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Questions So Simple, Answers So Far Beyond

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David Schelhaas

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I like poetry. I write poems and I read poems. Every day I get a poem in my e-mail from the Writer's Almanac, an organization that had its beginnings with Garrison Keillor and his radio show "The Prairie Home Companion."

Hank Hudepohl was today's poet. I've never heard of him but his name sounds like he should be a blacksmith or a country music singer. (Shouldn't poets have names like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow?) But I loved his poem.

Hank's poem hit me right where I like to be hit, in the softest part of my heart where nostalgia and sweet memories reside. In his poem, "The Heavens," he is standing next to his picnic table while his two young daughters are standing on the table and he has an arm around each. They are leaning back into him "like two armfuls of warm laundry" — watching for the Pleiades meteor shower. In my mind they immediately became my two daughters 40-plus years ago.

As you might expect, the meteor shower never shows up but the questions do, and they are the questions your and my daughters (and sons) asked us: "What do stars look like up close? Where does the sky begin? How long does it take to get there?" Innocent, profound, utterly unanswerable questions.

If, like me, you have a sentimental streak and look back on those days when your kids were young and thought you, their parent, was an all-knowing sage, then you would love Hank Hudepohl's poem. I remember a night, actually 4 o'clock in the morning, when my children's mother roused us from our beds to drive to some high point 12 miles away to catch a glimpse of some comet — Ahman Hotep or something else that sounded like the name of an Egyptian mummy. Of course, we did not spot it but it was an adventure. And a 6 a.m. breakfast at Denny's provided adequate compensation for our restaurant-deprived kids.

My wife has been a star gazer her whole life. When our kids were small she would put blankets on the grass, and the five of us would lie on our backs and gaze at the sky until late in the night. Stargazing was the stated purpose, but the real blessing as we lay under the sky with a warm

breeze rustling the leaves and the sky gradually going black was the intimacy we felt. Love flowed, unspoken as we dreamed and laughed and sang and asked big questions.

Hank's poem (I know by all literary rules I should refer to him as Hudepohl, but "Hank" sounds like the kind of guy you could go stargazing with) is called "The Heavens," and like many good poems, it moves from the delight of the moment — the daughters and the mosquitoes and night falling — to the unanswerable questions that poets and mystics have asked throughout history.

The last two lines of Hank's poem — "the heavens so near, questions so simple/ and the answers so far beyond my knowing" — take me to a much older poem written by another guy named Dave: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, humans that you care for them?" (Psalm 8:3-4, NIV)

Questions so simple, as Hank says, but questions we will keep asking even when our catechisms and science books try to convince us that we have it all figured out.