

My Astronomy untraining

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When I was eight, my granddad, a keen lay-astronomer, took me and my cousin to watch the stars. We walked all day in the Judea desert until we found a nice secluded cave, where we could rest, take hide from the heat and the sand and eat.

At night everything around was dark – you don't get artificial light in the desert. It also became quite cold, and the desert seemed strong and mysterious in ways I haven't noticed during daytime.

My cousin and I lay on the ground and watched the Milky Way and the stars.

“Look,” she said to me, “here's a dragon.”

“It's not a dragon,” my granddad was quick to explain, “the tail is the three stars forming the belt of Orion, and to the left is the Hare.” He was very particular about his stars, and my cousin quietened and so did I.

We looked at the moon and saw how uneven it was, and admired the cheese-like formations. I was so taken by my granddad's knowledge and expertise. We watched Mars and his satellites and Venus with her shimmering clouds.

After a while we let granddad find Saturn for us and we watched the stars again, lying on the ground with this vast unknown sparkles above.

“Look,” my cousin said, “there's a girl with a kite.”

My granddad corrected her: “what you think is a kite, is in fact part of the Shepherd constellation, and the girl is probably both Snake-Head and Northern-Crown.”

He knew so much. I was quietly lying there, slowly noticing less and less, I didn't want to make a fool of myself like my cousin did.

We got up and watched Saturn through the telescope. Its rings were so beautiful, so colourful – it was a spectacular picture, and it was real and we could see it.

My cousin no longer told me about the stars she has seen, and both of us learned the real names of the constellations, and the formations, and the planets; until we went to sleep and dreamt of distant stars and funny aliens.

When I look at the stars today, I notice how much easier it is for me to see Orion and the Hare, the Shepherd, the Snake-Head and the Northern-Crown. The dragon and the girl with a kite are so much fainter but I hold on to them for dear life. I am working hard to see them better, as well as the sorcerer, and the flowerbed, and the funny hat, and the ever-changing praying-mantis.

It took me a few days to train in astronomy and after twenty-one years of untraining I still struggle with my (un) learning.