

Vastness of Existence Demands Our Humility

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Very few humans have had the awesome experience of viewing our planet earth from outer space. For those space travelers and interested astronomers, the further one views the earth from distant spaces the smaller it appears. Its predominant ocean surface is seen by space cameras such as those on Voyager 1 which make our planet appear as a tiny pale blue dot.

In comparison to other objects in outer space, earth when seen from a distance of six billion kilometers, appears only as a very tiny speck within our part of a vast universe. Perhaps there can be other life-sustaining planets in such an immense universe but they have not as yet been discovered. And if they can be found they will be billions of kilometers away from our planet earth. If other life-sustaining planets are found in the future, the distances and traveling time will likely make it impossible for humans to ever visit them, and the thought of migrating to live on other life-sustaining planets presently seems out of the question.

Humans need to reflect on the conditions we require to live happily here on our planet earth. At least in our generation we can set aside the possibility of surviving in far-away spaces within an unimaginably large universe.

So what can we humans do to preserve our planet earth? Presently it is our only self-sustaining abode. Earth is now home to over 7 billion people. We must learn to share and protect our resources. We must come together to understand the political, racial, and religious divisions that too often separate us. Some of our people are wealthy, well-educated, and healthy. Many are not. Some are well-fed while others are badly undernourished even to the point of starvation. Some of our human population cares about those who are living in poverty and are interested in the plight of the poor, while many remain unconcerned.

Though some people care about our environmental welfare here on earth, many do not. Many governments care about the welfare of all their citizens but other governments do not think about the underprivileged among us.

Perhaps if we could think of the planet earth as that tiny little blue dot that seems so insignificant within an unimaginably immense universe, we could learn that our ability to get along with each other is crucial. We will not be saved by our imagined self-importance nor by our war-like tendencies. We will not have another earth to live on if we cannot learn to survive on this planet.

So what can be done to protect us from selfishness and greed and the horrible effects of war now that we have atomic weapons capable of destruction of whole societies? Perhaps a good start would be to learn that the colour of the other person's skin is not a reliable way to judge the value of other humans. Nor can the worth of other humans be correctly assessed by the language they learned at birth nor by formal education nor by the wealth they may have accumulated.

Religion can be both integrating and at times divisive. If we believe in freedom of religion, and most people say they do, we are under an obligation to try our best to understand the ideas of those who choose different religions than we choose for ourselves. With patience, we may find that different religions share many of the same values as those of our own religion or perhaps we may even learn that we share many values with those who hold secular views.

Many astronomers, like the late Carl Sagan, believed the study of astronomy can bring one to a place of humility. The vastness of space and of things yet unknown may help us understand that many earthly differences among humans are trivial in the light of the gargantuan size of our universe. When compared to the minutia of our tiny planet, we must learn to get along with our fellow humans. These are lessons of objectivity and humility astronomers have experienced in their curiosity and their explorations. For both astronomers and others, we must learn that our earth is not the centre of the universe, although it is inescapably the centre of our daily lives.