthful words,
Pure from courtship's flatteries.

By your truth she shall be true —
Ever true, as wives of yore —
And her *Yes*, once said to you,
SHALL be Yes for evermore.

**Sonnets from the Portuguese 43:
How do I love thee? Let me count the ways**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed

First time he kissed me, he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write,
And ever since it grew more clean and white,...
Slow to world-greetings...quick with its “Oh, list,”
When the angels speak. A ring of amethyst
I could not wear here plainer to my sight,
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height
The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!
That was the chrism of love, which love’s own crown,
With sanctifying sweetness, did precede.
The third, upon my lips, was folded down
In perfect, purple state! since when, indeed,
I have been proud and said, “My Love, my own.”

Wow.

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**Ratio of an Igloo’s
Circumference to
its Diameter:**

Eskimo Pi

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Fasting and Type 2 Diabetes

Intermittent fasting may help people with Type 2 diabetes control their blood sugar levels, according to a new study.



knowledge.com

Intermittent fasting is a type of time-restricted eating pattern where people limit how long they have to consume their daily calories. Fasting or diets that mimic fasting activate blood stem cells and trigger autophagy, the body's cellular cleaning process in which cells devour and replace their damaged parts.

Fasting periods lead to decreases in blood sugar and improved glucose tolerance. Within two days of going without food, the body depletes its glucose stores and starts using fat as its preferred energy resource, a process known as ketosis.

For decades, animal research has shown that intermittent fasting-like diets resulted in longer life spans and improved health overall.

In 2022, scientists reported a four-year experiment on timed eating and calorie restriction in mice that found calorie restriction alone led to a 10% increase in life span. Combining time-restricted eating windows with calorie restriction extended their life spans by 35%.

These findings echo a 2020 study on two groups of rats—one that ate a "normal" diet and another that ate 30% less—that found the calorie restriction group had less inflammation, longer lives, and delayed age-related diseases.

While evidence in animal studies suggests calorie restriction and fasting can increase longevity and improve health outcomes, why this happens is still a mystery.

Not all of the findings in animal studies have carried over to human studies, where it's been hard to prove that fasting-related health effects don't just stem from calorie reduction or meal timing.

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The Gorgeous Textural Beauty of Iceland and Greenland

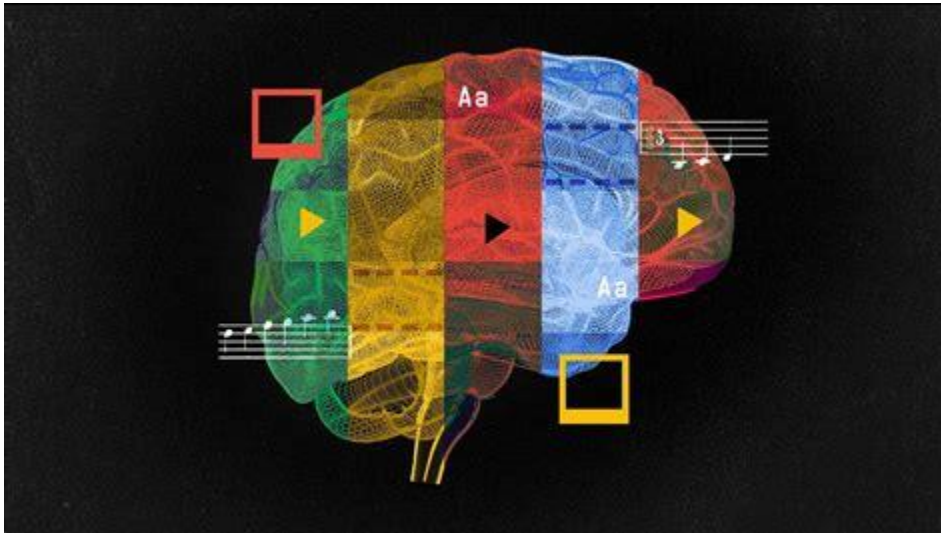


Ben Simon Rehn

<https://mossandfog.com/the-gorgeous-textural-beauty-of-iceland-and-greenland/>

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Google Unveils Gemini: The Empire Strikes Back



shellypalmer.com

Google has announced Gemini, its answer to OpenAI's GPT-4, which will launch with three variants: Gemini Nano for Android devices, Gemini Pro for Google AI services (including Bard), and Gemini Ultra for data centers and enterprise applications. Each variant is tailored to specific uses, highlighting Google's commitment to diverse AI applications.

