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KONE FOUNDATION



# Introduction to Pareidolia

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## Recognising faces and forms the natural environment

In studies of trees and other types of natural phenomena, there is a phenomenon called 'pareidolia' in which people perceive images of faces that help stimulate the imagination<sup>1</sup>. The term 'pareidolia' is defined as "the tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous pattern."<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the *Collins English Dictionary* defines the term as "the imagined perception of a pattern or meaning where it does not actually exist, as in considering the moon to have human features."<sup>3</sup>

Snow and ice that forms on trees can contribute to pareidolia. But what about images that form naturally from snow and ice on the ground? Are we to assign the concept of pareidolia to snow and ice that are temporary whereas, on trees, images tend to be more permanent? Indeed, these are interesting questions.

In fact, 'pareidolia' can be ascribed to multiple contexts, such as faces in clouds, foods, plants, flowers, mountains, and stones as well as markings on horses, cows, and other animals. Driftwood that has been fashioned by sea water into a face or other form is another example of pareidolia.

On photographing the forms of snow and ice on trees that resemble human, animal and other entities, the question occurred to me as to whether pareidolia has been in the past and present linked to animism and, thus, spiritual traditions in any way. Indeed, we know that natural faces are discernible in sacred mountains and old trees considered shrines.<sup>4</sup>

Although snow and ice are usually white, some is blackened by carbon, debris, soil, and dirt. I have noticed how these colour variations are important elements because they play an important role in the formation of forms, for example, of heads and facial features.

Pareidolia recurs in the Arctic areas in Finland as well as farther south to Oulu, a large city on the north-west coast of the country. These forms encourage a deeper understanding of nature in the Arctic. Some of these forms are location specific and connected to the winter cycles in the Arctic. Understanding these helps bring forth new ideas about trees, snow, and ice as imaginaries of value to human relations with

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nationalpost.com/news/seeing-faces-in-trees-correlates-to-creativity-and-cognitive-scientists-are-taking-interest>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pareidolia>. Accessed 2nd of February 2024.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pareidolia> Accessed 2nd of February 2024.

<sup>4</sup> <https://georgiatoday.ge/pareidolia-everywhere/>



the environment. Forms created naturally on the ground from snow and ice within forests and woodlands provide an interesting experience for winter trekkers in Finland.

Psychologist Roy Brand gives the following description of pareidolia:

*In the past, pareidolia was perceived as a sign of psychosis, but today it is commonly seen as a normal and universal human phenomenon. It is particularly evident in how children think, or in the worldview of primitive tribes, who attribute a will and consciousness to everything. Gods, humans, animals, the dead, plants, the weather, and often inanimate objects, are all seen as having an appetite or will, a viewpoint, and cognitive abilities – all have a soul. But the pareidolia is not about a childish or animistic worldview; it is a fundamental disposition of the human imagination. Even before we know something, we begin to see things: dots form an image, situations look like patterns, and we can take them apart and reassemble them until we have a theory (from the Greek ‘theorien’ – to look at, or by extrapolation, a way of seeing, a worldview). The world comes into view and becomes comprehensible – it is one of the characteristics of this world that it can become visible and comprehensible. So, the visual image is but an extension, a capturing of the ways in which the world opens up to human experience. How wonderful it is that the world lends itself to us in this way? And perhaps that is precisely the basic, native, or classic experience of all things beautiful – the experience of being at home in the world.<sup>5</sup>*

Pareidolia is one way nature communicates to the human and animal kingdoms. How and when these impressions reach us can play a fundamental role in how we live and how we form our beliefs through personal experience and identification with nature. Those of us living in Northern Finland are in a unique position to explore the realms of the seasons and nature’s cycles from the perspective of pareidolia.

Henceforth, pareidolia shows us how forests and their powers have been so deeply interwoven into people’s lives and in what ways this sense of wonder can be rediscovered. Trees have been one of the main ways people have forged or established their connections with the land.<sup>6</sup> Trees as gateways that act as veils between the physical and spiritual worlds through which layers of truth about the universe can be encountered.

When it comes to discerning faces in snow, ice, trees, and other natural contexts, multiple studies have been conducted in the fields of psychology and psychiatry.<sup>7</sup> In addition, studies of pareidolia as a spiritual phenomenon have, likewise, been given

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<sup>5</sup> Brand, Roy. 2024. *Pareidolia*. Available at: <https://www.parterreprojects.com/pareidolia-1> Accessed on 03.02. 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Caldecott, Moira. 1993. *Myths of the Sacred Trees*. Destiny Books, Vermont, Canada.

Turner-Skoff, Jessica B and Cavender, Nicole. 2019. “The Benefits of Trees for Livable and Sustainable Communities.” Published in: *Plants, People, Planet, Volume 1, Issue 4*, pp. 323-335. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.39>

Mann, Alden Taylor. 2012. *The Sacred Language of Trees*. Sterling Ethos, New York.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Ihokta et-al (2023), Wardle et-al (2020), Göbel et-al (2021), and Caruana and Seymour (2021).



significant attention.<sup>8</sup> There is also an abundance of non-scholarly literature about pareidolia available online.<sup>9</sup> Finnish scholars Reikki et al. examined how paranormal and religious believers are more prone to illusory face perception than sceptics and non-believers.<sup>10</sup> Sceptics describe face identification in different phenomena as fictional. This view of pareidolia is evident in psychological studies as well:

*It can thus be expected that illusory face recognition is more typical for paranormal believers than for sceptics. Illusory face detection can be considered, in a liberal sense, as a form of anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism, in a strict sense, denotes the belief that nonhuman phenomena have unique human properties, such as a sense of humor. However, nowadays the concept is often used more liberally in connection with attributes that may apply to animals as well (e.g., a belief that God is an intentional agent) or without assumption of a genuine belief [...]. Cognitive scientists of religion have suggested that anthropomorphism explains people's inclination to believe in gods. The few available studies about the relationship between individual anthropomorphism and religiosity surprisingly propose that this is not the case.<sup>11</sup>*

Studies of pareidolia in Finland argue that approaches to the subject in terms of analysis and understanding vary. According to Ian G. Barbour, views of pareidolia vary because:

*Science seems to provide the only reliable path to knowledge. Many people view science as objective, universal, rational, and based on solid observational evidence. Religion by contrast, seems to be subjective, parochial, emotional, and based on traditions or authorities that disagree with each other.<sup>12</sup>*

Questions concerning pareidolia emerge at this point as to what peoples' thoughts are on these phenomena? Is it fact or merely fiction? What kinds of experiences have people had with forms as such, and what emerged during engagement or afterwards in terms of perceptions, thoughts-feelings-emotions? Do you see these encounters as meaningful or valuable in the sense they have the potential to open different forms of dialogue and creative expressions?

