

INDESCRIBABLE

ENCOUNTERING THE GLORY OF GOD
IN THE BEAUTY OF THE UNIVERSE

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360-degree Panorama of the Southern Sky

The Milky Way arches across this rare 360-degree panorama of the night sky above the Paranal platform, home of ESO's Very Large Telescope. The image was made from 37 individual frames with a total exposure time of about 30 minutes, taken in the early morning hours. The open telescope domes of the world's most advanced ground-based astronomical observatory are all visible in the image. To the right in the image and below the arc of the Milky Way, two of our galactic neighbours, the Small and Large Magellanic Clouds, can be seen.

Credit: ESO/H.H. Heyer



CH 4 // LOUIE GIGLIO

SIGNIFICANT INSIGNIFICANCE

*“BEHOLD A UNIVERSE
SO IMMENSE THAT I AM
LOST IN IT. I NO LONGER
KNOW WHERE I AM.
I AM JUST NOTHING AT ALL.
OUR WORLD IS TERRIFYING
IN ITS INSIGNIFICANCE.”*

BERNARD DE FONTENELLE

**WHILE SCIENTISTS AREN'T ENTIRELY SURE
JUST HOW BIG THE UNIVERSE IS, ONE THING IS
CLEAR: WE ARE REALLY SMALL WITHIN IT.**

In fact, in terms of scale, earth itself is inconsequential amid the expanse of space around us. The same could be said for our entire solar system, and the Milky Way Galaxy, both of which, when it comes to size, really don't matter at all in the grand scheme of things.

Our entire solar system is tiny in the midst of the vast Milky Way, which itself is only one of hundreds of thousands of other galaxies in the known universe. By way of example, scientists say the size of our solar system relative to the Milky Way would be roughly the size of a quarter in an area as big as all of North America. Imagine placing a quarter in your backyard, gaining enough altitude to view the entire North American continent at once, and then trying to find that quarter. *No way.* You wouldn't even be able to see your city or town.

Maybe, just maybe, we're not that big after all. But it's not for

lack of trying, is it? In the early days, people tried to build a tower that would reach the heavens. Talk about self-confidence. And, in every generation since, we have worked to elevate our names and build things as if we could really garner fame that lasts. Yet the scope of the night sky seems to always have its way with us, and if we look too long, we will soon feel that shrinking feeling that Hermann Hagedorn so perceptively describes in “Starry Night.”

We are such little men when the stars come out,
So small under the open maw of the night...
That we must shout and pound the table and drive
wild,
And gather dollars and madly dance and drink
deep...
When the stars come out we are such little men
That we must arm ourselves in glare and thunder
Or cave in on our own dry littleness.¹

That’s the way I felt the first time I saw the image that stunned the astronomical world. Mind you, at first glance, this picture looks like one of those “oops, my camera accidently went off in the bottom of my bag” photos.

It was February 14, 1990, and the Voyager 1 spacecraft screamed through the darkness of space, traveling forty thousand miles per hour away from the sun. Launched thirteen years earlier, in 1977, Voyager was now beyond Pluto, having successfully accomplished its mission of photographing each of our distant neighbor planets. Amazingly, though the spacecraft was flying past the edges of our



Earth

The different trajectory taken by the Apollo 17 astronauts allowed them to capture the southern polar ice cap for the first time in this image. The Arabian peninsula lies near the top of the globe from this angle, providing a full view of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Credit: NASA

SUDDENLY, FROM BEHIND THE RIM OF THE MOON, IN LONG, SLOW-MOTION MOMENTS OF IMMENSE MAJESTY, THERE EMERGES A SPARKLING BLUE AND WHITE JEWEL, A LIGHT, DELICATE SKY-BLUE SPHERE LACED WITH SLOWLY SWIRLING VEILS OF WHITE, RISING GRADUALLY LIKE A SMALL PEARL IN A THICK SEA OF BLACK MYSTERY. IT TAKES MORE THAN A MOMENT TO FULLY REALIZE THIS IS EARTH ... HOME.

EDGAR MITCHELL

APOLLO ASTRONAUT

solar system, scientists had Voyager take one last earth-facing image before continuing on its one-way journey away from the sun through space.

