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Posted at 08:23 AM ET, 11/07/2011

## Hidden dimensions (in my flowerbed)

By [Joel Achenbach](#)

I'm writing a story on the physics of the unseen and the unfathomable — hidden dimensions, superluminal deelyboppers, warped space, the Planck Length, and all that jazz. I start from scratch, knowing very little about the subject other than that the word Large in Large Hadron Collider modifies Collider and not Hadron.

So maybe I know [a bit more than that](#). But I always have to reacquaint myself with the basic concepts when I gin up one of these physics stories. It's not like riding a bike. (Which is, come to think of it, a good idea for a physics story — why doesn't the bike want to fall over sideways?) (Well, for me it's the training wheels, but I mean more generally.)

Right now I'm dipping into Lisa Randall's new book, "Knocking on Heaven's Door" (purchased this weekend at Four Seasons Books in Shepherdstown, W.Va. — please support your local independent bookstores, folks!). From the get-go it's clear that Randall is routinely besieged by people who think that, because she studies hidden dimensions, she can help them find their car keys. Or make contact with the creatures who are the source of the voices in their heads. Randall hammers home the fact that physics does not jettison its truths lightly, and that no one should expect that the advances in particle physics



(such as at the LHC) are going to make the paranormal the new normal.

In fact, notwithstanding Einstein's later revelations, Newton wasn't "wrong" when he laid out his laws of physics in the 17th century. Newtonian physics works at certain scales and speeds, just as Einstein's equations work at other scales and speeds. Perhaps in the popular press we too often make it sound like physicists are retracting their earlier conclusions when they are merely revising and expanding them.

There are many unknowns in physics, and in science in general, but collectively we're not starting from scratch. We can understand not only the forces that apply to our scale of existence, but also many of the forces that apply at the subatomic scale and at the cosmic scale (though what exactly dark energy is remains to be seen). Technology enables us to see things that no one could have seen in the pre-scientific age. Some people find science to be a downer; I find it amazing and exhilarating. So let's say that by random processes matter becomes animate and evolves into complex life that eventually can deduce its own place in a vast universe — I think that's pretty cool.

The other big agenda item this week is bulb-planting. It's very much an activity involving hidden dimensions — the depth dimension of the soil (what's down there? how do I avoid hacking up the old bulbs?) and the temporal dimension of creating a flower you won't see until next April. Which requires a certain faith. I assume April will come around. The asteroid will miss us this time. There is a future, and I'll be in it, and there will be flowers.

By [Joel Achenbach](#) | 08:23 AM ET, 11/07/2011

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