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Stardust

Last month I embarked on some early spring-cleaning, thanks to my parents' latest undertaking: eliminating household dust. My dad had proclaimed my room free of the offending particles after he had given it a thorough vacuuming – no part of it was left unscathed, not even the ceiling, the walls, or the door. I was then charged with tidying up the remaining debris; the flotsam and jetsam of my life that had accumulated in unstable piles atop bookshelves, in corners, and under furniture. I attacked them at first with a vengeance, fueled by the Red Hot Chili Peppers blasting in my ears, but soon my progress slowed as I began to cast a closer eye on the clutter of years long past.

I am a packrat. Nestled in the nooks and crannies of my room were volumes of miscellany, old school projects and unfinished diary entries, letters from friends and forgotten musings in sketchbooks. It is hard for me to bring myself to throw anything away. Even old toothbrushes I discard with a heavy heart. I found myself amidst a sea of paper, surrounded by various piles that I had mentally titled, “Throw Away”, “Keep for Possible Future Use”, “Return”, “Unknown”, and “Keep for Sentimental Reasons”. It was the contents of this last pile that I pored over the longest.

Each item there I discovered was buried like a diamond in the rough – through careful digging, I brushed away the years and found objects that evoked in me the deepest feelings of nostalgia. A bag of seashells brought forth vivid memories of a day at the beach. I found a jar of dusty pebbles that instantly transported me back to second grade, rummaging through rocks at the playground with a group of other amateur geologists, pretending to find agate and jade in ordinary stones. In a way I was still doing that, searching for precious stones of memory. Perhaps I was just overly sentimental, finding deeper meaning in scraps of paper and Ziploc bags of worthless rocks. But I couldn't help those feelings, so I decided to

sit back and enjoy the ride down memory lane. I delighted in my discoveries, especially of experiences that I thought I had forgotten. I was reclaiming parts of myself that I had accidentally discarded.

In a binder my younger self had titled 'Personal Stuff', I found pages and pages of facts and figures on astronomy. There were charts of constellations and photocopied pages of our solar system. Apparently all this had been of great importance to me seven years ago. Vague recollections began trickling back as I studied the star maps with growing interest and fondness. The memory of one summer night spent stargazing stuck me with particular clarity.

That night, my dad heard a short blurb on the radio proclaiming that we Earthlings could catch sight of Venus for a short period of time. Father and daughter ended up outside, necks craned upwards for hours, attempting to find it amidst all the other similar looking specks of light in the night sky. Venus was a sneaky planet. We were rather inept astronomers. By the fluorescent light of a street lamp, we mulled over star charts pulled off the Internet. Which way was North, anyways? We found the Big Dipper, only to find that half an hour later it had shifted. My eyes had started to tire from squinting at faint pinpoints of light millions of light years away. We traced our bumbling path across the sky with pointing fingers, hopelessly lost and greatly confused. The only constant was the constellation of Orion, the three bright stars of his belt guiding our wavering path. To this day, it is the only star formation I can find with relative ease. Wherever I go, its familiar shape jumps out at me from the jumble of other stars, unchanged since that summer night. It seems fixed in time, like my memories – a constant reminder of the past, as well as a comforting symbol of stability for the future.

My dad and I never did get any better at stargazing. I abandoned the idea of becoming an astronomer. It was just as easy to get lost in astrophysics as it was in a tangle of constellations, both of which I was getting very good at. However, that has not stopped me from turning my eyes skyward. Gazing at the distant stars and galaxies never fails to evoke in me a deep sense of wonder at the sheer size and number of those heavenly bodies. I know that those tiny pricks of brightness are in reality giant balls of burning gases, inconceivably far away. The light that reaches my eyes is actually billions of years old. I am not looking at the present, I am actually staring deep into the distant past.

Looking at the night sky is more humbling for me than standing before the ocean. My earthly cares seem infinitesimal compared to the grand scheme of things, yet I also feel that a deep ache inside me has been filled. Those stars are burning hydrogen and helium deep within their cores. Those simple elements are also a part of me. I realize that I'm connected with the rest of the cosmos in an especially deep way – the building blocks of those stars and galaxies are exactly the same as the chemicals that make up the very structure of my body. I am made of stardust. Whenever I glance up at the sky and the stars, I am sensing a connection that is billions of years old. I am looking into the past. This is much deeper than looking through piles of childhood memories that span only a few years, yet this is also very much the same.

By glimpsing into the past, I feel that I am cementing myself more firmly in the present. I have the distance of years to look back, reevaluate, and seemingly relive my experiences. I am more connected with myself. Instead of burying or ignoring my memories, I embrace them. I am not just the person I happen to be right now – I am also a collection of thoughts, feelings, and experiences spread out over sixteen years' worth of time. I dig through my past, literally and figuratively, and find forgotten jewels of childhood memories. On a considerably grander scheme, I turn my sights to the stars, and connect myself to a much greater span of years. I'm seeing the history of the universe, painted out for me across the sky. I am going back, but by doing so I am also finding myself, maturing and growing and going forward.