

DIY: Choice Lots & Home Improvements

Written by Alex Baer

Saturday, 28 January 2012 00:01

Some days are cloggy-headed dreams, like your ears and your head are all filled up with warm milk or room-temperature library paste, those white, traditional kindergartner's snacks, that kind that stuck to too many ribs, back in the day.

Today has been one of those gurgle-headed days here, looking up now and then from reading about NASA's latest discovery, about 26 new planets in 11 systems -- bringing the Kepler mission's tally to date, so far, to 61 planets and 2,326 planetary candidates out there.

It's not a bland or blind fascination of numbers for their own sakes -- there is no attempt to take bean-counting into space as non-essential adjuncts and enablers to greed. Heavens forbid. When we escape this gravity to go elsewhere, let us not be so lame-brained as to lug along counting, for greed's sake.

This fascination is less quantifiable. Only rarely do numbers whisper to me of their intrinsic beauty -- even when they do, it is for only for very short periods, just for tiny periods of time.

Albert Einstein, as we all know, would court conversations with numbers, in full belly-laugh, for their very own sakes. He could go for weeks at a time, tickling numbers, and with the numbers tickling right back.

For my putty-stuffed mind, it is what these numbers signify, it's the heady out-gassing of eternity, scent markers of the infinite -- the biggest space we are ever likely to think we can know.

Ignorance and naivete, it should be said, can also be viewed as positive items in the inventory and repertoire of any species. The notion is related to any answer we might posit to the question, "So, what are we -- grabbers of weapons, or reachers of tools?"

That opposable thumb of ours: Here's hoping it hangs in there long enough to be really useful and not just for hitchhiking, off the planet, trying to get somewhere else that still has air.

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So, yes: These discoveries are mightily distracting. They pull me from my lower Earth orbits doing chores, trying to earn currency, trying to keep a ceiling between me and the stars -- a handy thing as inventions go, at least, when it snows and is cold, and for times when it rains.

There's no escaping it, although it might be wished for daily, by one and all: The 4-F Club convenes every day on our planet, down here, at the surface, where the old rivers always meet our new roads.

The club meets for Food, Fuel, Finances, and Fun. The first three have nothing on the last one; the last one is what really keeps us going, getting up each day, able to tolerate doing what needs doing in our securing of the first three, here in our Clubhouse, Earth.

Every day, we peel back the darkness and sleep, just like the sun, like clockwork, and we plant ourselves on Earth, try to stretch and grow toward the light -- usually, with the daily miracle, coffee. Maybe, something to eat.

Today, gravity's pull down here seems a little lighter somehow. It's a little less solemn outside today, inexplicably. There is no explaining how the weather people missed this -- it really should have been part of the news. They are supposed to pay attention to these things, to the stuff outside.

The opining-heads-shows this morning all missed it, too -- not that I expected any of the bubble-heads to catch this corker of a change-up pitch -- high and away, outside -- but the sports readers and business analysts should have been able to one-hand this one as it went steaming on through, sharp as they are on the recitations and regurgitation of numbers, on the joy of numbers.

Even though we couldn't cough up cab fare for a one-way to the Moon, it is heartening to have NASA be so steeped in celestial real estate news, to be so invested in pointing out possibilities, places where that charmer of a bungalow could go.

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Maybe it'll be part of the morning news some year, with its own segments, in true 4-D CubeLink, the technology best experienced via neck-jack.

To quote from their logo, in the future, "Just look for the silver and the gold!"

When the commercial was over, the program would start up for a while, then would stop again, like now, still using that creaky framework of money, like having to keep plunking quarters into the Magic Fingers brand mechanical bed-shimmiers, to make it go, to make it go some more.

"It has a breathable atmosphere and a stellar view," the morning host-bot would say, smoothly pointing to a range of images, hovering on stage, "each one available for your full immersion, in a sub-time-loop, as a trial, for only 69 credits, plus orientation fee."

It was an amazing, one-time offer, not likely to be repeated.

The host concluded, excitement obvious from the shiver and wobble while hovering, "It's in a diverse arm of the galaxy, where species work together logically and with laughter, "

"I'll take it!" I shouted, as if stuck with a pin, leaping straight up, shooting up into space, rocketing up from the sofa, spilling my coffee, startling the dogs, launching the remote who-knows-where.

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As I say, it's been a distracted day, one that has blurred and made fuzzy any routine, pedestrian affairs. It is a challenge, keeping both feet on the ground with such news in mind, so many

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planets, so many systems.

No doubt, the pressures of this atmosphere will keep up thinking we are the centers of it all, or as much as we can know. We will join Copernicus in that thought, even as we are pressured to maintain the illusion, as he was, that it all revolves around us.

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Even after replacing the coffee and sweeping up the broken shards of ex-mug, I still find myself drifting weightless in thought, then come back again, down to Earth again, mostly, finding all the adults speaking -- *what the?* -- as if in a Charlie Brown special, burbling away like muted wind instruments, us seeing only their legs. Good grief.

