



Murray State University

From the Selected Works of Paul Walker

2021

Not in Lone Splendor

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/paul__walker/17/

loved us, who kept us, who left us, who made our lunches, who never made our lunches. Stories of decanting macaroni, cutting apart Sears catalogs, making beds. Our stories are stories of chasing and achieving our New York dreams, even if we never see the city. We commute within lives, mapping the silvery strands that bind them all together.



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Not In Lone Splendor

Paul Walker

In a 2010 episode of *Doctor Who*, a caretaker gently chides the young Amelia Pond for painting the night sky with bright yellow stars surrounding the moon: "Amelia, you know there are no such things as stars" ("The Big Bang"). Then both walk outside to confirm that in their rural English hamlet, indeed, only the moon is visible. Turns out, in a particularly mind-bending exhibition of the malleability of time and space, the invisibility of the stars to Amelia is the result of "the universe folding into itself" in the far, far future, which eliminated the stars' past emanations of light reaching earth in Amelia's present time.

The absence of stars bothers me; rather, I am disturbed by the absence of stars *from my vision*. I know that no stars in the universe are truly absent; they are *there*, past and present, more numerous and significant than we can truly imagine or actually see. But for most of us, the stars are absent not only from our vision but also from our fancy, hidden by our obsession with unnatural light sources and their requisite electricity. Most people do not view nighttime lights as wasted energy; rather they see them as security. Then again, I could be wrong—maybe many of us believe these lights do more than veil the stars themselves. Perhaps there are many who understand that stars provide more than aesthetically pleasing views, many who find that stars spur curiosity and inquiry, and many who know that because stars can be looked at directly, they help us counter the fear and dogma of supernatural brightness.

When I teach first-year writing, I often use *progymnasmata*, which is an ancient scaffolding method to move from one rhetorical writing skill to another. One of the early exercises is writing a proverb. Early in the *progymnasmata*, proverbs prove difficult because the requirements of the genre—brevity and moral profundity—intimidate immediately. Even once the problem of a topic is overcome, a "new" proverb either borrows too much from clichés or other maxims or resists conceptualization into a memorable aphorism. Nonetheless, attempting a series of proverbs with my students on one occasion I came up with something that, albeit trite and far from original in concept, started a discussion:

Stars are dim when earthly light is too bright.

When I shared it, my students construed it to be religious, a fair interpretation since it can be easily moralized as a caution against “worldly” distractions that dim “heavenly” influence. Such an interpretation crossed my mind as well, but I pushed it away, resisting the supernatural metaphor. The problem, however, is the natural truth in the phrase seems too bland and obvious because it relates literally to the effects of light pollution, our world’s purposeful effort to alter the darkness of the night and by so doing hide the stars from our view. The absence of stars because of light pollution is tolerated and even embraced by people who not only care little about the impacts of energy use but also misunderstand the science of darkness and misinterpret light’s power over it.

Meanwhile, people search for a definitive heaven, impeding their view of less definite delight.

Unlike the visible, catastrophic results of climate change intensified by human activity, pollution by light is visible but banal. No one denies the prevalence of nighttime lights, but the numerous lights are generally met with appreciation for their curtailing of otherwise dark circumstances. I don’t recall when I first saw a “light pollution” map showing lights masking whole areas of earth as viewed from space, but I can pinpoint when it began to matter to me: when I lived in an “international dark sky” city—Flagstaff, Arizona—where the planet/not-planet/planet Pluto was discovered at Lowell Observatory. During the eight years of nights spent there, each time I walked out of the house—especially in the predawn darkness—the cold, thin, clear air in the high southwestern desert revealed a dazzling number of stars. Often I froze, shocked at the hardy brilliance of the sky and with a desire to look longer even as the warm car beckoned. When the moon wasn’t in the sky, the brightness of winter’s signature constellation Orion was diminished by the other stars. Moments like these invoke the horror of Isaac Asimov’s short story “Nightfall”—a portrayal of the cataclysm that occurs when people living on a planet with six suns anticipate and then see, for the first time, a billion dots of light in their once-in-a-millennium dark sky.

