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'Einstein Gap': It's all relative

BY DAVE BARRY

Recently, I received a phone call from my son, Rob. It was a phone call that every parent dreads.

That's right: My son told me that the universe does not exist. Or at least it does not in any way resemble my concept of it. According to Rob, I understand the universe about as well as a barnacle understands a nuclear aircraft carrier. I blame college. That's where Rob is getting these ideas, which have to do with Einstein's Theory of Relativity and something called ``quantum physics."

Rob and his roommate, Hal, stay up all night discussing Deep Questions and figuring out the universe, and when they have it nailed down -- The Rob and Hal Theory of Everything -- Rob calls me up, all excited, and starts talking about time travel, the Fifth Dimension, the Big Bang, etc. I try to follow him, but I am hampered by a brain that for decades has firmly believed that the Fifth Dimension is the musical group that sang "Up, Up and Away." So I quickly become confused and testy, and Rob gets frustrated and says, "Don't you understand? THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS TIME!" And I'll say, ``YES THERE IS, AND RIGHT NOW IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING!"

(At one point -- I swear this is true -- we got into a bitter argument about whether people in Minneapolis age at the same rate as people in Miami.)

When I was in college, during the "60s, there was no such thing as ``quantum physics." Or, if there was, nobody told ME about it. Back then, when we stayed up all night, we were not trying to figure out the universe: We were trying to figure out how to operate the phone, so we could order pizza. (Note to young people: Phones were MUCH more complicated in the `60s.)

I was an English major, and when we English majors thought about physics, we were trying to solve problems like: 'You are required to turn in a 15-page paper on `The Brothers Karamazov.' You have written a grand total of 311 words on this topic. How big do you have to make your margins to make these words stretch over 15 pages? Do you think the professor will notice that your 'paper' is a little anorexic worm of type running between margins wide enough to land an airplane on? Do you think that anybody in history has ever actually read all the way to the end of 'The Brothers Karamazov'? Why?"

This is not to say that I know nothing about physics. I studied physics for an ENTIRE YEAR in Pleasantville High School under the legendary Mr. Heideman. We learned that there are five simple machines: the lever, the pulley, the doorbell, the hammer and the toaster. We learned that the most powerful force in the universe is static electricity, which Mr. Heideman demonstrated by getting a volunteer to place his or her hand on a generator, which caused the volunteer's hair to stand on end, unless the volunteer was a girl with the popular early-"60s ``beehive" hairstyle held rigidly in place by the other most powerful force in the universe, hairspray. Presumably, if Mr. Heideman had cranked the power up enough, the static electricity buildup would have caused the volunteer's head to explode, and we would finally have found out if -- as widely rumored -- many "beehive" hairstyles contained nests of baby spiders.

Thanks to my high-school training, I believed I had a solid grasp of physics. So when Rob was growing up, I was able to answer his questions about the universe, such as "What is a star?" (Answer: a big ball of static electricity that has caught on fire because of friction with comets) or "What is gravity?" (Answer: a powerful type of static electricity that sucks you toward the ground, especially after you eat Italian food.)

These answers satisfied my son until he started reaching that snotty, know-it-all age when kids start losing all respect for authority (18 months). And now he's calling me from college and telling me that the universe is NOTHING like my concept of it. The stuff he talks about is pretty complex, but I will try to summarize the main points, as I understand them:

--Point One: Whatever you think about anything is wrong.

--Point Two: There is no such thing as Point One. You THINK there is a Point One, but that just shows what a physics moron you are.

--Point Three: If there are two identical twins, and one of them gets on a spacecraft going at nearly the speed of light, then one of them will grow old much faster than the other one, and that one will retire to Miami.

--Point Three: There is an infinite number of possible Point Threes, and they all are all equally true, and you will never understand ANY of them.

OK? Is that clear to everybody? Good! To prove you really understand, I want you all to write me a 15-page paper on how the universe works and send it backward through time to me in 1964, c/o Mr. Heideman's class. OK, I got it. Thanks.