Then, I have more coffee. Slowly, an edge of realism appears, and people are talking plainly again. I am doodling on a phone pad, rings around Saturn, around and around.

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It pays to be practical. Everyone knows you start looking around for a new place to live before you really need it, per se, just on general purposes.

Also, there's nothing like noisy or crazed neighbors to spur on that sense of urgency, as if someone were strip-mining under your home, all the way down to the strip mall, stripping anything of value out of the place.

Meanwhile, others would be hooking up diesel exhaust right into your ventilation system, and busting out your windows, throwing garbage through your living room drapes, heaping toxic and radioactive sludge on the back balcony or deck, spewing mining chemicals down through the stove or bathroom vents, and up through the drains.

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You know, like we have now.

We'd do well to start looking.

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The Global Footprint Network is a real group of scientists who work away calculating how many "Earths" we will need to continue our consumption and expansion, at current rates, using what we have now, in technology.

We are using up resources far faster than they can be sustainably replenished. Right now, today, we are using up 1.5 Earths. We are eating our future faster than any new ones can be proposed or created.

I suspect this will not slow down as population grows,

We are pricing ourselves right out of our home, the big one, this orb we're all on, the one going 'round and 'round Mr. Sun at 30 kilometers or so every second, sizzling through space faster than you say, "Warp Factor Eight!"

We are pricing ourselves right out of the market.

Pretty soon, there may be no one home.

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Aliens may then arrive, of course, eternally relieved, waving their appendages at their air inlets, pantomiming the ordeal of containment, at having successfully kept secluded and corralled such a bobble-headed species as we humans, fenced it off and confined it only to its home ranges.

"Nice house," one of the aliens would say, from the ship, scanning Earth from space, all healed up again after shrugging off humans, after countless millennial passages of flooding and frying and re-sinkings, and ice ages, and what-not.

"Nobody home," another alien would say --then, after a microsecond's pause, something like laughter would go on for a while, with various damp and humid sounds, like used to happen, right around here, back in the day, way back when, when humans lived here.

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There are dreamy images here and there, if your telescopes don't go quite as far as you wish:

planetquest.jpl.nasa.gov

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Nice house, crazy dwellers.

Imagine poor NASA, propelled into space, way out there in their work, their minds exploring outward -- and constantly yanked back down to Earth, by tugs at their shirts.

One tug that must twinge, every time a new one is felt, is answering why it is, the world will not

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end in 2012.

They are very nice, the people at NASA, in their explanations to these questions.

Take a look yourself:

www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/2012.html

Behind the scenes, they must be experts in head injuries by now, just from helping each other, their friends and their colleagues, recover from all that banging of heads onto walls, the impulsive head-plants into concrete, the facepalms accidentally done while forgetting they're holding something big or hard.

They are nice to everyone, and never say back, to ending-calendar questions, "Have you never run out of room while making out a shopping list on a piece of paper?"

It becomes more obvious to me daily that I could never work there, no matter how much I really wanted to -- which has always been a lot. Metric tons.

It is possible I could wait the length of an entire career before anyone asked how the ancient Sumerians covered up mistakes they made while writing in their cuneiform tablets, to give that one a go.

"Mud, trowelled in, then marked on again, then left to dry," I could say, adding, "The ancient Sumerians used mud as their 'Wite-Out Correction Fluid.'"

Then, I could retire -- beaming a huge grin up and out into space.

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Everyone at NASA would probably prefer to be talking a lot more about Frank Drake's masterful equations pointing away at the logic and likelihood of intelligent company in the wider neighborhood.

They'd probably prefer talking about Carl Sagan's work, too -- he left behind lots for us to think about, after he died.

The media latched onto one of his statements, about there being billions of stars. The media made it a catch-phrase, a rubbery shuttlecock to slap at, if there was nothing else going on.

"Billions and billions," imitators and comics would say, and get knowing laughs, not knowing the number of stars in the Universe was many factors greater than all the grains of sand on all the beaches of this world.

It was a cliché of the times, latched onto and made fun of, by a media, and by people, often too thick in the skull, and too thin in the heart.

Welcome to Earth!

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Carl Sagan, writer and host of the 13-part series, "Cosmos," did what few shows did, when it was first broadcast by PBS, in the olden days of 1980: It opened the minds of everyday folks, for just a little while, to science, and mystery, and awe, and exploration.

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It did what teevee could always do, if it wanted to, if it gave a tinker's patootie about anything besides money or its secondary goal, making us forget.

It could share knowledge, or hope, or the endless fascination of this world and others.

In some places, it still does, or tries to do, in between commercial breaks and assorted words about buying and selling, after shaking you down for some cash.

Magic Fingers, another quarter to make it go.

We're a young species, still very much into keeping score, knowing who's ahead, in all our childish games, like money, scorekeeping like mad.

