

Falling in Love with the Night Sky

When I was a child we lived in an apartment building on a busy street with constant traffic, noise and lights. I don't think I was even aware of the sky until we moved to the suburbs. My new home couldn't have been more different. A developer started with a corn field and built long streets of identical houses and that's all there was. Nothing else. So nothing was taller than my house, not even a tree. There was absolutely nothing to obstruct the view of the sky, so it quickly got my attention. I remember lying on the grass looking up at the blue sky with white puffy clouds. I thought it looked like a warm blanket and seeing that blanket above everything made me feel safe, but the night sky was something entirely different!

I still remember the awe I felt the first time I stepped into the darkness of night and beheld the night sky. Wow! It happened like this. My dad was a man of few words. He took the train into the city early each morning and came home after seven at night. I always knew he was home when I heard classical music playing. Then I knew he'd be in his chair reading, mostly science fiction books. Later when my mom was helping my sister and I get ready for bed, my dad would go out on our porch to smoke his pipe in the dark. One night I followed him. I felt my way through the darkness to the edge of the porch and held on to the post, and then I looked up and saw stars and more stars. They filled up the sky and seemed to go on and on forever both scary and beautiful. I remember the feeling that if I let go of the porch post I would fall into the blackness and keep falling forever.

That night my dad showed me the big dipper and how the stars at the end of the bowl point to the north star at the end of the handle of the little dipper. He told me how sailors used the north star to find their way across the ocean.

After that I joined my dad on the porch often. He showed me the Milky Way, the summer triangle and his favorite constellation Cassiopeia. He told me that Cassiopeia was a Queen who was chained to her throne as punishment for bragging about how beautiful she was and now her throne, shaped like a W spins around in the sky sometimes sideways and sometimes even upside down with her in it! Being able to name the star patterns and know their stories made the night sky less scary for me and sometimes I would leave the safety of the porch and sail down the milky way through the inky darkness of our yard following the north star.

Soon I grew up and left my home, my dad, and the night sky behind. Again I lived with traffic, noise and lights. A gentleman in a tuxedo on the sign of the tuxedo rental place next door even winked and tipped his hat at me through my window every night and bright lights chased around and around the perimeter of the roof of the drive in hamburger place across the street! Then one day 52 years ago my husband took a teaching job in Door County, and we came here to look for a place to live. We didn't have money for a motel, so we camped that night at Peninsula State Park and there it was, both scary and beautiful! The night sky. Complete blackness with millions and millions of stars. I felt like I was traveling back through the years to my dad and the porch of my childhood; falling in love with the night sky all over again!

*Author's Note: What I didn't understand then is that my dad who was raised in the city, got his love of the night sky and his knowledge about it from summers spent at Boy Scout Camp.

Linda Merline