

The Night Sky:

It's cold tonight. Oh, it's not the record breaking kind we can get around here but it's cold. I'd say it's about three below. When it gets cold like this, in the winter, there is a better than even chance that the skies will be clear and the star show will be excellent. They are and it is. There's nothing quite like stepping outside to that cold slap in the face, looking up, and beholding the wonder of the night sky.

The ancients spent countless hours wondering what the stars and their configurations meant. They conjured constellations and imagined the reasons for those constellations. They saw hunters and sisters and ruminants out there. They invented the stories to go with those images. They imagined these characters marching across the night sky within the logic created for their purposes. They defined the hunt, planting, the harvest and any activity important enough to need celestial guidance. They tied the stars to the moon and the moon to the sun and the sun to life and life to the earth and the earth to the end of life. Before science there was the circle. The circle was sufficient. The circle was law enough for many millennia.

We have different eyes now. We have minds that behave differently too. We have notions that travel in new circles. We no longer have the need to tell our children that the night sky is full of stories and that these stories have meaning for us. We have replaced the night sky with television and recordings and the telephone. We have created a night-time without the night sky. We ignore that vast expanse every night, almost without fail. We stay inside. Too bad.

What would it take to miss a segment of your eight o'clock show and replace it with that magical step outside to look at the sky? How difficult would it be to pull out the ear buds for a minute and march your clan onto the porch? What if we invited the soul on the other end of the phone to share the night view? What if we paid attention for just a few minutes, just a few times a month, to the glories above?

I suspect that our conversations with the kids would change a bit. They would go from complaining at first, "Why are we doing this" to resigned acceptance, "At least the moon is out" to honest inquiry, "What's that orange one?" to, finally the best place of all, "Hey dad, come here and look at what Venus is doing." It's simple really, if you show people the wonders of something, sooner or later they will get it, remember it, and make it theirs. It might be after you're gone. It doesn't matter. The night sky will still be there.

My father gave his family the gift of the night sky. As a result my brother became a decent and serious amateur astronomer. My sister built a life in the country long before I did. And I have come to this place prepared for very few things but the night sky was one of them. I remember my dad marching us into our back yard in the middle of New York City the night of the first big blackout. He was ecstatic that we had a clear night and a dark night. It was the first truly dark night of my life, city glow being what it is.

Out came the telescope, mounted on its heavy base. On went the eyepiece and viewfinder. Pick out the target and get lined up for our turns at stargazing. And what stars we saw! "That's Vega, that's Polaris. That group over there, that's Cassiopeia. Let's see how far away that is." He was reading from one of his books by flashlight, eyeglasses pushed up on his head, more excited than any of the kids. What a wonderful man.

You can be wonderful too, you know. Go get a book from the library and march the kids out after dark. You don't need a scope. You don't even need binoculars. You just need to point and say some of those wonderful star names. Capella, Pollux and Castor, Betelgeuse. It's magic. Kids remember these things. It's as good as a bedtime story, maybe better. If you can send a child or grandchild to school the next day with the name of just one constellation memorized you have done a most excellent thing. They will own that forever.

It's out there, every night, a boundless and beautiful show provided free of charge, requiring nothing more than a short walk and a little curiosity. It's showing right now in a back yard near you. Catch it soon, the night sky.