Nieminen and colleagues who are scholars of theology, biology and biomedicine from the University of Eastern Finland go on to say that:

*Pareidolia [...] is a special case of anthropomorphism, where a person perceives human faces in patterns that are not actual pictures or faces<sup>13</sup>.*

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<sup>8</sup> for instance, by Nieminen et-al (2020), Reikki et-al (2013), and Southern (2020)

<sup>9</sup> Examples of online references

<sup>10</sup> 2012

<sup>11</sup> Reikki et-al. "Paranormal and Religious Believer Are More Prone to Illusory Face Perception than Sceptics and Non-believers," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 27, Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1002/acp.2874>, (2013): 150.

<sup>12</sup> Barbour, Ian. *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues*. New York: Harper Collins 1997, pp. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Tapani Reikki et-al. "Paranormal and Religious Believers Are More Prone to Illusory Face Perception than Sceptics and Non-believers," *Applied Cognitive Psychology* 27 (2013): 150-155.



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*[...] What happens in religion is that personal experiences of pattern recognition get reported, remembered in narrative for and eventually passed forward in time. This passing forward constitutes the specific religious tradition. This tradition becomes the evidence on which contemporary religious faith is based.*

## **Pareidolia in Northern Finland**

Since 2005, I have been involved in the study of Sámi religion, rock art and sacred places and landscapes predominantly in Finland. During this time, I have visited multiple sacred sites where faces and other bodily forms are clear within large natural stone formations. Some of these forms are in the south of Finland whilst others in the northern parts. The names for such sacred places in the northern Sámi language is 'Sieidi'. In the Finnish language the term for such a sacred site is called 'Seita'.

Finnish rock art scholar and archaeologist Antti Lahelma states:

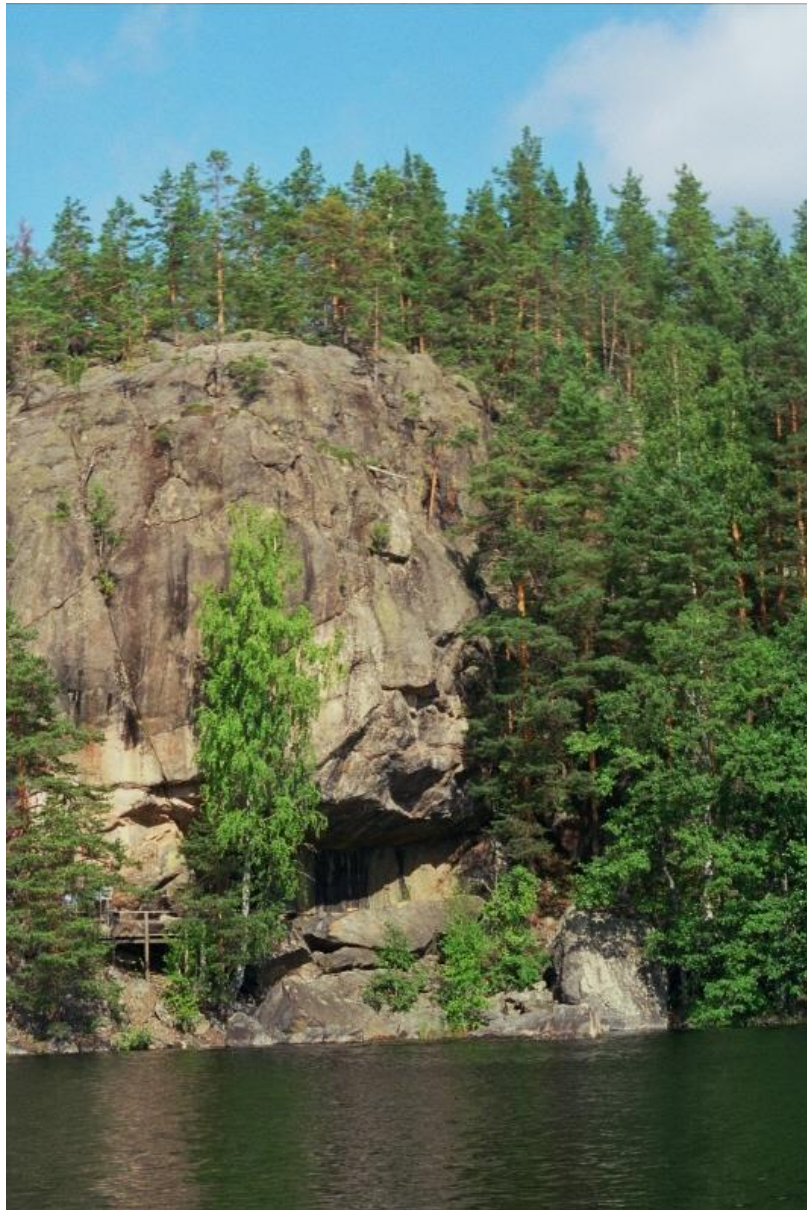
*The cult of the sieidi is generally considered to belong to the most archaic aspects of Saami pre-Christian religion with possible Stone Age roots [...] Aside from large boulders, a sieidi could consist of a solid cliff, an entire island, peninsula or mountain. In such cases, the sanctity of the site was often concentrated on a small object, usually a strangely shaped stone, which served as the focus of worship.<sup>14</sup>*

At some locations, these facial or bodily features have been confirmed through prehistoric hunter-gatherer rock paintings. Signatures in the forms of different symbolism and landscapes, many which consist of boats, animals, human persons and what could be spirits on different boulder formations, rock terraces and stones not only assert these sites as significant, but also indicate different forms of inter-species communication. These anthropomorphic or zoomorphic features are mostly located in liminal zones at the edges of lakes and rivers thus, indicating their sacred function.

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<sup>14</sup> Lahelma, Antti. (In press a) "Communicating with 'Stone Persons': Anthropomorphism, Saami Religion and Finnish Rock Art." In *Walderhaug, Eva. & Forsberg, Lars. (eds.) Cognition and Signification in Northern Landscapes*. UBAS International Series, pp. 120-142.