Raised in a very small town in southeastern Utah, I had older brothers who showed me the new constellations they learned about in Boy Scouts. My father always pointed out the obvious formations (“There’s

the Big Dipper, kids”) easily found from our yard but also taught us a few tricks to find the more difficult ones, such as the Little Dipper, Draco, or Delphinus. After high school, I moved to larger cities, including New York, and it was pleasantly jolting to return home and see the sky at night. Yet even when I settled in Flagstaff with its dark sky, that jolt of visible stars never completely disappeared.

After those years in northern Arizona, I moved to a small town in western Kentucky, where I expected comparable views of the night sky because of its rural isolation. But hazy, humid air and low elevation hid most summer stars and in the colder winter air only the brightest stars and constellations such as Orion were visible. Shortly after I moved into my new home, I tried to watch an expected meteor shower, but on the August night when I stepped outside to find it in the northeastern sky, all I saw was the glow of lights from the town. I experienced the sad realization that even under the best of conditions at this elevation, a nice view of the stars similar to that where I had lived before was unattainable. But more stars are always there to see and they are still worth seeing, despite geographical and climate impediments. Now, though, we seem too accustomed to and too insecure without the artificial lights that make stars disappear.

The justification for so many lights, especially on our streets, stems from a misunderstanding of how lights work at night. We tend to believe that more of anything useful is better, and a brighter light is therefore better than a not-bright light. However, when the source of a bright light is in the field of one’s vision, its presumed effectiveness is negated by the glares and shadows it creates. Artificial lights emit an illusory aura of protection from the assumed dangers of the dark: accidents, assault, theft, and boogeymen. Streets are lined with lights, stores and buildings have illuminated signs and parking lot lights, houses have motion-sensor or always-on porch lights—most people think nothing of these normalcies of twenty-first-century life (despite the heavy use of electricity) and believe that property owners and city officials are actively preventing the dangers of the dark. But the lights used by most communities and homeowners are unshaded, which means that the light dispersed from these lamps is not focused on the ground but throwing light in every direction. In contrast, shaded lamps—those endorsed by the International Dark Sky Association—use the top cover of the lamp to direct the illumination onto the ground where it is most useful. Furthermore, the best shaded lamps also use bulbs that don’t produce glare—they seem significantly dimmer than what we are used to—but

provide focused light onto a sidewalk or street without producing night shadows or blinding glare. For most people, the idea that bright lights create more darkness and reduced vision is counterintuitive, but that is exactly the case. Edward Abbey describes how when one is far from civilization at night the use of a flashlight/ torch reduces one's ability to see one's whole surroundings (14). I know from experience that I can see what is in the illuminated triangle of my flashlight's beam, but everything else is blackness and shadow. If I turn the torch off I can see in all directions—grayly—yet quite well enough to navigate and see things differently *because* of the lack of bright light.

The same blackness that exists outside the beam of a flashlight shows up in areas around outdoor lights as well. The sun is powerful enough to create a general brilliance illuminating shadowed areas created by impediments to its direct light. An unshaded outdoor light imitates the sun in sending rays outward but lacks the power to enlighten where the direct light is blocked. Therefore, behind bushes, trees, or fences, the night shadows are pure blackness: a perfect place to hide. Not only do these shadows create cover for would-be thieves, but if one is looking toward an unshaded outdoor light, the glare clouds and blocks one's vision of the area, essentially leaving a person blind and unable to see any lurking danger/beauty in the shadows created by the "security" light.

When I have suggested to others to hike at night without a torch, they scoff, telling me, "I want to see the way." But the way is rarely the only thing to see. In fact, "the way," with the definite article, narrows our vision and imagination, reducing our capacity for discovering multiple paths or off-the-path routes. When my family traveled away from my hometown in southern Utah, there was one feasible highway to any of our usual destinations—other ways required four-wheel-drive vehicles or many extra hours in the car. Now that I live east of the Rocky Mountains, I feel both liberated and incapacitated by the choices I can make when I need to go some place. By interstate, parkway, highway, or country road, I can be adventurous or familiar in my choices. Once we let go of "the way" as an ideal, then our potential for discovery increases. As most of us know, traveling our usual path rarely results in interesting stories.

