

Their stars don't belong down here

Editor's note: Columnist Sharon O'Donnell wrote this in 1986 after the Challenger space shuttle tragedy and sent it to the family of the seven astronauts killed then. This is the first time it has been published. We hope there won't be another occasion where it will be appropriate.

I'm waking up one restless, almost sleepless, night in late January. There are tears on my face and a tight feeling in my throat somewhere, making it hard to breathe or swallow. I'm glad to wake up from my tossing and turning. And then I remember my dream.

I had dreamed that night that I reached into the sky and pulled the stars down to touch the Earth. Because, I thought, if the stars come to Earth, then man won't have to reach so far anymore. Man won't have to grasp into space, taking risks and floundering in the darkness. So in my dream I was proud to pull the stars down to Earth.

MY VIEW



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But they didn't look the same anymore. They had looked so much more beautiful high in the nighttime sky. I noticed the stars weren't as bright; they

didn't twinkle. I wondered why.

And then I heard seven voices say, "Stars don't belong on earth." I realized the voices were right. Always before the stars had been too precious, too special for this world we live in. Whenever the hatred and wars and loneliness of our world became too much to cope with, we could look up at the stars and take comfort in knowing that they were still up there, still shining to show us there's hope somewhere. I told the seven voices I was sorry for bringing the stars down to Earth.

They whispered, "We understand." I tried to look in the direction of the voices but saw only a bright, blinding light, yet somehow it was comforting. "We've looked up at the stars before, too," they said. "The stars called out to us, beckoning us to come into the sky. So we know you want to be close to the stars. But if you bring the stars to Earth, then man has nothing to look up at or to reach for or to dream of."

I hung my head. "So I'm taking away man's dreams?" I asked, meekly.

"Yes!" the voices thundered.

I asked the seven voices how I could put the stars back up into the heavens where they belong.

"We'll take them there for you," they promised. "After all, we've followed the stars into the sky before."

"You have?" I asked, quite impressed.

"Yes," they replied. "We left Earth behind."

I shook my head in confusion. "Why would you want to leave Earth?"

The voices paused, as if searching for the

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right words to make me understand. Then they said softly, "There is something inside each of us that will never quite be satisfied ... until we say good-bye to Earth and reach for something more." There was a silence. Lightning flashed across the sky, but there was no thunder.

"Don't the people back on Earth miss you?" I asked.

"Oh yes," they said. "We see them down there grieving for us. We see the disbelief that we're gone. The pain of our loved ones hurts us deeply. Yet, one day when the world and all the heavens are one, then our souls will meet again with those we left behind. But until that day, they can see our spirits living in the stars."

"The whole world is in mourning for you," I told them.

"We're sorry to cause so much unhappiness. Sorrow, though, is a strange thing; it creates a common bond between people — even between strangers. It is indeed a flaw in human beings that sorrow seems to be the only thing that brings them together. People don't realize how important other people are or how fragile life is until something very sad happens. It is good to look down and see people reaching out to each other, but we know it will all stop though, once the sadness goes away."

I realized the seven voices spoke with great insight. I wanted to know what they know, to see what they see. I hesitated, then spoke. "Can I come into the sky with you so I can look down and see, too?"

"Not now. Not just yet, my friend."

"But I want to follow the stars!" I shouted, becoming impatient.

Calmly they told me, "You can follow the stars without ever coming into the sky."

I was more perplexed than ever. "But how can that be?"

"Our dreams were in the stars so we came early. But every person has different dreams. Each of us has our own way to shine a little light into the darkness, to dance among the stars."

I shook my head and sighed. "I don't get it."

"Go after whatever dream you have and believe in it. Do as the stars make you want to do — reach! Reach as high as you can even if you think it's out of your grasp. And if each person does that, then they'll be doing the thing that will honor our memory most — they'll be reaching for the stars in their own special way."

My eyes were wide with excitement and something within my soul felt as if it were just born. "So even I have a way to reach for the stars here on Earth?"

"Just follow the dreams in your heart. Everyone has a way to make the world a brighter place, to make their own star shine somewhere. Sadly, some people don't bother to ever look for their star."

"How do I find my star? How do I know what my dream should be?" I asked, panicking.

"You'll know inside. You'll feel it," the seven voices assured me. "But even when you're pursuing this dream of yours, never be ashamed to show you care for others along the way. For when people stop caring, all the stars will burn out, and light will never again break through the darkness."

And then the dream ended as seven bright lights flew from the darkness and swept up all the stars, carrying them upward and placing them gently in the sky.

That's when I woke up.

Suddenly I can't stay in bed any longer so I go outside into the night. The stars are all in place. I gaze into the massive sky, such majesty all around. The sky speaks to me in some way, soothing my aching soul and bringing peace to my mind. And the stars ... the stars are calling me — sometimes whispering, sometimes screaming — but always calling. Sounds like some are even singing. And I can barely take in all the power the stars are bringing — bringing me a power that almost makes me burst the seams of my soul. Making me feel so strong, so safe, so special, so right. Wrapped up in the stars tonight. I know I can't bring the stars to Earth, but I have to find a way to bring their magic to our world.

The seven voices told me I was put here on this Earth to do something. They said there was a star out there for me to reach for. The stars are calling me. Somehow I've got to get there; I've got to try. I'll take the inspiration the seven voices gave me and keep it in my soul, reminding me to never give up reaching for the sky.

For I just look at the sky at nighttime, and suddenly everything's clear. And the stars that were so out of reach finally seem to be near.