

The Fourth Planet

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We sometimes wonder whether there is intelligent life in other parts of the universe. We even have a long-term project looking for it – SETI, the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. It has been looking since 1961, but without success. Perhaps it is looking for the wrong things in the wrong ways. This begs the question: would we recognise other kinds of intelligence if we encountered it, particularly if it is much higher than ours? Given the state of the world today, perhaps a more useful question would be: is there intelligent life on our own planet? Here is that question seen through very different eyes.

The mission

This was the fourth planet she had visited on this mission, which had taken her far from her home planet on the other side of the Galaxy. A very long journey, nearly three days. Her task, as always, was to find out whether there was any intelligent life worth contacting or reporting to the Council. She had already found highly intelligent, entertaining people on the first planet she had surveyed, and had established good contact with them. Before she approached this shimmering blue and white world, she positioned her craft so that the planet and its one moon appeared to be the same size. That was fun.

As she neared normal detection range, she took the usual precaution of switching to silent/invisible mode. Then she came closer, and she watched and she listened.

For her, “listening” was very different from what we understand as listening. To call it “telepathy” would be to understate it by a mile. She was able to tune in, at will, to any kind of signal, including signals that we call “thoughts” and “feelings”. She could tune into individuals or to groups of any size, including entire populations. Because this was a very advanced form of telepathy, she received information “hologrammatically”. In other words, huge quantities of information came to her all at once. She then had to “unzip” it, so as to make sense of it, but she had centuries of practice.

The first signs were encouraging. Gravity, radiation, the speed of spin, mean temperatures, and the mix of chemicals were uncannily similar to those of her home planet. And, seen from her close vantage point of 100,000 kilometres, this was a very beautiful place. Experience told her that beauty and intelligence are often to be found together, so she felt quite hopeful.

As she came closer, she began to feel a little uncomfortable. She could not quite find the words for it, but it felt like sadness. This was not necessarily a bad thing. She had surveyed planets where residual sadness still lingered as their inhabitants moved towards better times. But, in this case, the feeling intensified the closer she came. She decided it was time to look for signs of the Standard Indicators of Intelligence, a set of indicators widely used in this part of the Galaxy. The Indicators fell into two broad categories: Planet Enhancement and Species Enhancement. These were ways of ascertaining the extent to which the dominant species of the planet under survey enhanced or diminished themselves and their planet. Were they creators or were they destroyers? Was this a planet that was being improved ecologically? Were there any species that were consciously practising the virtues of peace, community, truth, courage, love and creativity?

She knew from long experience that there were some quick, reliable ways of spotting high intelligence. She knew that there was intelligence worth contacting

or reporting if most or all of the following questions could be answered in the affirmative:

Is there a general aura of peace, contentment and love on the planet?

Are there many signs of natural and created beauty?

Does the use of language reflect peace and wisdom?

Does the species under review live ecologically?

Are dishonesty and violence conspicuous by their absence?

Does the species have a lot of fun?

Does it give high value to spiritual development?

She was now close enough to the planet to be able to answer these questions. What she found surprised and confused her at the same time. Among a few of what appeared to be dominant species, the answers were mostly in the affirmative. But among a significant number, they were mostly in the negative. She had never come across this situation before, where two so obviously different forms of life appeared to be co-existing as if they were the same species. Enlightened wisdom on a modest scale co-existed with ignorance and stupidity on an too large a scale. She noted, with some amusement, that both forms of life, the wise and the stupid, called themselves by the same name – “human beings”. And she was not at all surprised that large numbers of them were singularly unaware of what was going on around them because they gave much more attention to their phones and computers than to other people and the world.

She saw that there were two powerful, opposing tendencies at work within the dominant species – the tendency to “wise up” to the highest potential of the species and the tendency to “dumb down” to the lowest common denominator. It was by no means easy to tell which tendency would prevail. On the one hand, there were encouraging signs that many were waking up to the damage and destruction their own behaviour was causing, to themselves and to the planet. On the other hand, there were signs that the deeper causes of this behaviour were as entrenched as ever, and that greed and the desire for instant gratification would not be given up easily. She could see that fear, insecurity and uncertainty were widespread and that these seemed to be rooted in something even deeper. That deeper thing felt very like forgetfulness, as if this species had forgotten who it really was. That made her wonder who this species really was. She was intrigued.

A little more observation revealed that a very large number, in fact billions of them, really believed that life began by chance, that they ceased to exist at the death of the physical body, and that the universe had no intrinsic meaning. This even included many of those who considered themselves to be intellectual leaders (typically they called themselves “scientists” or “economists”). This species has so much to learn, she thought to herself. It has so far to go in its future evolution.

It was the little things that really caught her attention. She was concerned, for example, that their words were often used to mean the opposite of what they originally meant – “defence” and “progress” and “success” were typical examples – and that the words “sound” and “noise” were used interchangeably, as if the difference between them did not matter. She was particularly concerned that nearly anything could count as “art”, even things completely lacking in quality or meaning.