But I understand the impulse to look for "the way" through life, enabled by a constant guide like the sun. Things make sense on a path; we trust that someone has walked that way before, removing our responsibility for keeping direction or our worry about dead ends

or precipices. Once, when I was twelve or thirteen, I was camping at a remote section of Canyonlands National Park—on the very edge of the rim of the high-desert plateau that overlooked the Needles district of the park a thousand feet below. From this butte, which was easily accessible by car from the east, one could stand on the edge of the drop, portions of which were protected by a metal rail, and see the extensive distance to the ground as well as hundreds of miles to the western horizon. In the winter, we sometimes threw snowballs over the edge, counting the several seconds before air currents smashed the white speck against the cliff face long before it could reach the ground. But one image from that particular camping trip has indelibly remained. The time of year was likely April or May, making nights cold but the days warm. I had stuffed myself and my sleeping bag into a small space under a sandstone overhang just large enough for me. It was probably an uncomfortable night, but I don't remember how I slept. Instead, I remember crawling out of the space in the morning to pee, groggily walking to the edge of the cliff, and stumbling onto the end of the world.

At the edge I could see nothing. Not nothing, really; the open space beyond the cliff was filled entirely with clouds, or fog, or whatever it is that can fill such a massive space. The extensive view beyond, which the day before included the earth's curvature over all those miles in the distance, now resembled the flat world of pre-Columbian myth. Had we arrived at that spot for the first time at that very moment, not knowing what the fog obscured below, not knowing that the whole of south-central Utah actually existed beyond that cliff, not knowing of the earth's roundness—we would have indeed believed we had reached the edge of the world, and that our way had, with resounding finality, ended.

Just as that fog cloaked the landscape that morning, light pollution conceals the stars that we know exist but generally care very little about because they are not part of the normal path through our lives. We are better able to comprehend the tangible underpinnings of still unrealized space flights than the stunning uncertainties in the images that the Hubble telescope is still transmitting back to us. Some scientists calculate that there are ten billion stars in the universe for every single person on earth. A magnificent, unfettered view of even a splinter of those stars—our portion of our galaxy—depends on vast blackness without the collective glare of artificial lights or the sun's singular brightness.

I was warned as a youngster against looking directly at the daytime sun because its brightness could be blinding. My strict obedience to this warning means that I don't know if it is true, but I know that an accidental side glance burns spots on my retina that temporarily make it difficult to see. The light of the stars, in contrast, can be stared at for hours, without harm to one's eyes, and a prolonged look usually results in new discoveries.

Yet our capacity and willingness to take prolonged looks has diminished in both the literal and figurative senses. Our streetlights and porchlights have increased in number and brightness, while the figurative Light of Truth has inhibited many people's curiosity and desire for discovery. For much of humanity, the source of truth is divine rather than personal. As divine truth overshadows our intellectual searching by encouraging (and forcing) faith rather than doubt, trust rather than skepticism, solutions rather than questions, the urge to look beyond subsides. The prevailing view of God in the world, since the earliest times, is something superior to ourselves, with the sun as a common metaphor for God's influence and power. Several religious legends mention that no man can look at the face of God and live, reinforcing the sun-like power of the superior being and the fear present in the face of dogma. Speaking of the sun as a heavenly god, Socrates asks in *The Republic*, "Whose is the light which best enables our faculty of sight to see, and the things which are seen to be seen?" (214). In contrast to Plato's idea that truth shines forth by a power like the sun, making it easy for souls to understand what is seen, the fear-inducing brightness (omniscience) of God can limit our full view and understanding of the universe, our motivation for knowledge, and our relationship to each other. The sun holds a single, lone place in the sky and resists our approaching stares—and understanding. On the other hand, the stars—distant suns—are "mingled with darkness," enabling them to shine brighter for us, while additional light on earth dims or erases our ability to find patterns among the dots, looking at them individually or in clusters, turning around dizzyingly while we do so. I have come to believe that instead of a superior God likened to the sun, which provides light but is dangerous, we might choose the diversity and infinite extent of the numerous stars to soothe our unknowing or to explain the mysteries of life. Some stars are too far away to see, but under certain conditions, sometimes with technological assistance, they can be approached. Those stars near enough to see consistently, as well as those that are patiently reached, can be examined, questioned, and connected to other stars by our naked eyes—all without experiencing the blindness that brightness brings. *Ad astra.*