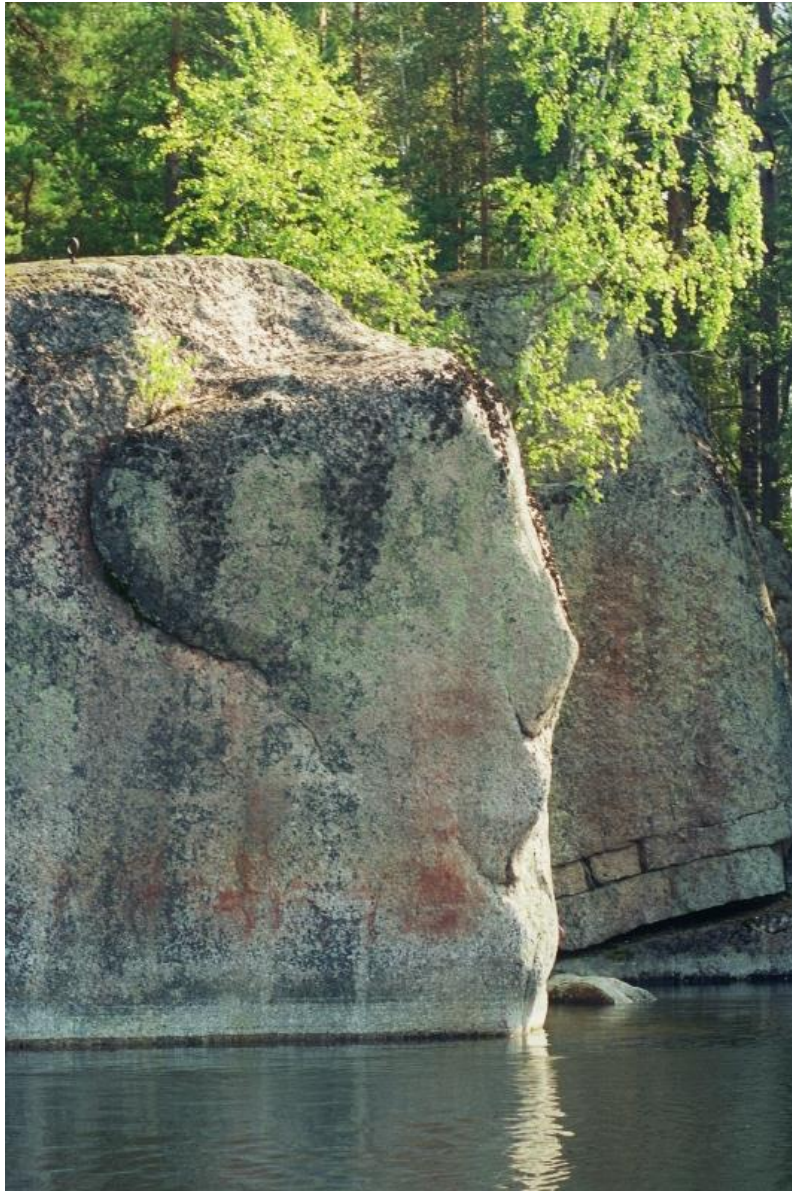




**Figure 1.** Finland’s most well-known naturally formed anthropomorphic cliff face is called Astuvansalmi, on Lake Yövesi (night water), in the municipality of Ristiina, in the south-east of the country. The enormous natural formation reflects a sleeping god. To the left at the bottom of the picture are red markings which are rock paintings dated to approximately 7,000 years ago. These paintings offer different types of narratives, indicating communication between people, animals and spirits. They were “painted on the rock wall over several thousand years.”<sup>15</sup> Photo copyright Francis Joy (2005).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Pentikäinen, Juha. 2007. *Golden King of the Forest. The Lore of the Northern Bear*. Etnika Oy.

<sup>16</sup> For a much broader comprehension of this site as well as over 120 other rock painting locations in Finland, visit Ismo Luukkonen’s website: <http://www.ismoluukkonen.net/kalliotaide/suomi/>



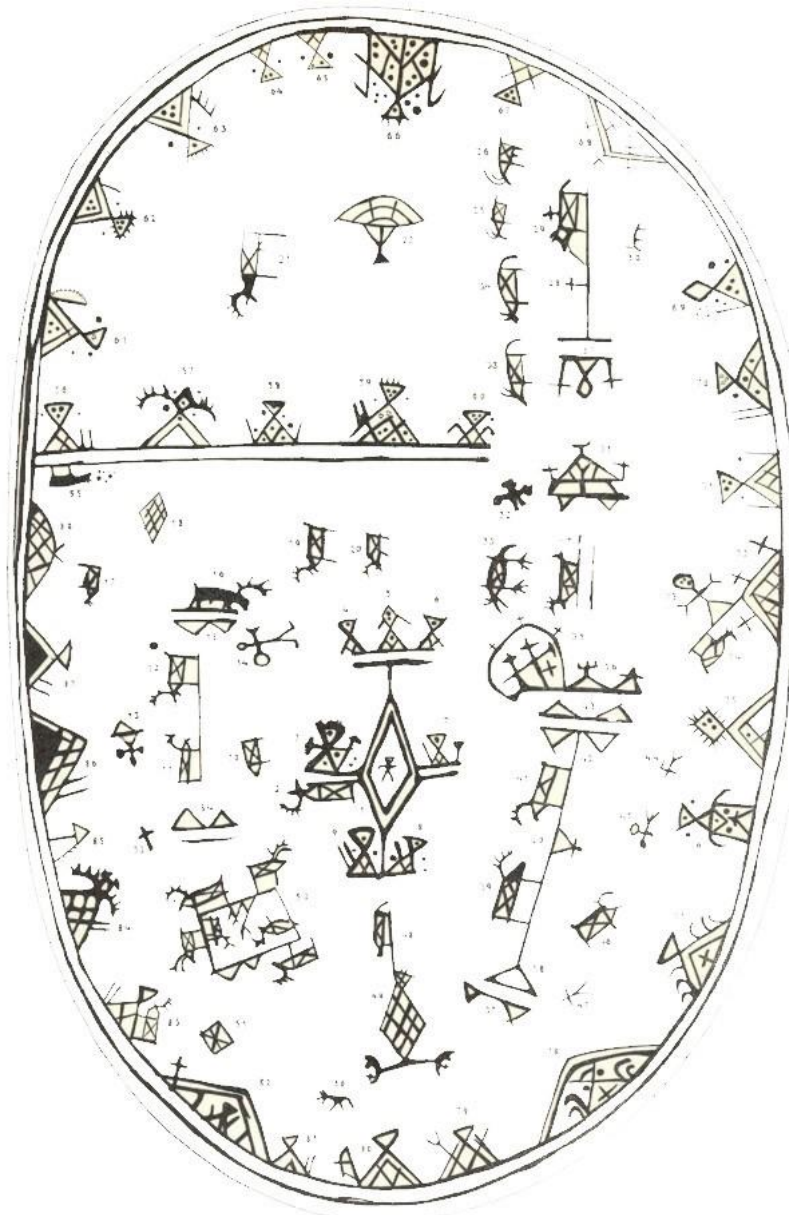
**Figure 2.** The bear-like head at the Verla rock paintings at the Verlankoski rapids located in the south-east of the country is accompanied by a line of moose and a human figure within a red prehistoric rock painting landscape just above the waterline. The presence of multiple species is indicative of communication at the site. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2005).