One of Gemini's standout features is its multimodal capabilities, enabling it to process and interact with text, images, video, and audio. Google hopes this integrated approach will offer a more comprehensive range of functionalities compared to OpenAI's separate models for different media types.

<https://bit.ly/484FHZ5>

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2,000 Pounds of Chinese Soup

Won Ton

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Call of the California Sea Lion



Henly Spiers

Our Storyteller in Residence, wildlife photographer, writer, and expedition leader Henley Spiers, is currently in Mexico's Baja California Sur to research his second SiR story on the charismatic California sea lions.

<https://oceanographicmagazine.com/features/call-of-the-california-sea-lion/>

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FDA Approves CRISPR-Based Medicine for Sickle Cell Disease



Crispr-based therapy.
getty

The Food and Drug Administration approved the world's first medicine based on CRISPR gene-editing technology, a groundbreaking treatment for sickle cell disease that delivers a potential cure for people born with the chronic and life-shortening blood disorder.

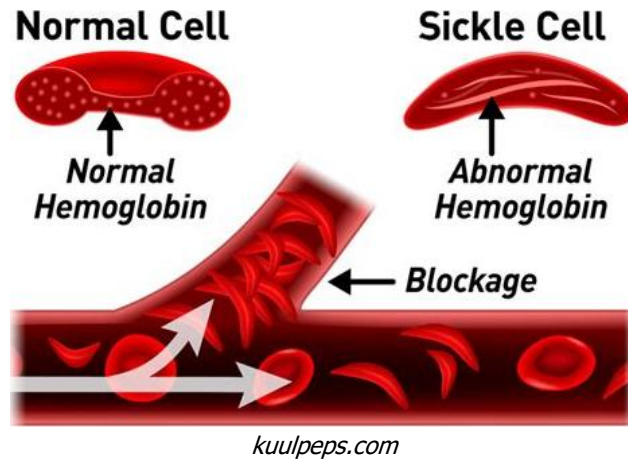
The new medicine, called Casgevy, is made by Vertex Pharmaceuticals and CRISPR Therapeutics. Its authorization is a scientific triumph for the technology that can

efficiently and precisely repair DNA mutations — ushering in a new era of genetic medicines for inherited diseases.

<https://bit.ly/474Iu3b>

Sickle Cell Disease: A Primer and Hope for the Future

What is Sickle Cell Disease?



Sickle cell disease (SCD) is a group of inherited red blood cell disorders. Red blood cells contain hemoglobin, a protein that carries oxygen. Healthy red blood cells are round, and they move through small blood vessels to carry oxygen to all parts of the body. In someone who has SCD, the hemoglobin is abnormal, which causes the red blood cells to become hard and sticky and look like a C-shaped farm tool called a "sickle"

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/sicklecell/facts.html>

New Gene-Editing Drug For Sickle Cell Disease Changed My Life.



Jimi Olaghere

Matt Odom

As a patient enrolled in a clinical trial for Vertex's new exa-cel treatment, I was among the first to experience CRISPR's transformative effects.

I'm very aware of how privileged I am to have been an early recipient and to reap the benefits of this groundbreaking new treatment. People with sickle cell disease don't produce healthy hemoglobin, a protein that red blood cells use to transport oxygen in the body. As a result, they develop misshapen red blood cells that can block blood vessels, causing intense bouts of pain and sometimes organ failure. They often die decades younger than those without the disease.

