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THEODORE BERLAND

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## What My Father Taught Me About Halley's Comet

I've been an astronomy buff since I was about 13. A buff, not an advanced amateur or even an astrophile. My observations of the heavens are done in an awe-struck casual way, rather than in a methodical scientific way. The telescope that I lug out to the patio every so often to see the amazing craters of the moon or the incredible rings of Saturn is primitive.

Born and raised in the big city, I only saw the moon and such bright stars as in the Big Dipper regularly when I was growing up. The city limited my view of the rest of the universe. Its glaring neon signs and sentinel-like street lights obscured the heavens after dark. Only on brief escapes to the country was I privileged to see the full splendor of the night sky.

I was so innocent that it actually frightened me while I was on a visit to my aunt at New Buffalo. I was alone, lying on a beach, the rhythmic surf at my feet, the Milky Way fully stretched across the black expanse above me. The sky was punctuated by stars of every level of brightness, and by planets. A shooting star occasionally startled me. I had never before seen such a full display of heavenly starworks. If I ever believed in God it was at that moment when I felt one with the galaxy.

I had another intimate experience with the universe eight years later, during the Korean War, when I was in the U.S. Air Force. I had learned to guide my plane at night by celestial navigation. I found such key stars as Sirius by first identifying such constellations as Orion and its Arc of Capella. Then I took declination angles with a sextant. This was done as I stood under the plastic bubble at the top of the aircraft. From there I could also look down on the outside of the long, cigar-shaped, metallic fuselage, across the top of the wings, and at the tail of the airplane. I could observe the structure sliding across the clouds, which were suspended above the gem-like lights of Texas farmhouses and villages far below. For those few moments I felt god-like there in the heavens, above the world.

Back in civilian life I was no longer afraid of the sky but still awe-struck when I looked up on clear country nights. Even before I owned the telescope, I kept track

of the moon's, the stars', and the sun's marches across the heavens. I tried to observe each eclipse and learned how to use the telescope to project a solar eclipse on a building wall. When I worked at the University of Chicago I visited its Yerkes Observatory in Wisconsin whenever I could in order to see the wonderful photos of the heavens taken through its sharp telescope, still the largest refractor.

So I was thrilled in Fall of 1985 at the prospect of being able to see that most famous of celestial wanderers, Halley's Comet. As a fan (isn't every American?) of Mark Twain, I knew of his astronomical lifespan, born in one year of Halley's Comet and dying 76 years later, in 1910 when it returned. When I actually did see the comet in December 1985, near the Pleiades, it was merely a blur without a tail. I read that Spring would be the best time in 1986 to see the Comet, with March and April offering the best views of the full-tailed Halley, as it started the outbound leg of its orbit around the sun. Unfortunately, at the same time, Halley also slipped into the southern heavens very close to the horizon. I looked in vain, as night skies were overcast. I even got up for predawn sightings, but no view of the comet was possible. Sadly, I realized that my chance was gone, since I certainly will not be around in 2061 to see it.

I suppose that the fact that this comet can only be seen once in a lifetime by most persons is what makes it most fascinating. Still, the vast majority of people who live now and who ever lived in the past have never seen it — even once. They have not even tried. That means that the 29 recorded visits of this comet were seen by only a handful of earthlings. Who were those who saw Halley's first recorded visit in 240 B.C.? Or in 451 A.D., when Attila the Hun was defeated at the Battle of Chalons in France? Or in 1066 A.D., when the Normans conquered England at the Battle of Hastings?

As I thought about Halley's previous visit, in 1910, when it put on a more spectacular show than this last one, I realized that my father is one of the lucky ones to have had the comet visit twice in his lifetime. Born in 1903, he was 7 years old at Halley's first flyby during his life, and 83 at the more recent flyby. I decided to talk to him about this. Certainly he was as marked by Halley as Mark Twain was!

"No," he said, "I never saw Halley's Comet in 1910."

Oh, I thought, you were still too young to realize its importance. I pressed on, still the know-better son.

"Are you interested in seeing it this time? After all, you are one of the few fortunate ones who have had chances of seeing it on two visits."

"Nope," he answered and changed the subject. (He often does that when a subject bores him.)

I was aghast.

I have thought about this a great deal since. I couldn't understand how someone I knew, someone of my own blood, lived through two visits of Halley's comet and didn't care, didn't seem to feel the same fascination I felt, wasn't impelled by the same motivation which made me want to witness celestial history in the making.

