

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Ken Olson

Let's say you live at so-and-so house number on Seventh Avenue North, Lewistown, Montana, 59457 USA. But that's not the end of it. We need to add North America in the Western half of the Northern Hemisphere of Planet Earth, third body from the Sun, a main sequence G-type star in the Orion arm of the Milky Way Galaxy in the Local Group of galaxies, in turn part of the larger Virgo Super-Cluster of galaxies, in The Universe. Now, that's a lot to get on those return-address labels, but that's where we are. That's our address. That's home. (Once, in a lecture at for adults at The Museum of the Rockies on the campus of Montana State University, I included a similar description of "home." Later, I received letters that were addressed to me in that fashion. I always wondered what the person delivering the mail thought about them.)

Much of the information above is quite new. In the 1700s, early telescopes began to show various "nebulae" in the sky. These images were later resolved into immense spiral forms called galaxies, but it wasn't until the 1920s that Edwin Hubble, photographing through the world's largest telescope, showed them to be not part of the Milky Way but existing far beyond, i.e. they are separate "island" galaxies at mind-boggling distances. In the night sky, if you know right where to look in the constellation Andromeda, you can detect a faintly glowing patch that is M-31, a "neighboring" galaxy larger than our own, composed of some 300 billion stars. Light from it reaching us tonight will have traveled for 2.5 million years to get here. It is the farthest thing that anyone has ever seen with the naked eye. "How cool is that?"

Context is everything. In 1950 the British astronomer Fred Hoyle wrote, "Once a photograph of the Earth, taken from outside, is available --once the sheer isolation of the Earth becomes known-- a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose." Many of us remember gazing in awe at such a shot in 1972. The planet looked much like a tiny blue marble, miraculously floating against the black immensity of deep space, reminding us of our utter dependence upon it ...and of its fragility. (The recent moon mission took more such pictures.) For better or worse, this is Home, our one and only, and there truly is no other place like it.

And the view reminds us that, while "We pledge allegiance to the flag," people of other nations on that tiny sphere also have reasons to love their homelands, and our recognition of this does not diminish love for our own. The message of the earth photo was simply that there is only one race, the human race: before anything else, we are all citizens of one world and share a common humanity. Thus, "Can't we all just get along?" For we must. In

the Nuclear Age, those movies about an Apocalypse are not total nonsense: the choice is now between coexistence or no existence. In 1946, right after WWII, Winston Churchill journeyed to the US to express gratitude. One of his speeches was at Fulton, Missouri, where he said, "The Stone Age may return on the gleaming wings of science."

Decades ago, President Jack Kennedy said of Canada: "Geography has made us neighbors, history has made us friends, economics has made us partners and necessity has made us allies." Of course, such an attitude grows out of respect for and gratitude to other people and nations, something that should be elementary. But Trump boasts that we have power unlike any other country, seeing politics as a WWE wrestling match, threatening Canada with takeover and saying, "We'll get Greenland, one way or the other!"

In the early 20th century, Max Born was the great physicist who made the key discoveries into the nature of the atom. In his 1968 biography, *My Life and Views*, he writes, "The belief that there is only one truth and that oneself is in possession of it, seems to me, to be the deepest root of all that is evil in the world." Then he added, "But we must hope. There are two kinds of hope. If one hopes for good weather or winning a lottery, then hope has no influence whatsoever on what happens, and if it rains or if we draw a blank we have to resign ourselves to actuality. But in the coexistence of people, especially in politics, hope is a moving force. Only if we hope do we act in order to bring the fulfillment of the hope nearer. We must not tire of fighting the immorality and unreasonableness which today still governs the world."

Ken Olson lives in Lewistown, MT. He is the author of *Lens to the Natural World: Reflections on Dinosaurs, Galaxies, and God* (Foreword by Jack Horner).