

Date: 10th February 2008

Copy: WALKING THE LAND, starship enterprises!

The last five years have pleurably been enjoyed gravitating towards high wild places and it seems odd and contrary to be heading eastwards recently and putting in city time. It's stupendously easy, I've discovered anew, to ignore rhythms of weather and seasons and skyline miracles, mindful instead of unrelenting clocks demanding early morning meeting times at truly ungodly hours. Pulling up the truck late one evening way afterwards, in starlight by the front corrals, I sat there a few quiet minutes, mentally unwinding. Outside horses ghosted through powder snow, hay expectant and in the old farmhouse the two cats, too waited for evening tuna reward time.

The engine meanwhile clicked and creaked into minus temperatures, peacefully cooling. Just about to pull on thermal layers, a weird thought slid in sideways, of super-powered felines all lined up at dawn's light, waiting for me to open the sliding cat doors, before embarking – akin to humans busy being 'busy' and relentlessly achieving – in a similar way targeting mice and voles to achieve deadline figures.

Ah, how I laughed at our human idiocy! Then, opening the driver's door, my breath caught at not just the heart-stoppingly awful temperatures surging in but, far overhead, a gifting of treasures from the Star People. An overhead canopy, blazing with constellations and planets and faraway galaxies. To the north, this early in the evening, lay the Great Dipper, who as the night progresses, I know slides upwards spilling its imaginary cargo from the four square ladle. I sat there, watching, and was reminded of a conversation with my mother, remembering stars singing far overhead as she sat one mystical evening as a child by a northern Ontario lake shore. Prolific writer Laurens van der Post writes, too, of the Kalahari bushmen explaining the same deal, to them as naturally accepted as us buttering toast for breakfast.

According to astronomer Alan Dyer, associate professor at the mega-mind blowingly wonderful Telus WORLD OF SCIENCE in Calgary – and author of the bestselling BACKYARD ASTRONOMERS GUIDE, these are seriously good times to gaze heavenwards, “with the best collection of bright stars, and particularly around Orion” just right now. Orion, part of the Big Dipper congregation and for the utterly clueless and uneducated (as I am), currently has Aries and Taurus (if your birthdays are coming up as horoscope signs) close by in the frame. Due south is Sirius, that loveliest and brightest of all stars in this overhead canopy, its brilliance due to the fact it's physically closer to us than most by stellar sky standards. Equally, because this glorious star is lower in the sky there's light distortion, and hence the rainbow of different colours visible even to the naked (without a telescope) eye. Many people, reports Alan Dyer, frequently believe

this a starship as it moves across the sky!

Stars, by the way, dance and change throughout the year, and throughout decades and centuries. Venus, both an evening and morning star, currently can be seen clearly in the early eastern pre-dawn skies. She then works her way southwards and upwards as our Earth spins around, although soon she'll be disappearing as part of her nine-month cycle. (If you are an astrologer- with Valentine's Day coming up – nearby companion Jupiter will be sliding away shortly, and apparently a very-big-deal. According to mystic belief “this event has the potential to open portals into other realms capable of different possibilities”, and is allied to fiery Mars butting into the sky scene. Apparently those who secretly enjoy difficult relationships - reports my favourite online astrologer Jonathan Cainer - will be in their element soon!). The romantic 14th, this year, by the way, falls between a solar eclipse earlier this month, and a really-worth-watching lunar version upcoming on Wednesday 20th.

With Alberta's propensity for clear skies, chances are hearteningly excellent for watching our moon's total eclipse. The precursory partial lunar eclipse runs, reports Alan Dyer, from roughly 6.40 p.m. through to 8 p.m.

And then we're into prime-time viewing. The moon, by then sliding into the earth's shadow, will be an emerging deep red from 8 – 8.51 p.m., finally back to normal ghostly hues again around 10 o'clock. The next eclipse, by the way, will occur in 2010. Alan, who has an upcoming multi-media production planned for 2009 as homage and celebration to the Italian Galileo astronomer in 2009 by the way, recommends his colleague Terence Dickinson's NIGHT WATCH (A Practical Guide to Viewing the Universe) as a really good intro guide for new enthusiasts.

THE END