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Rejected as a Planet, Pluto Has a Space in People's Hearts

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Outside the Smithsonian Castle, people have come to mourn the "death" of a planet.

The Pluto we knew "died" last week at the hands of a bunch of astronomers in Prague who demoted it to a "dwarf planet."

So people have gathered here to mourn the thing called life.

And as with any memorial service, you stop to review the life of the dearly departed. Pluto, which is solid and small and mostly made of ice, the only planet past or present that had never been visited by human-made spacecraft, always held a certain mystery when it was a planet. And now that it is not, the world has shifted. Reality has tipped.

The definition of what was is not.

Didn't those scientists in Prague know what kind of can they were opening, that you can't just play with people's minds that way? That people want things in order? Like the planets in a certain line, even if in reality they never are lined up. Change is hard. Didn't they know that the People would protest? That fierce winds would blow, as fierce as the gales on Neptune? That controversy would erupt in swirling storms as big as Earth itself? That questions of universe would spin sideways, tipping over like Uranus?

Didn't they know that when they change things, T-shirts would be printed? That someone would profit from the loss? And so it has come to pass. T-shirts for sale: "Pluto: One day you're in and the next, you're out." "Stop Planetary Discrimination." "Pluto was

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Condolence notes, including one signed by the other planets, adorn the Smithsonian Castle's Pluto marker. (By Michael Williamson -- The Washington Post)

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framed." "Size does matter -- Just ask Pluto." "Dear Earth: You suck. Too. Love, Pluto." "Back in my day, Pluto was a planet."

And just as with any death of a "superstar," memorials sprout spontaneously, seemingly overnight.

Beneath the display marker for Pluto along the sidewalk outside the Smithsonian Castle, a sign is taped, "We'll Miss You." The note is signed by all the other planets.

Another note reads: "Pluto will always be a planet in my heart. XOX."

Jeff Goldstein, director of the National Center for Earth and Space Science Education, which is part of the Universities Space Research Association, stands beside the Pluto marker. It's part of an exhibit he oversaw before it opened in 2001. The "Voyage" exhibition on the National Mall is a scale model of the solar system. The real solar system is 10 billion times larger.

"There is a lot of feedback from the public on the decision," Goldstein says. "Last week, the International Astronomical Union voted on what a planet is. And Pluto no longer has planet status. My 4-year-old, when I told him that, he started crying."

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Goldstein says there is still hope for Pluto, "which as an object has not completed a single orbit of the sun since the Declaration of Independence was signed." There is another meeting in a few months. Until then, "there is a big backlash from the public. They are saying, 'Who is this international unit to take away Pluto's status?' It bothers some people. It's like Pluto is no longer part of the family."

Why was Pluto so loved? Because even the dimmest student can name Pluto. "If you ask a 10-year-old how old they would be by the time they got to Pluto and back, they would say 27," Goldstein says. "They would forget to add the 17 years it would take to come back."

"And the human race is heading there as we speak," Goldstein says. He's talking about the unmanned spacecraft, New Horizons, launched in January.

But at this moment, on the sidewalk, people are walking toward Pluto. Some stop and read and stare.

Here come the Stanleys. Tessa, 11, Treven, 9, Norm, 40, Kelli, 35. And Goldstein asks them if they know that Pluto is no longer a planet.

They had heard the news. They are a bit sad. The boy says he is sad because it is his favorite planet in the world. The girl says, "I don't know. I liked it." Then she names all the planets, rattles them off by rote. Then stops. "And no longer Pluto."

And Norm, who is a Scorpio, read on the Internet that Pluto was the main planet for Scorpions and now they are out of the loop. But he tells Kelli that she should not worry because Scorpions always survive.



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Onto the marker pole, someone has taped a pink condolence card. "I know things are not easy for you right now," the card says. "You may be wondering how you're going to deal with everything that's facing you. But I know you -- you have a strong spirit, and even though it might be hard for you to believe, I know you have what it takes to get through this time. And if you ever need to talk or if you'd like the support of a friend, I'll always be here with open arms, listening. . . . And most important, I'm here to remind you as often as you need, that things are going to be okay."

The card is signed by someone from New Mexico.

And you wonder looking at that card how sincere they must have been to have gone out to buy a card for Pluto. And the sincerity of the words, even more mysterious. You wonder if Pluto actually did show up one day or call for a hug, what would its fans do?

And behind you on this sidewalk, there is carnival music playing in the background as a carousel spins. But no children are riding.

Underneath Pluto is a cardboard box that begs: "Rest in Peace Pluto."

And someone has left a pink silk tulip in a glass vase.

For more on the scale model of the solar system, go to <http://www.voyagesolarsystem.org>.

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