Other sacred sites with rock paintings and large faces in boulders include Hossa Väräkallio in Kainu and Valkeisaari in the south-east of Finland. In addition, there are different forms of anthropomorphic stone figures where there are no rock paintings. For example, in Finnish Lapland, in Muonio, a stone shaped like a frog leaning against a much bigger stone is found at a secret location.

Are these faces what is referred to today as pareidolia or are they something quite different? My point here concerns what the faces communicate and why. Locations like these were certainly important enough for hunter-gatherers to create rock art there over thousands of years.



Much emphasis on faces is evident in studies of shamanism, cosmology, and altered states of consciousness. This is in connection to the production of rock art and various forms of communication with sites where faces are emulated in stone. Some faces resemble mythological characters from other worlds, namely, those encountered in trance states. Sleep and dream states can be added to this category too.



**Figure 3.** An old sacred Sámi drum from Luleå, Swedish Sápmi from the 17<sup>th</sup> century depicting a cosmological landscape with a multitude of animals, spirits, noaidi and sacred places, illustrated, which is catalogued as number 17, in Ernst Manker's book (1950).<sup>17</sup> The structures and figures with triangular shaped heads, many of which have facial features are spirits and offering places.

<sup>17</sup> Manker, Ernst Mauritz. *Die Lappische Zaubertrommel: Eine Ethnologische Monographie. 2, Die Trommel als Urkunde Geistigen Lebens.* [The Lappish Magic Drum: An Ethnological Monograph. 2, The Drum as a Certificate of Spiritual Life] Acta Lapponica; 6. Stockholm: Gebers (1950), 270.



Questions concerning pareidolia and faces in relation to history go beyond sacred stones and boulders. On the drumhead above there are different spirits and sieidi offering sites which the drum user has given faces to. This is very important because it signifies how these are valuable and carry significance. From what is also known about Sámi offering practices, wooden poles called keripää were constructed by lakes and rivers, and some contained faces. These were typically found near water in connection with fishing luck. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that faces in nature also held meaning for the Sámi which means that they are not just something of the 'imagination'. There are likewise, other drums from the same period, which also contain sacred offerings, that have faces. The Sámi as an indigenous people have always lived close to nature and, thus, have better understood how these powers have taken on certain forms and seen manifest in different ways than we do today.

Sieidi sites contain images connected to this world, but which may have counterparts in other realms beyond mundane waking consciousness. Their shapes and forms get our attention but also invite us to communicate through and with them. Therefore, to think of pareidolia as either an abstract concept or material anomaly would be a mistake. The occurrence of pareidolia could be understood as one of the languages of creation which ancient peoples recognized very well. These forms in nature might have helped give meaning and purpose to their lives.

*This is a subject matter we will return to later, but in the meantime, think about what you have read so far. Check in with your thoughts, feelings and emotions and what is happening right now inside? How are your responses to what has been presented and has the photographs and textual data taken you on a journey somewhere. If so, where? Write down how you may have shifted your perception compared to the state of mind and heart you were in before reading this information.*

In Finnish Lapland, faces and forms in trees are found in multiple locations all year round, whereas those formed through snow and ice are encountered only during the cold seasons which span from approximately October to March or April. In all cases, we believe these forms are not merely abstract phenomena but real gifts from nature, which are abundant.

What will happen if the snow and ice disappear from the Arctic and sub-Arctic areas? Due to climate change, do we risk losing so many of these art forms that are vital sources of inspiration and wonder to poets, artists, authors, explorers and of course children and adults of all ages? How can we harvest these gifts while expressing our gratitude to nature? Many faces and forms are hidden away, and it is only through close observation that they become visible. Some of them are quite remarkable. This is the case with trees and forests which are being harvested all year round. Trees, forests, snow, and ice play multiple critical roles within the Northern and Arctic ecosystems. Their overregulation and ongoing dispossession are a tragedy that continues to unfold.





The uniqueness of these gifts from nature can be encountered during any season. Multiple art forms of nature have value and meaning in the ways they manifest anatomies and configurations in trees, as well as amidst snow and ice-filled winter landscapes on roads, streets, bridges, car parks, below trees, in fields and on bushes by lakes, rivers and within coastal areas. These figures manifest as heads, faces, and bodies, some of which have both human and animal characteristics and expressions, including eyes, mouths, noses or snouts, ears, torsos, arms, and legs.

Variably, they also have mythical connotations. With the help of the wind, changing temperatures and new snowfall, snow and ice bind themselves together in a multitude of ways, producing some remarkable illustrations on the ground and in trees that can have different impacts upon the human emotions and senses. In contrast to forms on trees and rocks that emerge naturally over many years, snow and ice not only take on different shapes through winter processes but also due to the action of machinery as roads and pathways of all kinds are cleared. Machinery as well as natural processes are involved in creating forms, demonstrating how snow and ice can be extraordinarily moulded in many ways and settings.

Faces and human or animal-like attributes are evident on trees because of snowfall and ice. The processes of thawing, freezing, and new snowfall within different cycles can provide trees with a special attire during the cold season. What is unique about these forms and their presence during this time is that they are all sporadic and, thus, tend to be temporary. To be encountered in different ways within the circularity of the cold period each year means they are visible for a short time and, thus, once they are gone, they are gone forever. In contrast, forms and faces evident on trees have developed through natural growth process for many years, sometimes decades or centuries, unless of course they are cut down or die naturally. But even as deadwood, we are gifted with faces and forms that become evident as the material decays.

