

A Child's Letter to Alpha Centauri

By Marilyn Reeves

Dear Alpha:

I'm sending this letter to you by e-mail, because the only way it might reach you is through cyberspace. I first tried sending it by US Mail like this: Alpha Centauri, Outer Space, The Universe ... but it was returned to me for "Insufficient Postage."

I'm just beginning to learn a little bit about astronomy and, according to the text book, you're out there somewhere and I should be able to see you with the naked eye, even though you're, like, 4.37 light years away from the sun! I really don't know how far a light year is, but I guess it's really, really far. Anyway, I probably could see you if it wasn't so hazy down here on Earth nowadays. Maybe if I could climb to the top of Mt. Everest which is the highest point on Earth, or if I had a telescope. But I can't and I don't so I'll have to take their word for it. And I know you can't see me, no matter how hard you try.

The book says you're a "binary" star, or a two-parter. One part being 10% bigger than the sun and the other about 10% smaller. So that would make the two of you together about twice the size of the sun, right?

If I could see you, you'd just appear like a tiny "diamond in the sky" ... like the song says. But I know what you really are is like this giant blast furnace that would burn somebody to a crisp if they got within a million miles of you!

The scientists say they're not looking at you the way you are today, but the way you were like a million billion years ago. But if you're looking back at us, wouldn't we also be the same number of years ago to you ... which would put us in the same time frame, right?

I just don't understand all this stuff about time. The other night I was watching something on PBS (my dad always watches PBS, so it's the only thing I get to watch when he's home). It was about the discovery of the earliest man in the Western Hemisphere. The scientists weren't able to measure *him* but they measured the dirt around his body, which they said was something like 30 thousand years old, and the bones had to be the same age. So my question is (and my dad couldn't answer it, he just told me to be quiet – the scientists know what they're doing): if I crawled into that same cave and died, and somebody found my bones a hundred years from now, wouldn't that make *me* 30 thousand years old, too (plus a hundred, of course)?

Well, the whole thing just gave me a headache and I went to bed. Then I got the idea of writing to you, because you're so old – even older than the guy in the cave – and I thought maybe you would know.

So, if you get this message, please respond. In the meantime, I hope to see you some day. Or some night. If I ever get to the top of Mt. Everest, that is.

Your BFF,
Jodie