

Family Hero Activity: Should Uncle Fred Be in the Sky?

by Andrew Fraknoi

Ancient cultures named the patterns of bright stars in the sky after their mythological heroes and monsters. Different countries and ethnic groups had completely different stories to tell about the same groups of stars. For example, the seven stars we call the Big Dipper were seen as a plow in England, as a stretcher with a sick patient by the Skidi Pawnee tribe of North America, and as seven Watchmen guarding the pole of the sky in Siberia. What if we could start over and rename the *constellations* (the star patterns) today? Who are the heroes we would now put in the sky?

A Family Hero

Suppose one person in the history of your family could get to be in the sky – to have a constellation (star pattern) named after him or her. Whom would you pick for this honor? Who is your family hero? It could be someone alive today, whom everyone in the family really respects and admires, or it could be someone who lived some time ago.

When you have some quiet time, get everyone in the family together for a “tribal council.” Go around the group and ask everyone to suggest a family hero to put in the sky and to explain why that person deserves having a constellation named after her or him. If younger members of the family don’t know some of the family history, this is a good time to tell those stories.

When all the suggestions are made, talk about them for a while. Then the whole family should vote on the one hero who will go in the sky. Next, you need to decide what star picture will represent that person as a constellation. The constellation patterns don’t always resemble the heroes or creatures they portray; sometimes they symbolize them. If you pick Uncle Fred, for example, and he loves to take everyone fishing, maybe you could find a group of stars that looks like a fishing pole. Or if Grandmother Rosa is your choice, maybe you’ll make a star pattern that looks like the necklace that she always liked to wear.

Print out the four star maps (one for each season) and select one for the next part of the activity. One family member should then draw the picture representing your family hero using some of the stars on the map (connecting the dots).

A constellation picture usually has a story to go with it. Some stories were true, and some were exaggerated versions of the real story. Just like the ancients did, your family might want to put together the story of what your hero did to earn a place in the sky. And if you want to exaggerate a little, that’s OK. If everyone likes the story, you may want to write it up sometime.

Sky Heroes from the World At Large

Another approach to this activity is to ask family members to pick one or two people they really admire from real life. The person could be someone alive and active now, or someone who died a long time ago but is still inspiring us today. It could be a political leader, a scientist, artist, thinker, sports champion, or author. The only rule is, it has to be a real person, not a character from fiction. (So Einstein is OK, but Superman is not.)

After everyone has had a chance to put suggestions in, the family can vote on their favorite or favorites and use another sky map to figure out how to “put them in the sky”.

Sky Heroes from Fiction

There are other ways to play with this activity. Some people like to nominate a favorite hero from fiction (you need to decide if the hero has to be from a novel only, or if you will allow comic books, movies, or television shows to be part of the hero pool.) Or you could make up a hero who combines some of the characteristics that members of your family treasure. And then you could go back and do monsters for each of these variants. Who was the most monstrous member of your family? What horrible figure from world history would you put in the sky to scare future generations? Is there an evil doer from fiction who would get the family prize for the most awful character?

The thing to notice in all these activities is that it’s often hard to agree. Once people come up with their favorite hero or monster, they don’t want to give it up for someone else’s. The same is true for the constellation stories of the world’s cultures. It was hard to give up the sky stories people grew up with to find one uniform set of constellations for the world.

Resources for Further Exploration:

Our favorite book for learning more about the sky stories of many different cultures is Ed Krupp’s *Beyond the Blue Horizon: Myths and Legends of the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Planets*. 1991, Harper Collins.

Two good web sites for exploring constellation stories further are:

Windows to the Universe Mythology Page:

http://www.windows.ucar.edu/tour/link=/mythology/mythology.html&edu=mid&back=/search/search_navigation.html

The Constellations Web Site, <http://www.dibonsmith.com/menu.htm>

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