Natural elements of snow, wind, rain, and sunlight are all contributors that influence how snow and ice interact with trees. Thus, we find that snow and ice covered treescapes are representatives of the season of winter because of the additional forms they take on in response to wind, sunlight, and the rotation of the earth. Because sunlight warms the earth, snow and ice can melt into different forms and shapes.

These forms in the winter landscape are a presence in our world and, therefore, deserve to be recognised as natural and cultural heritage because they are constructed within the earth's natural cycles which are increasingly threatened by human activity.

### **What do tree faces tell us about communication with nature?**

Trees, like humans, breathe, reproduce, and have immense healing powers because of the many different types of medicines they supply the human world. Trees can also help sustain relationships between the physical and spiritual realms. Through close observation, the forms of faces and other phenomena become evident, reminding us



of how different kingdoms exist within nature. On close observation of faces and forms within trees, it is interesting to note that they might communicate to us in their own ways. Pareidolia provides a way of bringing forth new perspectives on why we need to look further towards nature and not the economy to stop climate change, help enhance creativity, and bring back a sense of magic when we walk outdoors.

Divine power and its manifestations can be found in many places and contexts. Some species of trees can be understood as vehicles for this power. In other words, certain arrangements of faces on trees symbolize the visionary powers associated with a particular species that has been endowed through Mother Nature. Encountering the faces of humans, animals, reptiles, insects, or mythical beings can inspire poetry, creativity, and spiritual experiences.<sup>18</sup> In addition, these forms can also challenge a fixed belief system and influence one to think differently and become more open-minded and flexible towards life, nature, her kingdoms, and their value.

Faces that seem extra-terrestrial and from other worlds are not uncommon on trees.<sup>19</sup> These beings make up and are part of the web of life and are attributed to lakes, rivers, mountains, forests, and plants. Shamans portrayed through art and literature inform us of these unexplained phenomena that the rational mind may find difficult to comprehend or accept. Examples of non-human beings may manifest in the forms of certain trees such as pines.

Within animistic thinking, trees are considered to have a spirit. That spirit can take on different forms and manifest in numerous and quite surprising ways. Henceforth, eyes on trees are often asymmetrical. In addition, it can sometimes seem as if the eyes that appear on trees are not aligned. One eyeball is looking in one direction and the second in another. According to Jacqueline Memory Paterson:

*It is a fact that trees, breathe, move, feel and reproduce, and that they have, like all other living things, characteristics which can be very individual. These qualities are often visible through its guardian entity of spirit, called 'dryad' or 'wood nymph'. Dryads are often seen upon the*

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<sup>18</sup> Haggith, Mandy. 2021. Poetree – A Poetic Inquiry into Interdisciplinary Learning Based on the Gaelic Tree Alphabet. *Green Letters. Studies in Ecocriticism, Volume 24, Number 3*. Published by Routledge pp. 232-251. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/14688417.2021.1982400?needAccess=true>

Connor, Eamonn. 2020. If a Tree Falls: Posthuman Testimony in C. D. Wright's Casting Deep Shade. *Autobiography Studies, Volume 35, Number 1*. Published by Routledge, pp. 123-143. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/08989575.2020.1720183>  
Mann, Alden. Taylor. *The Sacred Language of Trees*. Published by Sterling Ethos, New York.

<sup>19</sup> Resløyken, Åmund Norum. 2024. Nature Spirits and Non-humans Symmetry and Translations of Genres in New Animism, in: *The Sociology of Translation and the Politics of Sustainability*, pp. 86-111. DOI: [10.4324/9781003285038-7](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003285038-7)

Vecino, Maria, Celeste. 2021. Nature, Spirit, and Spirituality in Husserl's Phenomenology. *Religions 12 (7)*, 481, pp. 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070481>

Hunter, Jack. 2015. Spirits are the Problem: Anthropology and Conceptualising Spiritual Beings. *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience. Volume 1, Number 1*, pp. 76-86. Available at:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288292023\\_Spirits\\_are\\_the\\_Problem\\_Anthropology\\_and\\_Conceptualising\\_Spiritual\\_Beings](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/288292023_Spirits_are_the_Problem_Anthropology_and_Conceptualising_Spiritual_Beings).

*surface of trees like faces or figures from a fairy tale, and they communicate with humans by imparting feelings or sensations to them.<sup>20</sup>*

These faces may vary significantly in their expressions, from happy to sad, from confused to inquisitive or humorous. Some may seem angry, terrified or terrifying, whilst others appear to be sleeping. These expressions remind us of our connection with trees as people. Our moods and emotional states are, likewise, reflected through our facial expressions and body language. However, unlike human beings, trees do not necessarily communicate in the ways people do by talking. But if you are lucky on rare occasions, they might speak to you directly using the wind, rain, sunlight, or thunder. From my experience, trees often communicate through feelings, emotions, and their atmospheres. Meditation can help us connect better with the natural world. Therefore, communication depends on how people develop their relationships with trees and how emotionally and spiritually healthy they are.




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<sup>20</sup> Paterson, Jacqueline Memory. 1996. *Tree Wisdom. The Definitive Guidebook to the Myth, Folklore and Healing Power of Trees*. Thorsons. An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 7.



**Figure 4.** What looks like the face of a witch with bulging eye, crooked nose, mouth and pointed chin encountered here, which has formed naturally as a series of lumps upon the trunk of a grey alder tree. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).

### **Exercise 1**

*Here is a suggested guided visualization.*

*Figure 4 is the grey alder witch with her bulging eyes, crooked nose and long chin. She is intensely watching over a large garden area with her piercing gaze. See if you can tune into her energy and try and interpret or decode what her presence in the garden brings to the area.*

*You might want to consider how she might be a protective figure or like a queen who reigns over her species of tree. Or perhaps, she is a protector of the animals, such as birds, squirrels, ducks, and not forgetting frogs who visit the nearby pond. See yourself following her gaze and where it goes. Does it stay static or move around the garden?*

*Spend 10-15 minutes working in this way and when you have finished bringing your focus back to this reality and write down your experience/s in a journal or on a piece of paper.*

*We have already touched upon the healing powers of trees because of the medicines they provide. Equally, there is another common benefit to be gained from trees in terms of healing and that is their atmospheres, which can vary significantly because of their age, species, environment, and the approach used to connect with them.*

*We know today that since time immemorial trees have played a central role in healing through their atmospheres. For example, forest bathing, meditation, vision quests, camping and sleeping in or under trees reflect beliefs in the restorative powers of trees.*



