

## Astrobiology News January 2021: Astrobiology for the Physically and Spiritually Incarcerated

"In the space sciences, we talk a lot about doing what we do for the good of all humankind—but who do we really mean when we say that? When NASA says humankind, we mean *everyone*. When we go to other worlds and look for alien life, we're involving every community, so we can all make that journey together." Chief Scientist Jim Green expressed these views while referring to NASA's unique program to bring astrobiology to the incarcerated, a program that has demonstrated a significantly positive impact in raising scientific interest and literacy, especially among incarcerated minorities and women.<sup>1</sup> Intellectual humility is at the heart of this program, which creates spaces that honor all perspectives on the fundamental questions of our universe.

Why is astrobiology particularly powerful in connecting people of diverse backgrounds, and levels of education, to science? In the words of Daniella Scalice, the lead for education in NASA's Astrobiology Program through Wyle Laboratories, ""The story of our cosmic origins illustrates our fundamental interconnectivity and relationality, and highlights that we're all capable of transformation and change. Through *Astrobiology for the Incarcerated*, we can share these messages embedded in the science: that adaptability and resilience, in even the harshest environments ... [are] fundamental to the nature of life itself."<sup>2</sup>

These words of wisdom resonate particularly well during these isolated and uncertain times -- we're all incarcerated to various degrees, and we most certainly need messages of inclusion opposing the heartbreaking voices of division! I've expressed some of my own thoughts on how astrobiology compels us to re-examine critically our connection, and responsibility, to all life on Earth in *Astrobiology, astroethics, and astrotheology in conversation*, the chapter I wrote for the new book in the *Routledge Science and Religion Series, Intersections of Religion and Astronomy*.<sup>3</sup> This book contains contributions from diverse scholars, who consider how our cultural ideas about "the heavens" shape religious ideas and are shaped by them in return.

I know how difficult it's been to maintain sanity and "normality" through the current state of affairs; however, the offer I made last month<sup>4</sup> stands. You may be tired of me writing about this, but participating in citizen science really is a great way for everyone to make a meaningful contribution to human knowledge -- in the words of Mary Voytek, senior scientist for NASA's Astrobiology Program, "knowledge is transformative." Please contact me if you'd like to brainstorm ways to incorporate citizen science via the online *Zooniverse*<sup>5</sup> platform into any of your programs, during Evolution Weekend or at any time!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/ast.2019.2209>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/ames/astrobiology-for-the-incarcerated>

<sup>3</sup>

<https://www.routledge.com/Intersections-of-Religion-and-Astronomy/Corbally-Dinell-Ricker/p/book/9780367369460>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theclergyletterproject.org/pdf/abnews122020.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.zooniverse.org/projects?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_campaign=projects-CLP](https://www.zooniverse.org/projects?utm_source=newsletter&utm_campaign=projects-CLP)

Until next month,

Grace

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