

Brief Autobiography, Frank Winkler

I was born in Nashville in 1942, and soon after my father volunteered for the Navy and served in the Pacific during WW2. We spent my early years in Tennessee until 1954, when my family moved to Chillicothe, Ohio, where I went to junior high and high school. It is there that I call home, or did until I'd lived in Vermont longer than anywhere else.

I then went to college at Caltech. Unlike today, when high school seniors zip around the country visiting colleges, I had never ventured west of the Mississippi before my parents put me on a plane bound for LAX. Arriving in LA from a small town in rural southern Ohio was something of a culture shock. But I soon grew to love the excitement, and to feel comfortable driving the many freeways. After my junior year, I won a travel prize that took me to Japan for the summer and ignited a love for travel that has endured since.

I majored in physics, and upon graduation, I opted to continue to grad school, partly because it was the “done thing” among my Caltech peers, and partly because of the unattractive alternative, as the conflict in Vietnam was ramping up. By that point, I had had enough of the frenetic life in LA, so I chose to return east for grad school at Harvard. There I continued to study physics, under the mentorship of Norman Ramsey, who would eventually win the Nobel Prize in physics (no thanks to any of the work I did with him).

Through a series of coincidences, I learned of and was soon hired for a position as physics instructor at Middlebury College. I thought this would be an interesting “experiment” for two or three years, that I could learn to ski, and then go on to get a “real job” somewhere. Never did I suspect that the experiment would take 44 years to play out! But I came to really enjoy teaching classes and mentoring individual students.

One of my earliest students had been intrigued by the old college observatory, a small derelict structure near what is today the east entrance to Bicentennial Hall. It had not been used for well over a decade—at least not for academic purposes. It was filled with a nice bed of hay and had probably been a favorite trysting spot in

those days before coed dorms! She persuaded me to sponsor her in a project to rehabilitate the old observatory and the telescope therein. And once that was done, she badgered me into teaching an astronomy course, even though I had had almost no astronomy background.

My previous physics research had all been in an atomic physics laboratory, but I was eager to try something new. I quickly became taken with astronomy, and when my first sabbatical came round, I found an opportunity to work with an astrophysics group at MIT. I truly enjoyed this new research, and that became my career focus.

I've continued with research in astrophysics ever since, concentrating on supernovae and their remnants—all while teaching both astronomy and physics courses at Middlebury. I've been privileged to use most of the largest telescopes on the planet, as well as the *Hubble* Space Telescope and other orbiting observatories. I taught thousands of students, and was a research mentor to several dozen, many of whom have continued in their own careers in science.

On the personal front, my first marriage ended in divorce, but left me with two wonderful daughters. For some years I was a single dad, until Janet Beers, the single mom of two children close in age to mine, and I married. Janet and I had known one another for six years and saw one another most Sundays at the Congregational Church, but with zero romantic interest until love suddenly blossomed on New Year's Eve of 1983. We were married six months later, combining our families with four children, a dog, a cat, a horse, and several goldfish.

We were fortunate to have travelled far and wide. All six of us spent a sabbatical year in Cambridge, England in 1985-86. Janet and I later had two six-month stays in Chile, and two shorter stays in Australia. All four children are now launched into careers and middle-age, and we have five grandchildren, two of whom are now in college—one of them here at Middlebury. Sadly, Janet passed away in 2022 after 39 fulfilling years of marriage, and I moved into an assisted living facility here in Middlebury. Despite my physical decline, I'm still fortunate to be

reasonably facile mentally. I had a research paper published last year, recently submitted another, and am at work on a third.



At Kitt Peak National Observatory near Tucson, AZ, 2009.