

FALLING STARS

“Dad, the Perseid meteorite shower is easy to see in the sky the next few nights. How about we drive out of Albany where it’s dark enough to star gaze?”

When your adult daughters, rarely home at the same time, ask you to go searching for falling stars, how can you say no?

So, off we drove late one night this month, down Albany County’s route 204, New Krumkill Road, past the slumbering sub-developments and horse farms, winding along the thickly darkened path in our car as the many lights of Albany and Slingerlands faded into dimming points of firefly luminosity.

Many a father and his daughters share a beautiful secret when daylight recedes. As grown up as they are, I imagine that my girls are holding on to early, deep memories of being held by their parents at bedtime, as the comfort of our presence staved off their terror of being blinded by the darkness enveloping them in their rooms and they gradually nodded off to sleep. As an even older grownup, I hold on to a different early, deep memory of soothing them to sleep after nighttime prayers, comforted by the fact that if God took me forever under the cover of night, they would still be here, living on well after me: lights reflected over so much time from a dying star, light years away.

These comforts, and the anticipation of seeing meteorites shoot across the cloudless sky, gave us that small bit of courage to stop at a lonely, wide-open field near an empty farm stand on the roadside. Around this time of year in the Northeast, the ever-loud nocturnal chirping of crickets and cicadas is a living symphony that can out-Tanglewood Tanglewood, its own

comforting reminder during this Summer of COVID that nature's concerts can't be cancelled and are there for all to hear, if we would only come to listen. Listen we did, my daughters and I, as the gracious wind played the tree branches like a string section, the occasional woody creature moaned out a solo, and a passing far-off freight train made its presence known with a fading whistle.

Above us in the sky, The Big Dipper and her gleaming entourage danced silently like diamonds slipping along a necklace string. We craned our necks, watching and waiting wordlessly for falling stars. Those shooting sky gems didn't disappoint us, as they arced and fell quickly across the vast expanse, playfully teasing our peripheral vision: light streaks shot from nowhere, disappearing into nowhere before we could even call to one another, "Wow, did you see that?"

"Wow," I wondered out loud to my girls, "How is it that what amounts to little more than junk from outer space burning up in the atmosphere can awaken in us such intense awe, wonder, and joy?" "Let it go, Dad, just enjoy the show!" they gently chided me. I did just that, but inside, I obsessed – just a little – over the mindless astrophysics of it all: gravity's blind force pulls rocks and ice into our orbit and hurls them through the atmosphere. I thought about

Robert Frost's early, depressing poem, *Stars*:

*How countlessly they congregate
O'er our tumultuous snow,
Which flows in shapes as tall as trees
When wintry winds do blow!—*

*As if with keenness for our fate,
Our faltering few steps on
To white rest, and a place of rest
Invisible at dawn,--*

*And yet with neither love nor hate,
Those stars like some snow-white
Minerva's snow-white marble eyes
Without the gift of sight.*

Commenting on this poem, Frost wrote, "There is no oversight of human affairs."

In other words, like God, those shining and falling stars which we so joyously celebrate, preside blindly over us, mindlessly leaving us to our pitiful, random fates.

Then I looked into my daughters' eyes, adazzle with the complex joys of childhood, adulthood, and sisterhood, blazing in quiet persistence with the light of years past, burning with gentle amazement at the beauty of that night sky in that moment, as if no other moment existed or mattered. I looked again at the stars, rising and hurtling downward, perhaps without the gifts of sight, yet all of them offering us the gift of insight when we encounter them.

Leave to Frost his despondent readings of the stars, I thought. I'll continue to leap faithfully through the present and into the future with a different narrative, that of the Jewish evening prayer:

God orders the stars' courses in the heavens according to God will.

Catching one playful falling star after another out of the corner of my eye, I recited Judaism's blessing upon seeing the miracles of nature:

Praised are You, God for constantly creating the world anew since the very beginning of time.

To which my girls responded, "Amen."