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## **Exercise 2**

*Try the following guided meditation/visualisation exercise as a way of revitalising yourself by letting go of worries and concerns that are making you feel stressed or anxious. Or it might be there is sorrow or grief which is a heavy load to carry. In either case, bring into focus these landscapes. Imagine yourself seeking healing and restoration from a place in the forest by setting your intention and purpose for entering the forest.*

*See yourself standing at a gate which is an entrance point to a pathway which leads to an old forest. Breathe a pause for a moment before opening the gate and entering the pathway you will embark upon. Once this is done, open the gate and walk through making sure you close it behind you.*

*Take off your shoes and socks and leave them at the gate.*

*As you begin to walk slowly and consciously along the pathway, you become aware of how the earth feels beneath your feet.*

*Once this connection has been made with the ground, notice the atmosphere of the forest area that is about 100m in front of you as you begin walking towards it. As you continue take note of the scenery around you. Is the sun visible? Where is it in the sky? How does it feel? Or is it after sunset where the moon has risen in the west? Is there any birdsong or sounds from animals?*

*Having now approached the edge of the forest, pause for a moment and notice what kinds of trees are standing there. How do they feel? What kinds of shapes and forms are they? Let them invite you into the old forest and notice any changes in atmosphere or inside of you. Can you feel their power upon your skin, or in your mind or heart? And how do your feet feel as you step onto a carpet of deep green moss?*

*Walk into the forest and look around. See if there are any trees which may have the shapes or forms of dragons or animals which are familiar to you, one that you are drawn to. Once this is done, walk around it and find a place somewhere either among its branches or beneath it where you can lie down comfortably. But before you do that. Stand and pause for a moment. Feel the tree's energy field – atmosphere and attune yourself to it.*

*Take a moment to introduce yourself to the tree and inform the tree what you are seeking help with, once this has been done, offer it to the tree.*

*Then go and lie down and allow yourself to relax knowing you are safe and completely protected. Then close your eyes and allow the energy of the tree to help you in whatever ways it interacts with you. Allow this to continue allowing yourself to feel fully supported. Allow the tree to communicate with you in any way it chooses to do so.*

*In a timely manner we will let you know when it is time to return. (allow 10–15 minutes).*



### **Exercise 2 (cont.)**

*Now it is time to return. Become aware of your position within the tree's presence. Notice how you feel in your body. Especially your feet and toes.*

*Stand up and offer thanks to the tree for its assistance. You may wish to do this verbally or by hugging the tree.*

*Then step back again and look at the trees shape and form.*

*Then turn around and begin the return journey to the edge of the forest where you enter back onto the pathway towards the gate.*

*Notice the change in your feet from the soft green moss as you step back onto the grass.*

*Continue walking back towards the gateway.*

*As you reach this place put on your socks and shoes again and open the gate and walk through, remembering to close it behind you. Take a moment to pause for attunement and notice again how you feel in your mind and body, as you step back into this reality, and when you are ready, open your eyes.*

*Write down your experience of entering the forest and encountering the trees in your own way. You may also wish to paint, dance, sing, or recite a poem about your experience. The choice is yours.*

In terms of communication, it is no coincidence that for thousands of years, different types of wood from trees have been harnessed and used for writing to convey information and data. When this is given more thought, we can begin to further comprehend how trees, even after being made into paper, are still used for expression. The atmosphere of a book or its cover will communicate something to us, especially if it contains certain animals, birds, or spiritual phenomena. A particular typesetting or font might present a magical atmosphere to readers, which draws their attention and changes their mood. Another way trees communicate with us is through musical instruments that are made of wood, such as guitars and violins made from spruce, willow, and alder.

### **Snow, ice, and the design of faces in human-animal forms**

Another major contributor that impacts designs connected with snow and ice is machinery such as snow ploughs, hand-held tools, and other vehicles used to clear away and pile up snow and ice. These play a major part in the processes of allowing art forms to come into being.





Some of the many expressions help characterise certain landscapes. Some of these are natural and can be quite strong in terms of their profiles whilst others seem subtler and less distinct. Either way, these faces and forms invite us to investigate nature and, thus, develop a different view of the world through the cultivation of creative imagination.

In Arctic and northern areas during the winter months, different shapes and forms come into existence and are fashioned around all kinds of landscapes. We find that the natural elements of snow, wind, rain, and sunlight are all contributors in the creation of these. Both snow and ice are representatives of the season of winter and, thus, are moulded through sunlight, different temperatures, and the rotation of the earth. Because sunlight warms the earth, snow and ice will melt into different forms.

Once different types of faces become evident within various landscapes, some of the more notable expressions may become instrumental in characterising certain internal feelings and emotions because they are so remarkable. These can be quite strong regarding their profiles whilst others seem subtler and perhaps faint. This of course, will depend on whether they are encountered in darkness or light.

We might be prompted to consider the impact they have upon our moods and senses in a similar way to how other phenomena within the natural world affect us. What does this say about what they communicate? It is important to recognize that natural elements during cold months are created within frost and thawing cycles as well as snow and wind cycles. They can likewise be understood as a manifestation of nature's biorhythms that include dark (nighttime) and light (daytime). However, during the winter months, long dark days can exceed eighteen hours. This is what makes the Arctic environment and its gifts unique. What is made naturally is a gift of nature.

If we consider how many thousands of years it has taken for shapes and forms to emerge, we would become concerned about losing these phenomena in the absence of snow, ice, old trees, and cold temperatures in the Arctic and northern latitudes because of the warming climate. As a result of these looming threats, we invite you to think about what these mean and how important they are for the winter environment. These ephemeral features help form part of local cultural identities, just like plants and animals do. But natural forms made from snow and ice, like flowers and plants, have a short lifespan.

Each winter in many countries with cold temperatures we find people of all ages sticking their faces into soft snow to create what looks like illusory 3D images of themselves. There are even YouTube videos,<sup>21</sup> which offer guidance and advice on how to prepare and undertake such actions. Many have quite startling results which bring laughter, a sense of fun, light heartedness, and playfulness to the occasion.

Faces and forms fashioned naturally by nature as well as those created through human influence can resemble a multitude of different beings. These include humans, animals, disembodied humans (deceased persons), wizards, witches, trolls, elves, gnomes,

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBp-KR6Tcyc>



devils, goblins, and pixies. Some of these images may seem disturbing whilst others animating, with a whole range of different expressions which may trigger emotional or cognitive responses.