She also noted, with dismay, that these “human beings” were the sole cause of all the problems on this planet. Without exception, all the many other species behaved ecologically and intelligently. This was something she had never

encountered before anywhere in the Galaxy – a single species on the planet being the cause of all the planet’s problems. What most concerned her was the sheer scale of the damage caused by these “human beings”. In the past 100 years alone, they had killed or injured over 300 million of their own kind and had taken the life-support systems of the planet close to breaking point. Clean air, clean water, forests, topsoil, aquifers, fisheries, wetlands, biodiversity were all in serious decline, but the species appeared to be blind to this and continued to behave in ways that seriously threatened all of these systems. In all her experience of surveying across this Quadrant of the Galaxy, she had never encountered such violence and destruction. She was on the point of deciding to submit a very brief report to the Galactic Council, which would simply say: “Dangerous, incredibly stupid – a possible threat.” And yet...

...and yet there was something holding her back. Thinking again about the minority who were “wising up” gave her a sense of the potential of this species to be “fully human”. She already had a picture in her mind of what they would be like if they made a conscious, collective decision to become “fully human”. If they ever decided to do this, she was sure that several big changes would happen:

They would become much more intelligent, and their behaviour would reflect this. Rather than cause unhappiness and damage to themselves and this planet, being more intelligent would mean that they would act wisely, in a spirit of love and enlightenment.

They would become better “knowers”. This would change their knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world out of all recognition. They would realise, for example, that intelligent life is to be found throughout the universe. And they would probably know that she was observing them!

They would evolve spiritually. This would mean that they would begin to use aspects of themselves that, at present, seemed to have atrophied with lack of use. That, in turn, would give them direct experience of the non-physical aspects of themselves and the universe. And that would completely revolutionise their understanding of themselves and the universe – i.e. their science.

They would be ecological – all their actions would support life and this planet, rather than diminish them, as at present. They would cease to be a problem-creating species and become a life-enhancing species.

It would be wonderful, she thought, if all this did happen. However, it was very clear to her that “human beings” still had a very long way to go in their evolution, although it was equally clear that they did not realise this. Meanwhile, their values, their behaviour and their view of themselves were distorted in several critical respects:

1. They believed themselves to be more intelligent than they were. Some of them actually believed that they were the most intelligent species on this planet, despite all the evidence to the contrary. This arrogance was the source of much trouble.
2. They seemed to value technological capacity higher than basic human capacity – so much so, that many of them were at risk of becoming “techno-humans”, apparently unable to function without material technology. This was a dangerous trend, because it presaged the loss of some important natural human capacities, such as common sense and basic survival skills.
3. They knew far less than they thought they did. In fact, some of them believed that they knew nearly all the important things there are to know, when the daily behaviour of the species suggested the opposite. Compared to the many

intelligent species she had met on other planets, their knowledge of themselves and the world was rudimentary. They did not even know that intelligent life was widespread in the Galaxy.

Why, she asked herself, were relatively few of this species moving consciously towards their highest potential and so many not? Was it, perhaps, because the species as a whole had simply no idea what its highest potential was? She felt that this was the most likely reason. And, if this were the case, what were the factors that kept it from knowing or acknowledging this? She sensed that there were important clues in its main knowledge systems, which could loosely be called “science” and “religion”. She could not help but notice that, although these systems gave access to some knowledge and understanding, they effectively blocked most of the knowledge and understanding potentially available to the species. This was because each system was a relatively limited “lens” through which the species viewed the world. If humanity only knew it, it had potential access to many other “lenses”. But, of course, getting access to these would mean taking a conscious decision to develop aspects of themselves that they currently ignored. As she thought this thought, she realised that the number of “lenses” (i.e. different forms of perception and consciousness) used by any species was yet another possible indicator of intelligence. She would mention this to the Council.

So she wondered if this species would ever get their act together, by deciding to shape their future evolution in a structured, purposeful way. Or would they carry on as at present, drifting aimlessly and downwards into the future?

All in all, she was not in the least surprised that the great majority of “human beings” did not know who they were, or where they were going, or how to get there. A few of them knew, but perhaps too few to make a difference. She therefore wrote a report that ended with the following: “*Very confused – needs help.*” And she found herself adding a postscript: “*There are some high order*

intelligences possibly worth contacting in the future. Most of them live in the oceans.”

Before she switched to main intragalactic drive, she could not resist doing a quick figure-of-eight around the planet and its moon.

Afterword

Is this a true and fair view of us? Are we the most dangerous and destructive species on the planet? Have we forgotten who we really are? Are a few of us wising up and many of us dumbing down? Most importantly, do we justify the surveyor’s hesitation – have we the potential, as she seems to suggest, to be the most intelligent species on this planet? If so, then what are we going to do about it?

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