

Little Humans

When I gaze up at the stars, I feel small, inspired, but also a bit sad.

If you fill a tank of gas and drive east from my house a few hours before sunset, you'll pull up to where the prairie grass still grows, and the crickets sing. As darkness falls, thousands of stars emerge from the blackening sky. In summer months, a silver river arches high overhead: our Milky Way.

To gaze up at a sky so clear is to feel miniscule, meaningless, and yet so alive, so human. For me, it is a deeply moving experience.

And so I hope it is for the children huddled around me. Sprawled out on the shore of a little lake in southwestern Michigan, our small bunch surveys the heavens with telescopes, binoculars, and dozens of little eyes. This is my camp group, and I'm to give a short lecture under the stars (maybe about galaxies, or star formation, or black holes) and entertain questions. This is the single most rewarding part of volunteering at Astrocamp.

At first, only a few of the brave ones have questions; but soon, every kid has something that they are dying to know.

"What's a nebula?"

"How does a star die?"

"What if a giant comet hit us?"

The questions come fast, and I can see the silhouettes of many raised hands in the dark. Sometimes it's a struggle to get everyone quiet. Once it's still again, I'll give an answer, something I read in a book, or heard from an older camp volunteer.

Then, my favorite thing in the world happens:

A small voice: "Was there anything before the big bang?"

After a pause, I'll say: "We don't know..."

And we'll all sit and think it over, little humans staring into the stars reflected in the lake.

From the deck of our suburban house, only a few points of light rise above the trees. Most are lost behind the amber glow of streetlights, shopping center parking lots, neon signage. When I look at the sky in my town, I see but a tiny

glimmer of the brilliance of the sky at camp. Familiar constellations are obscured by orange murk, stripped of their beauty. It's hard to feel inspired.

I know that when the people of our town gaze up at night, the beauty of the universe will not move them. The music of the night will fall flat on the ears of the children, and they'll never feel compelled to look up again. They'll lose the curiosity that I saw in the children at Astrocamp, the curiosity that all kids are born with. They'll lose their ability to wonder, and never want it back, because they won't see what they're missing. There lies the real danger: By severing our connection with the stars, we forget what it means to be human.