<https://bit.ly/4811sZL>

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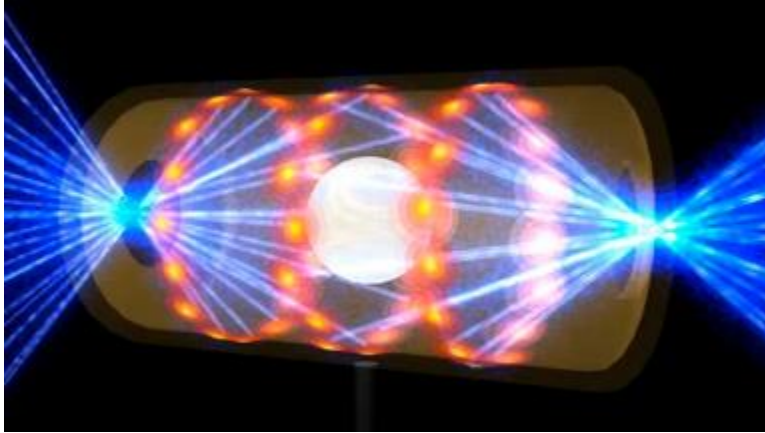
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365.25 Days of Drinking Low Calorie Beer

One Lite Year

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U.S. Lab Says It Repeated Fusion Energy Feat — With Higher Yield



An illustration provided by the National Ignition Facility at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory depicts a target pellet inside a hohlraum capsule with laser beams entering through openings on either end. The beams compress and heat the target to the necessary conditions for nuclear fusion to occur.

(AP)

<https://bit.ly/3QwDQos>

This second achievement by researchers at the federal Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California is another crucial step — albeit in a journey that may still take decades to complete — in the quest for an unlimited source of cheap and clean power.

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Top 100 Most Expensive U.S. Zip Codes



Atherton, CA (median price \$8,300,000) tops the list, realtor.com

<https://bit.ly/47kX4Em>

Yikes.

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Dinosaur Feathers May Have Been More Birdlike Than We Thought

Feather proteins can change during fossilization, a study finds.



An analysis of fossilized feathers, including one from the nonavian dinosaur Sinornithosaurus (illustrated), suggests that the fossilization process can leave misleading clues about the evolution of feathers.

Funkmonk/Wikimedia Commons (Cc By-Sa 3.0)

<https://www.sciencenews.org/article/dinosaur-feathers-bird-fossils>

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16.5 Feet in the Twilight Zone

1 Rod Serling

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States to Receive \$61 Billion for Roads and Bridges

The 2024 funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law represents an increase of \$17.6 billion from 2021.



On Oct. 5, The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) announced that it has allocated \$61 billion in Fiscal Year 2024 apportionments for 12 formula programs to support investment in critical infrastructure, including roads, bridges and tunnels, carbon emission reduction, and safety improvements, as well as workforce development to support these investments, utilizing funding from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

The \$61 billion in funding for Fiscal Year 2024 is the third year of funding under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and represents an increase of \$17.6 billion in formula programs as compared to Fiscal Year 2021, the last fiscal year before the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was implemented.

Allocation of funding by state and program can be viewed at FHWA’s Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Funding web page, organized by fiscal year.

“These historic investments in American infrastructure give States the flexibility they need to determine how to allocate funds for a range of transportation projects such as improving safety for all road users, replacing aging bridges, and reducing carbon emissions,” said Federal Highway Administrator Shailen Bhatt, in a statement.

Federal-aid Highway Program funds are authorized periodically by Congress in multi-year laws to assist the States in providing for construction, reconstruction, and improvement of highways and bridges on eligible Federal-aid routes and for other special purpose programs and projects. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law established or continued FHWA programs and authorized funding for those programs from the Highway Trust Fund and General Fund.