Spanning the canopy of black, Voyager snapped of a series of 60 images, storing them for future delivery to earth. Each of these sixty images consisted of 640,000 pixels (a pixel is one of the tiny series of dots that make up a photograph), yet because Voyager was now an estimated 3.7 billion miles from home, it took each individual pixel five and a half hours to make the journey back to earth. Not 5½ hours for each photo, mind you, but 5½ hours for each of the 640,000 tiny dots in each picture. Talk about waiting a long time for something to download!

But, finally, an image appeared. Dubbed “The Pale Blue Dot,” the composite photograph captured within one of the colored shafts a tiny dot, scarcely visible to the naked eye. Yep, you guessed it. That little speck is earth, photographed from almost four billion miles away.

Looking at the image, it’s easy to see why it rocked the scientific community and everyone else who saw it. Not because we hadn’t ever seen our planet before, but because we hadn’t dreamed of seeing ourselves from this far away.

At the time, we had grown accustomed to seeing images of earth from high above, mostly thanks to a multitude of groundbreaking photos from the Apollo missions. Those early glimpses of swirling clouds, greenish-brown lands, and deep blue seas caused us to stop and consider just how small we truly are. But with this image, we found ourselves looking back at earth from beyond the edge of our own solar system. And what do we see? No land or sea. No

continents or nations. No mountain peaks or towering cities. No evidence of life, or humanity, or any earthly thing. Certainly, we can't see you or me.

Reflecting on the image, Carl Sagan, the most famed astronomer of the day, noted:

That's here. That's home. That's us.

On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena... Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light.³



Spiral Galaxy NGC 628

Made up of about 100 billion stars, NGC 628 sits face-on to the Earth about 30 million light-years away. The galaxy has many similarities to our own, and is a striking example of symmetry and detail.

Credit: Gemini Observatory, GMOS Team



I couldn't agree more. The image confirms what the ancient Scripture says about us: that we are so much smaller than we think. We are tiny. Frail. Minute. We are vapors inhabiting a miniscule speck in a measureless sea of cosmic wonder. Looking up into the dark night sky, the same feeling must have washed over the psalmist as he wrote, "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" (Psalm 8:3–4)

This sentiment was echoed by Neil Armstrong when he said, "I remember on the trip home on Apollo 11 it suddenly struck me, that that tiny pea, pretty and blue, was the Earth. I put up my thumb and shut one eye and my thumb blotted out the planet Earth. But I didn't feel like a giant, I felt really, really small."

There is a certain sense of *lostness* that invades our hearts when we look up into the skies above or look back at ourselves from billions of miles in space. But are we merely nothing, an infinitesimal people living out our meaningless days on a tiny blue speck? There's no doubting that we're small (really, really small), but are we intrinsically insignificant?

Apparently Sagan thought so. He concludes this way:

Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.²

It's at this point that Sagan and I part ways.

As for the “hint” Sagan speaks of, I would invite you to look more closely at the little speck suspended in the beam of light. If you look closely enough at the pale blue dot, you’ll find, beside a busy roadway, just outside a small city, on a hot and searing afternoon thousands of years ago, a cross that stills looms ever so large in history and eternity. On this cross hung not just one of us, but God Himself in human flesh—the Originator of the vast universe who engulfs us by giving His life for us all. His name? Jesus—the name itself meaning He would save His people from their sins. For love Jesus chose to come to this “mote of dust” embodying God’s indelible proclamation: “I love you.” How amazing that on this tiny cosmic speck His incomprehensible death provided a covering for our fallen-ness, His resurrection life bridging the way back to the arms of our Maker.

Looking back across time at this little sphere that we call home, I cannot escape the feeling that comes over me. Yet, looking at the wonder of the cross of Christ, I can’t help but see God’s irrepressible stamp of *significance* on tiny, insignificant people like you and me.

LG

¹ Hermann Hagedorn, “Starry Night,” in *Combat at Midnight: A Book of Poems* (London: Blandford, 1946), 42.

² Carl Sagan, *The Pale Blue Dot* (New York: Random House, 1994), 6–7.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.