The lights that *pollute* our dark skies—the illuminations that create shadows and glare that prevent our full vision—continue to increase as our concern for the wider world and wider universe decreases. Even when scientists receiving data from far away satellites make discoveries, those discoveries often fail to make it into general conversation. We fail to see the connection of those far-off images and our earthly verisimilitude. We are like the buildings that are illuminated by upward-facing lamps on the ground, lights that spread out as they beam skyward, casting a bit of that light on a brick wall. As the building owners seem to say, "Look at this building! It is so important that you need to notice its walls at night!" We are so concerned with how we look to the world that we forget that we are only single humans on a single planet in an infinite universe, yet in that role, like the stars, we contribute to the brilliance of humanity. We are accustomed to a lit-up world, and we don't make time to imagine the full knowledge that the stars might offer us. As a child, I could see a million visible stars, including the wispy, thin, cloud-like clusters that we called the Milky Way, not realizing that we are not separate from our own galaxy. But most nights I did not pay attention. There were too many kick-the-can games to play, too many doors to knock on and then run away, or too many turnarounds to make back and forth on Main Street, swayed under the spell of hair-rock bands while I sat in the front seat of a friend's Ford truck. I recall a few star-gazing moments, but despite living in southeast Utah, likely the "darkest" rural corner in the continental United States, I rarely *truly* looked up. Even when, as teenagers, we drove up the mountain road to find dark places to park, our attentions were directed at the person sitting next to us, and even then the best spot showed the lights of town rather than the stars. On a few occasions, I looked for God in those stars, letting my mind ponder the unknowable scale of the stars beyond those I could see. Unfortunately, I was too caught up in the God-as-sun metaphor in my religious upbringing to take seriously what I was seeing and ultimately missing: a star-like perspective on humanity.

My family's religion taught that the universe was infinite, beginnings and endings only a human necessity. Humans, before we were born on earth, were *intelligences* floating around or gathered together somewhere in the cosmos. God, omniscient and omnipotent, was in fact descended from other gods, a string of beings in the infinity of time. But for us, these intelligences that are his spirit-form children, he is the only god that matters, thus making him the sun of our spiritual existence and the sun of our physical existence on earth. Yet this God, as grand as one

can(not) imagine, is also expressly concerned with my every thought and deed. I was taught to find reassurance rather than disdain in the Psalmist's question: "what is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (*The Bible*, Psalms 8.4)—that despite God's ultimate power he actually pays attention to me and every other person on earth. I was taught that because of this, he approved when I was kind, pure, and obedient, and was disappointed or angry when I was mean, prurient, and disobedient. As a typical self-centered child, I found this made perfect sense; my parents were attentive, why wouldn't my hyper-powerful heavenly father be hyper-attentive? For someone in different circumstances, a lack of parental attention would make this attentive God just as appealing. In my religious culture it was normal, even expected, to say a prayer to help find a lost toy or assist in *any* life endeavor. And if my friends gathered around a ragged few pages of *Penthouse* found in someone's shed, the God we were taught, like the sun's rays, peeked behind the fence where we were hiding, seeing us and disapproving. Repentance would be necessary.

Later, of course, the dirty deeds escalated, and the prayers, seeking divine intervention for things like a school test, girlfriend, job, or impending death of a grandparent, were not answered. Slowly, and then rapidly, my ability to reconcile this all-powerful God with the micromanager of my good character unraveled. At times, my questions were too disruptive, too loaded with potential disarray to answer with action, and I continued living as if those questions were resolved with my religious belief. But more and more, with increased anxiety, this God became overwhelmingly bright, too bright to look at for guidance any longer. This brightness was not such that it would illuminate my sins, as I thought before, but rather this brightness was a constant glare, blocking portions of the universe, whether an unknown black hole or an unfamiliar human being. I knew that this glare distorted my view of a whole humanity and a whole earth that I needed to better understand and more truly love.

Revised proverb:

Stars are dim when earthly or heavenly light is too bright.

