

## Look at the Stars as Love of the Sky

By Yilun Chen

*An interview with Ms. Stephanie Fall.*

*A story to Stephanie, myself, and everyone who dreams about the universe.*

I interviewed Stephanie Fall, a wife, mother, grandmother and star lover. She grew up in the days when the television was not the prime center of life. As a little girl living in Upstate New York, she was rarely inside the house. Her childhood flew by in the woods and the plateau across the street, her fingertips played with shrubs and dipped in the water of streams. Looking up into the sky, she saw the clouds and imagined what shapes they made. The nights didn't seem scary to her as it does now to many children in cities. She often brought her astronomy kits and went outside with her friends. The little astronomers spent hours and hours looking at the stars—the Big Dipper, Orion's Belt and Polaris, the Pole Star. She told me, "There were stars, from what I've seen, there were lots, and lots of stars." The wonderful night journey interested her in an earth science class where she learned a lot about the sky.

Some people say that adult life is all about grey, not black, not white. Adults naturally are aware that happiness often comes with suffering. They are free to love, but also feel bound sometimes. Stephanie said, "I was working all the time and I was traveling all the time. I couldn't focus on anything other than my children, my husband, and my job." However, adults take some breaks from jobs occasionally, as Stephanie and her husband did fifteen years ago, taking a three-week trip to the Southwest. Amazing things happened out of blue. Stephanie and her husband visited one of their friends who lived in a cabin at the top of a mountain in Taos, New Mexico. "His house was very remote, and there was no light at all," Stephanie said. "After dinner, my friend said, 'Let me show you something', and we went outside. I thought he was going to show us his horses, but instead he said, 'Look up.'" Stephanie stopped speaking for a moment, as if remembering. "We've never seen anything like that."

She saw the sky—the most beautiful, unbelievable sky she has ever seen in her life. "Really, it looked like there were more stars than empty space. It was like you were under a canopy of lights and it was so shocking... I can't describe it, but I am trying to describe it to

you.” At that moment, I saw all kinds of emotions flowing across her face. I saw stars shining in her eyes, and I could plainly see that she felt the love of the sky.

The sky loves us in such a special way that once we feel it, we never forget. The memory stays—our first astronomy kits, constellation graph and the first time to see those amazing stars, but sometimes, we feel sad because the memory is not the current reality as people rarely see stars nowadays. “I had a feeling that my grandchildren would rather look at them [the stars] on the computer instead of going outside because there aren’t many of them in the sky. It’s been almost 60 years.” Stephanie misses the old days, especially when she sees an empty city night sky with too many artificial lights. She moved to a remote, woody area outside of Pittsburgh with her husband. Their grandchildren go visit them quite often. “They are just so fascinated that we have streams, we have woods, and they love it so much...it’s too bad that they don’t have these things in their everyday life.”

The reminiscence is for people who have experienced the wonders. The first generation born under an empty sky still hear stories from their parents and their grandparents. After generations of empty skies, those stories will become legends. “For people in my neighborhood, they knew how amazing the sky was, they knew the lights were affecting the wildlife and their planets, but for a lot of people, they don’t think about that...[because] their life isn’t affected.” Just as adult life is never absolutely black or white, human desires and ambitions cultivate civilization, but also bring in greediness, exaggeration and exploitation. We have been living on the edge and have almost forgotten humbleness and respectfulness, the qualities our ancestors formed every time when they looked up, realizing that they would probably never touch the sky. Some people say natural disasters or pandemics like COVID-19 are the revenge of nature, but I would rather believe they’re the love of the universe. When confronting the disasters, humanity becomes more conscious, scared, and respectful. “One of my sons lives next to a very big park [with his family]. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, he got time to take his kids into the park on a daily basis, for two and a half hours. He told my 4-year-old grandson about the stars, the Earth and the other planets. It’s terrific that the education he just gets is from nature.”

Stephanie is now retired, retired with bold dreams and wonders, retired as a new beginning of her life. The first thing she did after retirement was sign up for an astronomy class.

“The class was different than I thought. It was much more interesting and there were many things I didn’t know. The things I learned in a couple of hours a week were incredible to me. I am very fortunate to have had the time and opportunity.”

The sky loves Stephanie. It opened up all her curiosities in her childhood. It moved her, surprised her and shocked her with thousands of stars during her adulthood. The sky enlightened her to the boundless possibilities in the universe and brought her courage, joy and humbleness.

“It’s like a shock when you look up and see how minutely tiny we are... the things we are worried about are so insignificant... I look at those [stars], and say, I had my little time on Earth, what I’m trying to do is just to enjoy the little bit of time in my life, to see how tiny we are, and how short our life is. That’s been my focus.”