We invite you to think about what these short-lived faces and forms mean and how important they are for the winter environment.

These faces and forms are resources for raising environmental awareness and education through imagination and creativity in the face of climate change where cold seasons are receding because of the loss of snow and ice.

### **The formulation of faces and nature's cycles**

When I moved to Rovaniemi in 2010, the winter months were much colder with temperatures dropping below minus 20c and staying there for three months. Now, these cold spells (below -20c) are short lived by comparison.<sup>22</sup> In one week, temperatures can drop from -25c to +3 in a matter of days, thus indicating instability. It means that from one day to the next the weather can be unpredictable and therefore, in certain times what was photographed on a Monday is not there on Tuesday. However, changes are due not only to the warming climate but also to more snowfall, which covers earlier faces and forms. Faces and forms that had taken of configurations made of ice would, unless cleared away by machinery, last longer and thus were more solid and better preserved (conserved) due to the nature of ice and its texture and durability.

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<sup>22</sup> The winter cycle between 2023 and 2024 has been the coldest for years. The snow came so early in 2023 that many trees still had their leaves, and these were falling off in late January and early February, which is very unusual but another indicator of the changing Arctic.



**Figure 5.** An example of how snow and ice have been compressed and developed layers some of this are dark because of carbon. Through interaction with machinery this is the outcome. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 6.** In the Oulu area, a pile of snow and ice which was high up about 3 meters which had been cleared with other debris from the road had formed into hard chunks of ice. One recognizable figure is what looks like the head of a lion. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



## How can pareidolia connect us to nature's intelligence?

Having lived in the Arctic Circle for fourteen years, I am familiar with saying about this part of the country, that "a deep silence prevails in the far north. In Lapland people live closer to their inner selves."<sup>23</sup> Faces and forms in snow and ice remind us how a different perspective on life can emerge if we dwell on our inner selves and not always have an external focus. Within studies and theories about pareidolia:

*Evolutionary psychologists argue that the phenomenon of pareidolia was advantageous to our ancestors. They argue that it helped them to survive for the following reasons. Babies are more likely to be cared for if they experience pareidolia. Astronomer, Carl Sagan, theorizes that, "Those infants who a million years ago were unable to recognize a face smiled back less, were less likely to win the hearts of their parents, and less likely to prosper". Therefore, it could be argued that this survival has allowed pareidolia to pass on through the generations. Protection from predators. It was safer for the ancestors we evolved from to assume they see a face, even where there is none.*<sup>24</sup>

Within a contemporary approach to studying pareidolia we need to ask whether this phenomenon is a reminder to us about our relationship with nature and our survival because of what is unfolding regarding climate change, the loss of snow and ice. If this continues not only will the colder regions of the world further recede but further contribute to growing threats to our water sources, cultivation, growth and production of food and widespread diseases. Therefore, the loss of snow and ice as well as forests would have a devastating impact on these forms which embody a way of remembering our place within nature and developing consciousness of responsibilities to the natural world.

## Examples of pareidolia in three different contexts

I have compiled a selection of photographs below that cover three different contexts consisting of four photographs in each as examples of pareidolia. The first context contains four faces that have formed naturally on or beside trees during the winter season. The second context brings into focus four photographs of pareidolia that have formed naturally within trees. The third provides six examples of pareidolia within snow

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<sup>23</sup> Tanninen-Mattila, Maija. 2011. The Magic of Lapland - Lapland in art from the 1800s to today. *Published by Ateneum Art Museum / Finnish National Gallery*, p. 21.

<sup>24</sup> Lenstore Hub. 2021. *Pareidolia – the Science of Seeing Faces in Everyday Objects*.  
<https://www.lenstore.co.uk/eyecare/pareidolia-science>

and ice forms that have assembled during the winter season. Some of these are formed by ice whilst others have formed because of new snowfall on older piles of snow and ice. I have used six examples because they help to demonstrate a variety of different forms some of which resemble animals. Each of the photographs has been carefully chosen and not altered in anyway, but some have been slightly enlarged to make their features stand out so participants will be able to recognise them.