This altered version declares the obvious while implying the figurative. The daytime sun erases the stars from our view; the increasing urban lights do likewise. But the dark night can bring fear of the invisible and restive ponderings—dream visions—that spark the human imagination for stories and ways of understanding. When the night resembles the day, and stars dim because of more lights, and the less we look beyond

our visible immediate surroundings, the more we center our perspective on what we can see in front of us or what someone else has told us to see. Our own speculation about what can be known beyond falters; we might trust and fear and beg to an unknowable but all-powerful God, reducing our powers of observation and imagination, hiding the wisdom that we can only know *that* we do not know. But the stars—and human intellects—offer us imagination and knowledge (or even, as Keats praised, steadfastness) only if they can be seen. If the places where stars are visible continue to diminish, and stars become too dim everywhere, then our attention to them may further wane, just as our desire for attaining new knowledge and new ways of living may waver in the face of fundamentalism. Without a nightly reminder of infinite points of insight, we are more likely to be blinded by the dominant, lonely sun or shadowed by the artificial, insecure, megalomaniac brightness of our own world—hubris, short-sighted exploitation, deliberate ignorance, and disregard for ecological interdependence. As Ursula K. LeGuin suggests, "stand still for long periods . . . and look at what is, in fact, in front of [us]: the earth, my fellow beings on it; and the stars" (143).

Hence, I am left eager to escape a "starless" dogmatic and paranoid worldview—perhaps as much as Dante was eager to escape Hell. The darkness in Hell is the absence of glory, joy, and further knowledge, the *contrapasso* rejection of the bright, divine source of truth. But the star-gazing darkness of the world rejects the notion that imitation light provides safety and certainty, for there is no safety nor certainty in ignoring or inhibiting new knowledge offered literally and figuratively by the stars. Although my faith in the divine differs from Dante's, I share with him a melded sensibility of the spiritual and philosophical and empathize with his restless anticipation and ultimate relief as Virgil leads the pilgrim out of the *Inferno*:

We climbed, he first and I behind, until,
through a small round opening ahead of us
I saw the lovely things the heavens hold,

And we came out to see *once more* the stars. (34.136–139, *emphasis added*)



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Being Godzilla

Michael Smith

My kids don't love *Jurassic Park*. They are five and seven years old, and they have never loved it. They prefer Godzilla. Give them any sort of choice between a Godzilla movie and *Jurassic Park* or any of its sequels, and they will choose Godzilla. And not the Godzilla of recent vintage, not the one from the 2014 film starring *Breaking Bad*'s incomparable Brian Cranston (well, sort of, he goes away after the first twenty minutes or so) and Oscar-winner Juliette Binoche (well, no, she dies in, like, the first eight minutes) and the lethally wooden Aaron Taylor-Johnston along with the wholly inert Elizabeth Olsen. That Godzilla, who they refer to as "Fat Tummy Godzilla" and sometimes, less comfortably, as "Black Godzilla," is fine. They like him fine. At the end of that movie, when that Godzilla grabs the "Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism" (MUTO for short) by the head and forces its jaws open, and the giant scales on his spine start to glow blue and he rolls his head on his neck like he's winding up for an operatic finale and then he releases a stream of hot blue radioactive fire, breathing fire for the first and only time in the movie so that you are delighted to realize only just now that the movie has been withholding the radioactive breath—the money shot—from you all along, that you were missing it without knowing you were missing it, and Fat Tummy Godzilla breathes it right down the thing's throat, into its belly, which swells and glows blue and swells and glows blue until it explodes, the whole thing explodes—well, my boys giggle and cheer. They like that part *a lot*, and so even though the rest of the movie's maybe a little slow (slow even for a Godzilla movie), because of this scene, they like the movie "pretty well overall," as much youngest likes to say. "We like it pretty well overall."

But the guy they really like? The one that gets them stomping around in slow motion and kicking over Brio trains they have painstakingly set up over the course of the previous three hours, all while roaring that distinctive "AWOOOO-UHHH"? Is "Man-in-Suit Godzilla." The Godzilla from the Toho movies of the '60s and '70s.

It is 2018. There is more new content being produced now than ever before, and technology gives us unprecedented access to that content. Special effects allows filmmakers to put—well, pretty much whatever they want on your screen. So how did we get to this point, where my