

From Twinkle Twinkle to the Lion King and Beyond: Nurturing a Scientific and Personal Relationship with the Stars

by Connie Barlow
December 2003, www.TheGreatStory.org

NOTE: This series of 8 paragraphs can be read by 8 volunteers or by two readers, alternating. Use it to begin a stardust ritual (see our website), or to dramatize a lesson, workshop, or sermon on the stardust theme.

● **1. “Twinkle twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are.” Two hundred years ago, parents and grandparents began teaching their children that simple tune. Generation upon generation of children have since gone out at night and melodically given voice to their wonderment. What, if any, answers did they receive then — and what answers do we give them today?**

● **2. We humans have always wondered about the stars. We have yearned for relationship with the vastness and seeming permanence of the night sky. And we have told stories which did indeed assure us of such a relationship. To some peoples, the stars mapped constellations of the gods and recorded the gods’ adventures. To others, the stars were pinprick holes in the canopies of the heavens that allowed the glory of their One God to shine through.**

● **3. For many, the stars revealed something comforting about the passage that awaits us all. Tribal peoples, all around the world, saw evidence of ancestry in the stars: for them, the stars were campfires of those who had crossed over the threshold of death. A contemporary Native American poet, Joy Harjo, gives voice to this ancient perspective:**

**“I can hear the sizzle of a newborn star,
and know that anything of meaning,
of fierce magic, is emerging here.
I am witness to flexible eternity, the evolving past.
And I know I shall live forever,
as dust or breath in the face of stars,
in the shifting pattern of winds.”**

● 4. Humans have invented a multitude of ways to nurture a personal relationship with the stars. In 1943, the French author Antoine de St. Exupery wrote a book that is still read and loved by children and adults – and that transforms our regard for roses and baobab trees as well as stars. The hero of this book had his home in the stars. Toward the end, the Little Prince spoke these words to his new-found human friend on Earth:

“In one of the stars I shall be living. In one of them I shall be laughing. And so it will be as if all the stars were laughing, when you look at the sky at night.”

● 5. Today we have a new myth about the stars presented to our youth in western culture. Whether we be kids, parents, or grandparents: many of us became teary-eyed when we watch the Lion King speak these words to his adventurous young son:

“Simba, let me tell you something that my father told me. Look at the stars. The great kings of the past look down on us from those stars. So whenever you feel alone, just remember that those kings will always be there to guide you – and so will I.”

● **6. The progress of science has barred us from a literal understanding of the words spoken by the Lion King, or the Little Prince, or the early biblical writers, or by our own ancient ancestors gathered around fires at night. In the late 1800s, scientists first discerned that stars were not campfires or former kings or holes in the heavens but rather, "big burning balls of gas," and that our sun was a big burning ball too. Soon scientists calculated that those big burning balls were "billions of miles away" – and, later, that the stars in distant galaxies were billions of LIGHT-years away. Yet in the late 1950s, something happened that gave all generations hence an opportunity to have it all. We could have scientific awareness AND a deeply felt and comforting relationship with the stars.**

● **7. A half-century ago scientists began to discover that the intuitions of the ancients were correct: stars are, indeed, our ancestors. Generations of giant stars, who lived and died before our sun and our planet were born, created inside their fiery bellies all the atoms – other than hydrogen – that now compose our bodies and the bodies of all living creatures. These ancestral stars, these cosmic cauldrons, created all the atoms of oxygen that now give us breath, of calcium that bind our bones, of phosphorus that light up our neurons, and of silicon that give form and solidity to the very earth beneath our feet. In the 1960s, Joni Mitchell celebrated this scientific discovery, in an anthem that has empowered a whole generation:**

“We are stardust, billion year old carbon. We are golden... And we’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”

● **8. Today, we have the opportunity to pass through our culture's adolescence of doubt and spirit-draining materialism. We now can celebrate that stars ARE "big balls of burning gas billions of miles away" AND that generations of stars who lived and died before our sun was born are, quite literally, our ancestors. This is an embodied awareness, a tangible ancestry that celebrates the billion-year-old carbon within our very cells. Once again we can look up at the stars and know who we are. A quarter century ago, the astronomer Carl Sagan expressed this modern relationship with the stars in a way that is still unsurpassed. He concluded his television series *Cosmos* with this grand exultation:**

"We are the local embodiment of a Cosmos grown to self-awareness. We have begun to contemplate our origins. We are star-stuff pondering the stars!"