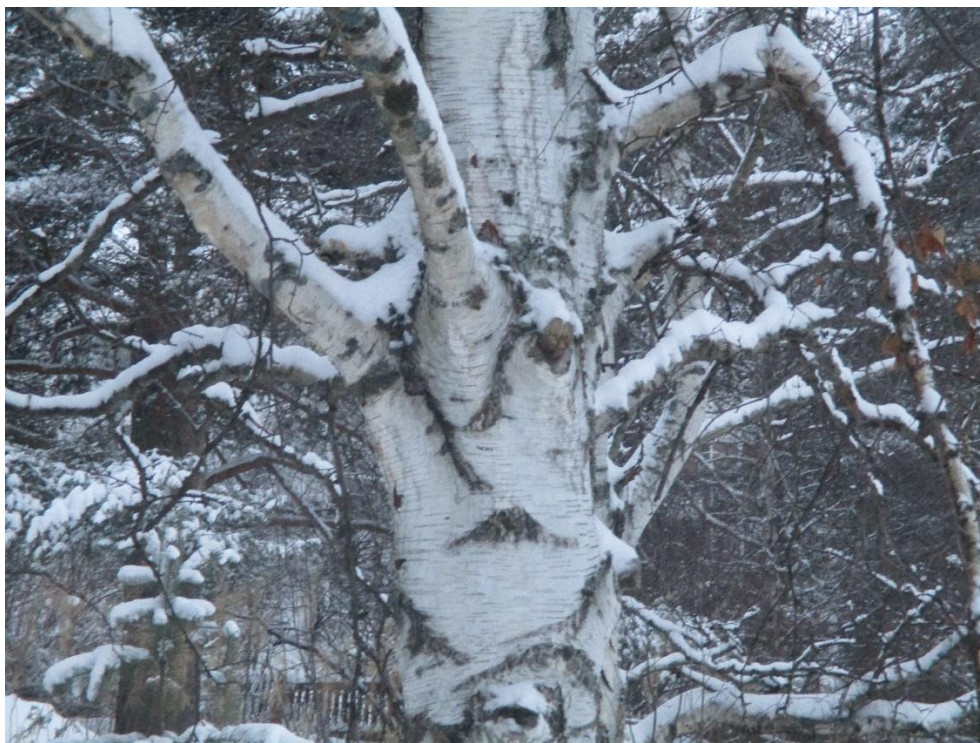


**Figure 7.** An outline of a face on the trunk of a linden tree by the side of the road. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 8.** An elf-like form at the base of a linden tree trunk by the side of the road. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 9.** A face with features and branches with snow on them that look like wild hair seen in this birch tree in winter. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 10.** The form and outline of what looks like a bear's face formed upon the trunk of a linden tree. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 11.** Within the roots of an old pine tree is a form that resembles an eagle's head. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 12.** At the base of this pine tree is what looks like a figure who is laughing. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 13.** An example of an alder tree which has a face upon it that looks like a reptile eating. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 14.** A birch trunk upon which a face is clearly recognisable with two eyes, a nose and mouth positioned slightly to the left which means it could be smiling or smirking. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 15.** Newly fallen snow at the time of kaamos (no sun), covers ice to make what looks like an old man sleeping, with the outline of his head visible as well as one eye, and his nose on the right side of his face. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 16.** A being-like head with a closed eye and mouth which are evident on the right side, formed in fresh snow. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 17.** A pile of snow covered with snow that has recently fallen and with the help of the wind it has formed into a crescent moon with a face – man in the moon. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 18.** New snowfall on top of a plie of older snow and ice has helped design what looks like the head and face of a barn own. Its eyes and pointed nose-beak are evident. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 19.** A sad or sleepy face is evident underneath new snowfall. On the one hand it looks human and on another hand like an animal. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



**Figure 20.** A clear recognisable outline of a head with a face which has piercing eyes and a mouth. The form which looks a bit like a mask has come into being on a pile of snow and ice which has been made by machinery and then furthermore, designed by recent snowfall. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



## **Discussion**

Today in Rovaniemi is March 3, 2024. The winter seasons came early in October 2023, not giving so many deciduous trees time to shed their leaves. Throughout the last week of February up until this present day it has been mild weather meaning rain which has caused the snow and ice to begin to thaw. What has been interesting to note about these processes are that large chunks of ice on the side of pathways and roads have been shaped by these processes. Meaning, pathways and roadsides where snow and ice have earlier been piled up by machinery have become like riverbanks, lakesides and seashores where there are stones and boulders have been formulated and subsequently shaped by river processes that have evolved during and since the last glacial period. What these two processes have in common is both have been impacted by water over a period. Riverbanks, lakesides, and seashores over centuries and in some cases millennia whereas, with snow it is a case of weeks or even days depending on the mild temperatures and amount of rainfall.

It came to mind about how the processes of melting and formulation of shapes and forms of snow and ice are like sculptures that are in part because of the cyclical nature of the web of life and it seems this is why at this time, embankments, sides of pathways and roadsides look like they do. To provide the reader with some examples of how these landscapes look, I am including photographs below which demonstrate what is described above.



**Figure 20.** Large pieces of snow and ice at the edge of the pathway which have been sculptured by the processes of nature. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).





**Figure 21.** The photograph in this case depicts some larger chunks of snow and ice that have been conditioned by the rain and milder temperatures over a one-week period and thus, sculptures into their current shapes. Photograph and copyright Francis Joy (2024).



## **To encounter the earth**

As we way-fare carefully upon the beautiful earth  
Amidst its ripe and bountiful seasons  
We are blessed to experience life and love  
Which is a cause for blessings and celebrations  
Its colours are inspiration for creating different kinds of art  
Its snow and ice that remind us to rest  
The wind and rain of our elemental nature  
The sun and moon for the potential for magic  
And their power to give one's life a new start  
But all of these are dependent on how each day we walk  
Upon the paths we choose throughout life  
And the intensions of each moment as to whether  
We speak lovingly or with nonsense and double talk.  
Because the trees and plants and birds as well  
Can sense and feel everything we say  
And therefore, choose wisely and with a touch of gratitude  
For how you might live this day  
Copyright Francis Joy (2024).

## **Some concluding remarks**

I have already in this introduction discussed to some extent the threats towards nature and the seasons which are becoming more dysregulated because of climate change. But you have probably figured out from studying what is presented above is that photography of tree faces and forms with their own individual expressions and those made from snow and ice can be both fun and fascinating and have a variety of impacts upon the senses. To record and therefore, approach research in this way is a good and creative method of developing art education and both sensory and thus, emotional intelligence. Ultimately, in the ways the different materials help enhance learning and help to develop awareness skills in relation to searching for and being able to identify



and gain different and deepening perspectives on both nature and seasons and some of the faces and forms connected with them. Being able to feel what we feel when faces and forms are encountered in different settings can help to achieve a broader comprehension of some of the different layers within nature by expanding on new ways of being creative and transforming emotions in a meaningful way that, likewise, helps with developing both observation, sensory awareness, intelligence, and creativity.

Having noted the transformational power that has come from photographing hundreds of different forms and faces and then looking at them on the computer perhaps some hours or days later has been a positive experience in terms of study and learning. It has opened another world regarding formulating different levels of awareness and its development. The way the inspiration has unfolded means it has been exciting to consider the prospect of going out during different seasons to search for faces and forms in trees and then during the winter months to look for faces and forms made from snow and ice which has helped enhance the creative processes and the positive aspects of that in terms of being outdoors and getting exercise and fresh air. The most interesting part of making these unpredictable journeys into the outdoors is that one never knows what, where or when a specific form or forms will be recognized or encountered and therefore, this can create mystery that is tied to landscapes of all sorts of first-hand experiences. Some figures are better seen at night than in daytime. From observation, they may look considerably different or more obvious in either or. But going out and searching is the key to encountering them. A further significant factor in terms of timing which is important to understand is how when the snow and ice is in their melting processes for example between for example in 2024, March-April, during these weeks there are different layers of snow and ice that are present in which features of all kinds maybe comprehended. In addition, when old snow and ice have been covered with new snowfall the same occurs. Newer forms are created and are thus, evident.

This is one of the unique features of the Arctic landscapes which can be home to many layers of inspiration throughout the duration of the winter months and consequently there is a need to undertake more research into these fascinating subject matters, especially regarding snow and ice because they help demonstrate the inherent values to be found during the essential cold seasonal cycles.

It is important to give thought to what contributions and impacts these materials and what has been written will these have in relation to other types of data published on the phenomenon of pareidolia when the northern and Arctic regions of Finland are considered in connection with both significance and possible complications in relation to our understanding of nature and its cycles and seasons given how the winter months are receding and the planet warms because of climate change.





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