<https://bit.ly/3rX2p5D>

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Christmas Really is a Time for Flash Mobs

Silent Night- Christmas Shoppers Didn't Expect This Performance

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-MpEn8Nyc4>

Flash Mob Christmas Carol at Mall

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7baFMmSv4k>

Christmas Flash Mob At Saint George Hospital Beirut

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlSkI91ErQ4>

A Christmas Flash Mob Visit to a Home

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QY8Jf-45DzE>

British Army musicians at Gateshead's Metrocentre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z2GMP08Ulqk>

Christmas Food Court Flash Mob, Hallelujah Chorus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXh7JR9oKVE>

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Jester's Cap



Jester's Comments on Last Week's Ode

Dark matter:

Like just about anybody else who's heard about it, I've been very curious about "dark matter." And now I think that I have an answer. Consider the big bang. What would the universe look like if there had been a much earlier big bang, say, perhaps 40 billion years before the most recent one? Edwin Hubble's observations showed that we live in an expanding universe, with some matter really hauling ass, so I'm going slower, and some going much slower.

We also know that stars eventually burn themselves out. At some point in the future, we expect a dark universe with no lives stars.

It doesn't mean that there's no more matter; it only means it's not emitting light. And it is likely distributed around the universe in a more or less random way. Some of it will be found nearer to earth, some further away--mostly the latter. But, it being matter, it

has mass. And that mass bends space-time, and so exerts a gravitational pull on what we can observe, namely, normal matter. Specifically, distant galaxies.

There. That wasn't hard, was it?

Natural selection:

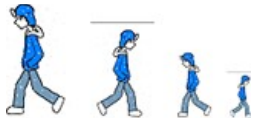
It is not obvious to me where the guy is going with this. There are numerous ways for evolution to continue a classical manner. We know that this happens in E. Coli: plasmids (short DNA chains) get exchanged between and among cells similar to sexual reproduction. The model that the guy shows graphically depicts an evolutionary pressure that is reflected by the heights of individual peaks. But imagine that you have a imaginary pressure has been eased. When that happens, the floor gets raised, perhaps as high as the top of the highest peak.. and then it's easy for any organism to go from its state to any other state, setting the backdrop for the next evolutionary period.

He also posits organisms getting stuck on peaks with nowhere to go from there. How about farther up? I didn't notice him mentioning that possibility.

Adaptive processes? I have no idea what is meant by "adaptive processes."

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My Walking Thoughts



For Sunday December 24 2023

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The Day I Learned the Truth About Santa

I was 32 at the time. We were in Bishop, Texas, 5 miles up the road from NAS Kingsville where I was a flight instructor. It was 1968, the first Christmas for our daughter Kitty, the second for son David who at two was by then an old pro at the Santa thing.

Since neither Mary nor I felt traumatized by the Christmas rituals from our childhoods, the thought that we might be damaging our offspring never occurred to us. Santa, the manger, the shepherds, cattle, stories, songs, gifts—the wonderful mixture of religion and hoopla—were things we all could share without fear.

But that was merely the backdrop for my Santa epiphany.

It came later in the day when the four of us journeyed three blocks to the community park where we became part of a throng comprised of nearly everyone in town...maybe a couple of thousand people of a wide variety of ages and persuasions.

There was no plan. No one was in charge. There wasn't even a jolly fat man with fake whiskers decked out in a crimson suit with white trim. It was just a flock of neighbors in a small South Texas town happy to be there.

Shortly after we arrived the singing began...traditional songs...songs with meaning...songs of hope...songs that brightened that bleak December day` illuminating what Christmas meant to each of us...especially the kids whose faces shone with such happiness, I've carried the memory with me ever since.

I'd like to think that Christmas—the carols, the reindeer, the sleigh, the crèche, even the wretched excesses--by whatever name our descendants a thousand years hence choose to call the season—will still bear the central message of the Prince of Peace and bring joy free from concerns of fomenting trauma.

"Love thy neighbor." Not a simple task, but one that gets easier with continual effort.