

Thoughts on the Passage of a Great Comet

A Great Horned Owl floated dream-like and silent above my headlight beams, as I led our little convoy of eager comet-seekers down twisty back-country roads toward the California coast. The owl was surely more awake than I, or at least more used to being awake at one AM on a Tuesday morning, but I could begin to appreciate its view of the world. Almost every night for the past week and a half, I had been out late, watching the approach of Comet Hyakutake. On this morning of March 26, 1996, I had coaxed a group of hesitant friends to come along with me. Their reluctance vanished as we viewed the apparition first from the busy downtown streets of San Francisco's suburban bedroom communities, then from side roads near the freeways that skirt the edge of the light-polluted cities and towns. But now we were headed out where the sky was dark; now it was time for the real thing.

State highway 84 terminates at the ocean, a bit more than half way from San Francisco to Santa Cruz. We pulled over to the side of the road a few miles before its end. City glow loomed up over the spine of the peninsula hills to the north and east, but the sky straight up, and south and west over the broad Pacific, was nearly black.

The comet was magnificent, a display that seemed to dazzle our dark-adapted eyes, even though we knew that in absolute terms it did not truly qualify as bright. I recalled a legend about comets from bygone days, that they are great dragons, bringers of wisdom and of knowledge, speeding among the stars, breathing fire and flame, strewing smoke and sparks far across the trembling heavens.

What the ancients saw in the sky usually seems like proof positive that they possessed some of the hallucinogenic substances we regard as modern. Yet this time I could see what they meant -- a dragon indeed. To stare at the coma was to gaze into the maw of the beast; the central concentration provided a view down its very gullet. The straight, narrow beam of the inner tail blazed with the lambent, incandescent blue of a bunsen flame, as the dragon expelled its mighty breath at full force. Further away, the streaming gout of fire lost intensity and coherence, and widened and dissipated in fading swirls of translucent smoke and pale luminosity, through the equatorial counter-glow and beyond, out to ninety degrees, half way across the sky.

The image of the comet and the memory of the owl put me in mind of a modern fantasy I had recently read. The book was Jane Lindskold's

_Brother_to_Dragons,_Companion_to_Owls_. Of course, it had nothing to do with comets or astronomy, but the title provided a pretty conceit for the night's experience.

Looking again at the streaming tail, standing wide-eyed in awe of its power and beauty, I grew sad at the rarity of such a sight, the more so because the press had done a reasonable job on this one. Most Americans surely knew there was a great comet out there, and heard lots of astronomers tell them to go out and see it.

And most Americans stood up in their well-lit living rooms, turned on the porch lights so as not to trip on the steps, walked outside, and looked up past the street lights, up into the sky of cities and suburbs. Then they wondered what the fuss was about. If they saw anything at all, they saw a bit of fluff, a mere lightning bug. For them, there was no awe and no wisdom, no power and beauty. For them, the Star Dragon refused to appear.

Back home, I took up my book of familiar quotations, on the chance of finding a literary origin for Lindsfold's fantasy title. The source was the King James Bible, the words of Job [30:29]. I am not Biblically inclined, but I once studied Job as literature, and remembered a powerful story of the triumph of faith, persistence, determination, and patience over suffering and disbelief. Of course, that doesn't have anything to do with comet-watching, either.

Or does it?

You can't see a great comet easily. You surely can't do so by stepping out of a brightly-lit house into the street lights. It takes determination, to plan and execute an expedition out away from cities, out where the sky is dark, out to the wild lands where the owls live. It takes patience, to wait for the right combination of time, of viewing geometry, of weather, and of the changing appearance of the comet itself. It takes persistence, for you must go back and do it all over again, night after night, if the precise circumstances were not just so the first time. It takes patience and persistence in a larger sense, as well, to wait for the rare and unpredictable arrival of a bright comet in the skies of Earth, and meanwhile, to learn and practice the methods and techniques of visual observation of faint objects: Even with plenty of advice about dark adaptation, averted vision, and all the other tricks, my companions -- all new to astronomy -- could only see a tail two thirds as long as the one I saw.

Some times you have to suffer a little, too. You're cold. You're

tired. You are grubby and unkempt. You are late for work the next day. Things go bump in the night and growl unnervingly, half out of earshot on the side of your car away from the road. Pickup trucks and nondescript old cars cruise by slowly, lights on high beam and radios blaring, as their mysterious occupants, visible only as silhouettes, eye you with who knows what malevolent thought or intent.

There are also matters of faith and disbelief. You must have faith that the comet is really there, even if circumstances conspire to hide it from you the first few times out. You must contend with the disbelief of your friends and colleagues, the ones who have already seen it from their front porches, who tell you time and again that it's no big deal, that there is nothing out there worth the time and trouble to see, that there never was, and never could be, a Star Dragon. You must know in your heart, and remember always, that they are wrong.

If you successfully overcome all these obstacles, then you, too, may one day find yourself brother to dragons, and companion to owls.

They make the best of company.

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