

Found in the Phases of the Moon

ON A DARK, breezy night, an owl calls in the nearby woods. A dog barks in the distance. A shooting star streaks across the sky. "Aahh! Did you see it?" we both say at once. I want nothing more than to Be Here Now. But my mind is preoccupied, wondering when the Moon will next be full.

One woman finds a key to understanding a little piece of the universe.

I am sure I can figure it out. I just have to think about what time it is and where the Moon is. But is it moving eastward or westward with respect to the Sun? If the Moon rises nearly an hour later every day, and if it's full when it's opposite the Sun in the sky, is it waxing or waning tonight? About once a year for the last 20 years, I've had to

start from scratch to re-solve the problem.

The trouble was that from year to year I'd forget. I'd remember the pieces but not the answer. I tried to think of a device for remembering where the Moon is in its cycle. How about: When the dark side of the gibbous Moon is facing down, it's almost full, and when it's facing up, it's past full. But doesn't that depend on whether it's in the east or the west, and on what time it is?

My doctor has an "easy" system. He uses "R" and "L" for "right" and "left," "X" and "N" for "waxing" and "waning." But is it "RX" or "RN"?

The "need to know" always overtook me when I was outside with no pen and paper handy. It was a challenge that I couldn't let rest. Once the thought arose, my mind would not be quiet until I found the answer — again.

So there we were, down at the pond, listening to the frogs, enjoying the glitter of the stars as they appeared in the darkening sky. The half Moon was up above the trees in the eastern sky. But was it before the full Moon or after? First quarter or last quarter? As the conversation died, I started muttering, drawing pictures in the air with my fingers, visualizing in my mind the Moon traveling around the Earth and the Earth spinning and traveling around the Sun. Gradually, I determined that it was before the full Moon.

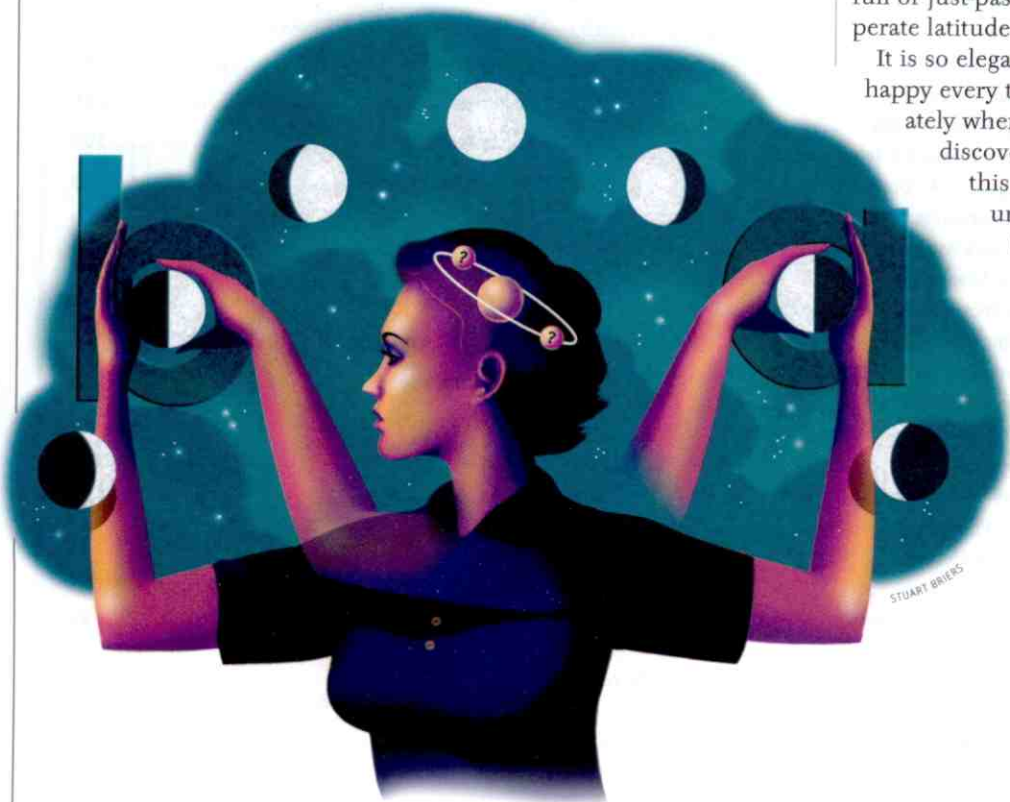
And then, "Eureka!" I discovered my perfect mnemonic device. Facing south, I reached my right hand toward the Moon. The curve of my outstretched finger and thumb matched the curved limb of the half Moon. I added a straight edge with the palm of my left hand to make a lowercase letter "b" — "b" for "before." Oh! I held up my left hand with fingers and thumb curved to match an imaginary Moon facing the other way. I made a straight edge with the fingers of my right hand. It's a lowercase "a" — "a" for "after."

It's too easy — "before" and "after" full. Can it be? Yes, it's true. It works any time of day or night, with anything from a sliver of a crescent Moon to a nearly round almost-full or just-past-full Moon (as long as you live in north temperate latitudes).

It is so elegant — so easy to remember! It makes me happy every time I look at the Moon and know immediately where we are in its cycle. I have reveled in this discovery — in this conquering of complexity, in this tiny piece of order and predictability in the universe — for several years now. (My husband likes it, though I don't think it makes his life better the way it does mine.)

Not everyone can discover a planet. Not everyone can determine whether the universe is expanding or contracting. But we each have something to offer. So here's my humble contribution to science and astronomy. Face the Moon . . . stretch out your hands . . . and like me, find yourself found, not lost, in the phases of the Moon. *

BRENDA CURRIN is a communication consultant (www.currin.biz) who enjoys stargazing and deciphering Moon phases at her home near Oxford, North Carolina. Her father was an avid telescope maker — she still has the 6-inch telescope he built in the 1950s.



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