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Let There Be Light – Bring Back the Stars

Nancy Hyden Woodward

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Springs School Second Grade, Starry, Starry Night in Springs

At last, a warm spring has replaced the cold winter that dogged the East Coast earlier this year. We have good reason to refresh our flowerbeds, turn the soil, bring out the patio and garden furniture and replace the old outdoor light bulbs that turn night into day. It is time to spend summer under the stars. There is, however, a small glitch to this scene. Depending on where you live and the choices that you make in lighting your outdoors, you won't see all that the summer night sky has to offer – at least, not with the clarity that you would if you were looking upwards from high on a mountainside or, perhaps from the beach at Napeague.

If Susan Harder had not moved into a glass house in the Springs ten years ago, most of us on the East End would have little concern for the right way to light our outdoors for safety and aesthetics. The brighter, the better was yesterday's norm. Now we learn that brighter than bright does not guarantee safety but it does ensure needless waste of energy at our own expense. It goes without saying that if a pair of spotlights from the house next door had not glared into Harder's bedroom without relief, day and night, none of the following initiatives would have taken place:

- LIPA is in the process of switching from traditional floodlights to fully shielded lighting on 16,000 public utility poles across Long Island.
- Second Grade students in the Springs School are nearing completion of a large mural,

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“Starry, Starry Night in Springs”. When the last glistening star (a Christmas light) is in place on the canvas, the children and the artist Cynthia Knott who has been guiding them in their exploration of the world above, will celebrate with a Star Party.

- The Town of Riverhead established new standards for exterior lighting in 2002 that mimic the lighting ordinance passed in Hailey, Idaho.
- That same year, the Ladies Village Improvement Society of East Hampton underwrote the cost of replacing lights that only were installed on Main Street and Newtown Lane in the 1990s.
- The Incorporated Village of East Hampton strengthened its outdoor lighting code in May to include residential lighting fixtures and the Town plans to include similar requirements in its Comprehensive Plan.
- Members of Southampton’s Town Board and Planning Department have taken the first steps towards revamping the existing lighting code.

From the western end of Nassau to the eastern tip of Long Island, Harder’s imprint is deeply embedded on every path that is being taken to a better understanding of outdoor lighting that is safer, healthier and cheaper.

Retired Manhattan art dealer Harder knew next to nothing about outdoor lighting when she and her husband bought their house. But after two years passed without any response to polite handwritten notes dropped at the front door and messages left on the week-end neighbor’s answering machine, Harder was beside herself from stress. She bemoaned the constant intrusion on her sleep to a neighbor across the street. Dava Sobel, the Pulitzer Prize finalist and author of *Galileo’s Daughter*, encouraged Harder to join the, **International Dark-Sky Association (“IDA”)** which was headquartered in Arizona and attend its annual meeting. She might find a way to resolve the problem at one of its workshops.

Acting on Sobel’s advice, Harder joined IDA and its New York State affiliation, and immersed herself in a world of information on outdoor lighting. The non-profit IDA was founded in 1988 to educate the world on the increasing loss to view of a natural treasure, the night sky. We all have contributed to the problem, many of us using high wattage light bulbs in the mistaken belief that lower wattage won’t be as effective in deterring crime. As bad as it is, Harder learned that it is not too late to reverse the pollution. Neither does it have to cost you a lot in the doing. You just need to know the common components of bad lighting before you buy your next light bulb or lamp fixture.

Light pollution is unshielded artificial light sent upwards to the sky. Any time you see a luminous orange halo on the horizon as you near a community, that is light pollution. Sky glow comes from upward shining light reflecting off moisture and dust particles.

Glare. Compromising safety, light glare does not come only from approaching headlights. You see it on highways where car dealerships and shopping mall parking lots are bathed in high wattage. Glare also is found in residential neighborhoods, perhaps even flanking your own front door.

Light Trespass. Light trespass, no less irksome than noise pollution, is light from one property crossing to another. Are you a contributor?

Energy Waste. LIPA’s 16,000 floodlights wasted energy for years. We waste it too when we use a 100-watt light bulb where a 40-watt light bulb would be just as efficient in the right lamp fixture. Don’t forget: the more light that we waste, the more money we waste in taxes for public lighting and in higher prices at the cash register.

Full Cut Off. FCO comes in lamp fixtures that provide shielded light, preventing any light above the horizontal plane. In other words, the next time you shop for outdoor lighting ask to see one that has a flat glass lens housed in a fixture that will not allow the light to escape upward. Lamp manufacturers have been listening and are making changes.

Change. Change is being willing and able to alter some well-worn habits and not spend a lot of money in the doing.

The best way to start making change is to give yourself two tests and answer some questions.

Test #1. On a clear night, step outside when darkness falls and look up at the stars. How much of the night sky do you see?

Look around you. How much light – if any – spills out from inside your house and, how bright is the outdoor lighting that covers your property? Does your light trespass on your neighbor's property? Are you blinded by your own front door lights or those of your neighbor's? Are your neighbor's lights an imposition on you, the neighborhood? Is any house on your street lit up like a prison yard in the name of safety?

Test #2. Go back inside and turn off all your lights, come outdoors again and look up at the sky. Do you see a difference?

Some Lighting Myths:

The more light the better is the same as saying the more salt on your food the better for you. If you are going to be away for a while, put your indoor lights on a timer(s) and have them shut off after midnight..

Light pollution only is a bother to astronomers. It affects us all. Has it ever occurred to you that not everyone around the globe has seen the Milky Way? The IDA estimates that the Milky Way is only visible to one-third of the global population. Last summer, a Manhattan resident's joy over being able to see the stars from Central Park during the major blackout along the East coast led him to share his rare experience in an Op-ed piece for the New York Times.

While sky glow will not be erased from the horizon in the immediate future, you can make a difference in your neighborhood. Some people may not believe what you say, at first, but, once you are out of sight, they may not be able to resist your polite suggestion that they take tests #1 and #2.

Without missing a beat, you can make a difference this summer.

Nancy Hyden Woodward was a contributing editor at Town & Country magazine and has authored six non-fiction books including East Hampton - a Town and its People.

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