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Sheldon Lawrence

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## Stranded in the Stars

*Sheldon Lawrence*

**M**y wife asked me if I had the keys, but only after the car door locked shut, so her question was asked in suspense and hope—waiting to see what damage had been done to our trip to the sand dunes. I did not have the keys. I had left them in the car so they would not get lost in the sand. Our spontaneous trip to the dunes just got more interesting.

For the past ten thousand years, wind has collected tiny grains of sand from the vast Snake River Plain in Idaho and deposited them on the land just ten miles north of my home. The dunes cover 175 square miles, and they happen to be some of the best in the country. People from all over the United States come with campers and expensive toys—dirt bikes, dune buggies, four-wheelers—to play on the enormous, golden mountains of glass powder.

To my young children, the place is like an inconceivably large sand-box. So after getting an ice cream in town, they begged for a quick trip out to the dunes. It was evening, and we had less than an hour before the sun would set. The children were already making their way up a mountain of sand near the road when the door locked shut, the keys dangling from the ignition. And with a kind of mutual agreement that comes only with experience, we dismissed the blame-placing discussion, deciding instead to play a while before worrying about our predicament. So we climbed up the hills of sand as well, in the way that children do, on all fours, like animals.

On top of the sand dunes, the kids ran and jumped from the crests of the great, stationary waves. They buried each other up to their necks, while occasional gusts of wind would cause the fine sand to snake and

swirl along the surface, making them squint their eyes and breathe carefully through their noses.

In the sunset, the dunes seemed otherworldly, like we had just landed on a barren planet in a distant solar system. It was easy to forget we were only miles from farmland and neighborhoods. Perhaps it is the otherworldliness of the place that causes me to reflect, nearly every trip to the dunes, on a startling figure I once heard. It turns out that scientists have estimated the number of stars in the known universe. The number is incomprehensibly large, so to get a sense of it, they say, consider the grains of sand on all the beaches and deserts and dunes of the planet. Then multiply that by ten.

I think of the thousands of miles of coastline trimming each continent. Somewhere on Australia's Golden Coast, a surfer tracks a few hundred grains of sand into a beachside café—a cluster of stars in some distant galaxy. Somewhere in Indonesia, a coconut lying on the beach has a thousand grains of sand stuck to its brown husk; the sand on ten such coconuts equals more stars than are visible to the naked eye on a clear night.

Then there are the great deserts of the world. The Sahara alone covers over three and a half million square miles. Three and a half million. Now multiply that by the number of sand particles in each square mile. We can keep going to the Arabian Peninsula, where many have died just trying to travel from one end to the other. Then to the Atacama, the Gobi, the Mojave—all of them times ten.

But even these deserts and beaches are abstractions. It is the sand dunes here in my own backyard that fuel my imagination. If I had been told that all the stars in the universe equaled the grains of sand in the rolling hills upon which my children played, I would have found the comparison equally incomprehensible. A spoonful of this fine sand must hold tens of thousands of grains. And some of the dunes here are four hundred feet deep. My human brain refuses the math. At some point numbers become meaningless, just symbols separated with commas in sets of three.

It's hard not to feel lost in the numbers when I perceive myself on our little speck of dust, orbiting just one grain of sand in the vast cosmic dunes. It's hard not to feel stranded, marooned, locked out and lost with no way back. But it's also hard not to enjoy the mystery, the infinite playfulness, the wonder of being a participant in the absurd extravagance of creation. When Moses is given a vision of the universe, the Lord declares, "Worlds without number have I created" (Moses 1:33). Perhaps perceiving Moses's bewilderment, the Lord assures him, "But all things

are numbered unto me, for they are mine and I know them” (Moses 1:35). Maybe this is all we need in order to enjoy the adventure—to know that someone, somewhere, is keeping an eye on the fallen sparrows, the hairs of our head, and the grains of sand. Someone knows where we are and how to bring us home.

We continued to play. My daughter wanted to be buried, so I filled the bucket and poured waterfalls of galaxies onto her legs. We jumped into black holes, dug into nebula, and made sand angels in red giants and white dwarfs. But the problem of getting home remained, lurking in the background. As twilight set in, I took charge and ventured off in search of a solution. There was a campground just a half mile away, where, perhaps, someone might have a hanger, or a tool of some sort that I could wedge between the window and door, wiggle it around, and—I had no idea how such things worked—hope for the best.

The walking was slow and hard, each foot losing its grip and giving in to the soft powder, but I finally stumbled into the campground and found the camp host. He had no phone, but offered me some “universal keys” that he said just might open our door, and I was certainly welcome to give them a try. He seemed eager and hopeful about the keys, so I accepted them politely to reward his generosity, knowing even as he spoke that they wouldn’t work.

But in the end, there was no need for magical keys or jimmy-rigged tools. Back at the car, my wife, having learned to not rely wholly on my efforts, had flagged down a passing car whose occupants did indeed have a phone. She made the call for help to someone who knew us, knew where we were, and knew how to rescue us. Within minutes, a kindly neighbor was headed our way with an extra set of keys, racing across the cosmos to bring us home.

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This essay by Sheldon Lawrence won second place in the *BYU Studies* 2015 personal essay contest.