Oh well, I said to myself, he never was very interested in nature and science. I always had been, ever since as a child I discovered science books in the local library. But how could he not be captivated by the magic of it all! That was the key word: magic. Of course. Magic was his life. Since his grammar school days, my father has been tinkering and fiddling and fingering magic tricks. He lives magic, has invented scores of tricks, written more than a dozen books detailing how-to-do-it. He had taught me early in my life to be skeptical, to always look for the gimmick, to never accept things at face value. The glitzier the trick, the more suspicious I should be.

It came to me that Halley's Comet was certainly the ultimate glitz. Those detailed 1910 photos of it (some taken at Yerkes) that I stared at on my comet calendar all year or saw in astronomy magazines keenly whetted my appetite to see it this time. The wonderful photos from the space craft passing near the comet, which were published in the newspapers in the Spring, made me want to see it so much with my own eyes.

Of course! Eureka! That was it! Glitz, with a capital Z! I, maker of mass communications, had been manipulated by the mass communications. I had fallen for the gimmick. I had been dazzled by the shine, much as audiences are dazzled by the shine of the illusionist's cabinet before he makes someone disappear or reappear.

Halley had simply taken over where E.T. had left off. Both were objects of media hype. Their pictures, books, and T-shirts were sold; they were used in promoting sales of TV sets. Even if we had all seen the comet, it certainly would not have appeared to be streaking across the sky as it did in pictures of old; rather it would be a very small and faint object among all those uncountable small and faint objects in the night sky that have so long fascinated me (and others).

I asked my father again about Halley.

"Look," he answered, patiently. "I was living with my family in Poltava when I was 7, when Halley's Comet was around. We Jews in Russia at that time were doing everything we could to stay alive. We lived from day to day, always afraid that the Cossacks would storm into the village again and slash a few more heads. There were times when we didn't see my father for a week or so. We didn't know if he was alive or dead. Then he would come back and we would learn that he had been harbored by friendly Christians in the next village until things quieted down.

"We came to America in 1911. So, I was 8 then and Halley's Comet was gone. But

look, was it going to change the world? Were the pogroms going to stop? No, they went on. That was a big reason my father packed us all up and left. The world was the same after it came as before it came. The same was true this year.

“Now, the Statue of Liberty, that was something that changed people’s lives. During that week around July Fourth I was glued to the TV watching the centennial events. I was thrilled. You know, my mother and my brother and my sisters and I didn’t come to America by way of New York. We came in through Baltimore, so I didn’t see the statue in 1911. As a matter of fact, I didn’t see it until about 1956 when Jean [my stepmother] and I visited New York and took the boat out to see it. That was thrilling!”

The immigrant boy had finally met the Lady, I thought, remembering how thrilled I — the native born — had been when I visited the statue.

The essence of my father’s message was that life would still go on the same after Halley’s visit as before. And it has. Halley’s comet was at best an interesting sky object, even to those who saw it. (A friend who went to the Galapagos to see it was disappointed.) We know just about as much or as little about it now as before: it still is that dirty snowball on a 76-year periodicity. It is not a celestial messenger; it did not bring word from the Creator of the Universe. It did not bring the startling new clues to the formation of the universe which we expected; at best it confirmed those we already had from observations of less spectacular stellar bodies.

The magic of the comet, as in all magic, is in our heads. We want so for magical, wonderful things to exist that they do — in our minds. Dragons, unicorns, fairies, witches, ghosts, goblins, Atlantis, King Arthur, and the Wizard of Oz are all creations of fantasy. We know them as well as we know real beings and things. In only a small way is Halley’s Comet different: unlike the imaginaries just mentioned, it is a physical fact of our solar system. That is but a small difference. Not the reality of its existence but the magic we attribute to it makes the comet important enough to look forward to every 76 years.

So, what my father taught me on this visit of Halley’s Comet is that it is a legacy passed from one generation to the next. It is a lesson to be learned: the comet begs not better and better observations but better and better realizations that any and all magic can blind us. No matter the epoch of humanity, no matter the scientific and cultural sophistication of the age, we human beings are still superstitious creatures who will always want wonder, always want to fantasticate, even about real things. After all, isn’t that why we call leading movie actors, leading athletes “stars”?

The comet has passed as close as it will for 76 or so years, and life on this planet goes on as though it never visited. I still track the rise and fall of sun and moon and

am still awed by the nightly display of those distant, brilliant objects in infinite space. But I have a much better understanding now of the strength of the wonder which moved ancients to name constellations after mythical people, creatures, and objects who and which, they believed, ruled their destinies. But to paraphrase Shakespeare, the magic lies not in the stars but in ourselves.