

## The Case of the Mysterious Dots

On a March evening in 1997, an unusual phenomenon occurred in the skies southwest of Phoenix. With the Sierra Estrella mountain range as a backdrop, a formation of five brightly glowing orbs hovered against the darkness of the Arizona sky.

The so-called “Phoenix Lights”, witnessed by thousands and warranting hundreds of 911 calls, were summarily dismissed as military flares, at least, according to the military. But that theory has reportedly been debunked by higher authorities, those who specialize in trying to scare the bejesus out of us.

On Sept. 4, 2019, circles of light appeared in Eagle, Idaho. Unlike the ones of the Phoenix pedigree, these appeared in the early morning hours. There were not thousands of frightened people running around to witness them, only two people and a dog. Our dining room isn't all that large.

The backdrop for these orbs was our oak buffet and dining room set. No mountain range was visible or even needed. Orbs are simple in that way. This phenomenon didn't warrant 911 calls to the authorities, nor did they scare the bejesus out of anyone. It is an early morning ritual to which we have become accustomed to this time of year. For us, it signals the beginning of fall.

We have witnessed the globes of light since moving into our house five years ago. During their inaugural appearance, I had been tempted to call the police, but cooler heads prevailed. Subsequently, the orbs have returned each fall. They are now welcomed with anticipation.



The orbs of fall, or the dots, as my wife calls them, always start off rather meekly. A handful of circles move from left to right, plodding slowly across the room in tight formation. In less than an hour, they will have departed the dining room, inching toward the kitchen. By then, light is bouncing off the countertop, assorted breakfast utensils, and a half-empty glass of orange juice. From their original orderly march, they now refract into more familiar splashes of random mayhem. They will soon die out entirely for that day.

They will reappear the next morning, and the next. With each new day, they will increase in brightness and sheer number. They will return daily until we are deeply ensconced in this favorite of seasons. In a matter of weeks, the light show will cease entirely and we will know of winter's approach.

Initially, I was skeptical about this voodoo-like appearance of lights. My usual signs of autumn are more pragmatic. Autumn happens when television college football analysts start bad-mouthing my team several weeks before we've lost a single fumble at the goal line. There will be leaves showing signs of turning and some dead ones already blowing into the yard from as far away as Canada. The days squeeze shorter. A blanket returns to our bed.

Meteorologists will tell you that the true beginning of autumn is always on September 1, regardless of the year, decade or century. It was concocted by weather types who wanted a strict guideline for forecasting and recording

earth's temperatures. So to that end, each season is defined by unchanging, three month chunks of time. This makes concrete sense to me. What does not make sense is why they can't get the daily forecast right.

Initially I thought all this orb stuff was conspiratorial, dreamed up by some clever pranksters who were trying to freak out people in Idaho and Arizona. But, to be fair, some of it makes sense. We already know and follow astrological autumn, defined by the earth's axis and the orientation to the sun. The actual date shifts marginally from year to year. It has something to do with equinoxes, not to be confused with solstices.

And, I guess that would go a long way in explaining dots tracking across a dining room buffet. I may just have to accept that we all recognize and feel seasons in different ways. We can record the astrological autumn date for next year, but it won't necessarily coincide with the occurrence of dining room globes.

As for our resident dots, sun angle and length of day are helped immeasurably by our house orientation and a bank of living room louvred windows with adjustable slats. Rotating the slats to different angles will affect the shape and intensity of the orbs. But they mostly appear by themselves, very little fiddling involved.

My wife doesn't try to overanalyze autumn. When she sees our dots, she feels all those things that make the season special for her. She'll soon be on the lookout for pumpkins and, yet, another recipe for Thanksgiving stuffing. She'll get fall leaf-colored decorations into place on our cabinet and table, and put a wreath on the front door.

In the end, maybe our understanding of sunlight and season hasn't progressed all that much. In 3200 B.C., farmers built a stone structure on a mound in what is now County Meath, Ireland. The sun angles through its only door, down a long passageway, illuminating a wall at the end of the corridor. It happens only at the Winter Solstice. The implications for the ancients have been subject to interpretation, but Newgrange still stands and works its magic each year. It has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Oh, did I mention that my wife and I experience the dining room dot phenomenon on yet another occasion each year, this time signaling spring's approach? If this continues on for a few thousand more years, maybe we can apply for UNESCO World Heritage status. May need a bigger dining room.

From Gerry Tsuruda's writing series, "One Picture is Worth ...". More at [www.gerrytsuruda.com](http://www.gerrytsuruda.com).