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Carl Sagan came up with the notion of a Baloney Detection Kit, to ward off bad logic -- a sort of talisman for good thinking, a garland of garlic to keep junk-think outside, away from the brain.

Here are just two of the simple, effect steps he suggested be taken to combat deception and lazy thinking:

* Whenever possible, there must be independent confirmation of the facts.

* Encourage substantive debate on the evidence by knowledgeable proponents of all points of view.

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There are more. You would seeing them all, if you looked them up:

carlsagan.com.

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Sometimes, there would be an expression people would use, in English, that started out by noting, "Needless to say..." and then, people would finish their thoughts, the ones that didn't need expression, but they would go ahead anyway.

It was like the cashier yelling for a price check for some article in a customer's basket, at the dollar store, where everything is a dollar. It was like an overhead announcement made in a flooded grocery store, requesting a wet cleanup on aisle four.

We are a peculiar species. Carl Sagan was one of us, although it is not known how.

He was not, needless to say, a Republican.

We do not know his thoughts about the current gaggle of Republican candidates, but we could try, for fun -- especially anytime someone said, brilliant in their jest, "Billions and billions."

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Carl Sagan chaired a committee assembled to select materials to be included in the Voyager spacecraft's interstellar message, the greeting card to any other species who were capable of intercepting and translating the message. His wife, author and lecturer Ann Druyan, was Creative Director of the NASA Voyager Interstellar Record Project.

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It was how the two met. It is a great love story, if you are partial to such things. Their work together on the Voyager message, on that greeting card, become a series of love notes, to humanity, to whoever gets the message in the bottle, mounted on the Voyager spacecraft.

Most philosophers would tell you that love is what sets we humans apart from all the other animals. It is a good thought, as long as you don't let tool-making, or weapon-making -- whatever term you prefer -- wander off to far on its own.

Two samples of the fascinating things included on that gold record, that howdy-and-handshake-and-hug shipped off into space?

Excerpts of the world's great music, and the brain waves of a young woman in love.

You can look that up, too.

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Could be the aliens have not showed up here, not officially so far, not yet, and not so much from their fear of contamination from us -- although goodness knows they have much to fear.

Perhaps they are still discussing what to bring when they come over -- Some wine or brandy? Bread and salt? Candy or an out-of-this-world, flaming, Zlantavik pie? Or a casserole, maybe? Some fruit in a limited-edition, souvenir, keepsake cixnar?

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We all battle away, in our own ways, at the pulling and competing choices of modern life, at all the ignorance and apathy.

We try to fight off our own natures, just as we do old punch lines to old jokes, just like the difference between ignorance and apathy, being, "I don't know, and I don't care" -- then, our being told, "You are absolutely correct!"

Surprised, we get, sometimes, having issued truth, unknowingly. We're a young species, easily startled.

Out of the mouths of babes.

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But, as we all know, just from looking around in politics, at all the foot-draggers, and no further: Denial is a powerful force. It might even be a leisure service of the status quo, generated like invisible poison, like CO2 fumes, like greenhouse gases, both by and from those who think things are just fine, just as they are, no changes needed -- nothing to see here, move along, and keep moving, keep moving.

Australian environmentalist-entrepreneur Paul Gilding says of denial: "When you are surrounded by something so big that requires you to change everything about the way you think and see the world, then denial is the natural response. But the longer we wait, the bigger the response required."

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Moving day, for most families, is a busy, hair-raising, and nearly traumatic day -- and that's after heaps of planning and coordination and help or assistance, and so on. How much more crazed or brain-popping would it be for an entire species to load up the van, to get ready to go, to make

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sure the gas wasn't left on, if we got all our CDs?

Especially if we *HAD TO -- and fast?*

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NASA and Kepler aren't finished, to the great relief of most dreamers. We'll plug on, no doubt, with future projects and groups, our little gene pool -- always and forever changing our dance steps under the full Moon, three steps forward and two back.

We are dancing fools down here, doing the Shimmy, the Bunny Hop, Cupid Shuffle, the Twist, and Watusi, doing the Mashed Potato and Moonwalking, everybody doing the Loco-motion.

The Hokey-Pokey, of course, is what it's all about.

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Next full moon, when it's bright up there, when it makes you look up, keep looking, all around -- you might already be shopping for your next, new home.

Especially if you've already given up on this one -- it's an old model, starting to show signs of wear and tear, some wearing out, of getting a little weary, a little tired of People always riding its back.

It's got high mileage, that is true -- but, as you can see, it's still got a nice view.

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Funny thing, it's always such a longer drive, going home, than it was in the initial going, out looking for new places to live, shopping strange places out there, driving around in the dark.

Meanwhile, it's pretty nice to have someplace we can call Home. We have gotten used to that feeling, and have no right to assume, no right to have taken that for granted.

At least, not just because it's always been here, this Earth -- no matter what we do to it, come hell or high water.

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Robert Browning:

"Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"