

HERE AND NOW: OUR UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

BY **BILL NYE**

Like many animals, I find myself drawn to shiny objects, especially ones that move and fly. Near the end of a recent workday, all of us on the office staff left our desks and stood outside to observe the flight of the International Space Station (ISS). It went right over us. At dusk on a clear evening, it is a very bright thing to see.

The ISS is a human-made assembly. From the ground, with unaided eyes, the details of its construction are not apparent.

A few of our fellow citizens are on board, but somehow that wasn't the point of watching it. The point was that it was moving—unfettered by wind, unconcerned with nightfall, and oblivious to us.

As it passed, I realized that our ancestors must have felt much the same way about every object in the night sky, or when observing the Moon, just about any time it was visible. Everything up there is moving. Everything.

I cannot help but reason that some among our ancient ancestors came to accept that it was just possible that the solid-feeling place where they stood might be moving as well. These prescient few realized that our home would be tallied as just another object in some alien world's night sky.

It also seems to me that these thoughtful progenitors must have had the same feeling that I get when I garner my thoughts about our planet's position among the stars. I want to accost strangers, grab them by the lapels, and ask them,

The astronomers among our ancient ancestors surely saw that everything in the sky moves, and we are fortunate that they painted and carved rocks as records of their observations. In New Mexico's Chaco Canyon National Historic Park, a pictogram of a hand and a crescent Moon

appears next to what may be the Crab nebula supernova of 1054. On the floor is a pecked-out spiral, painted with a flaming tail of red. Halley's comet appeared only 12 years after the supernova. Photo: Tyler Nordgren



This bright thread of light is a long-exposure view of the International Space Station gliding through the twilight above Altadena, California on July 14, 2010. We fellow space explorers are lucky to live in a time when this visitor to our evening skies is a familiar—though always special—sight. Photo: Bill Westphal

“Do you realize what’s going on up there and all around us?” Perhaps our ancestors felt the same way—wanting to grab their contemporaries by the bearskin singlet. Do you see how astonishing it all is—how wonderful are the workings of the cosmos? Of course, one must also accept that those enlightened few probably were outcasts. The history of planetary discovery reminds us how long it took for people everywhere to accept our modern under-

standing of worlds in space.

As frustrating as it may be to reflect on the many centuries that must have passed between one of us realizing that our world must be one of an uncountable multitude, and our scientific proof of it, we can be thankful that we’re living now, and part of space exploration now.

This, for me, is the excitement and the deep joy that the Planetary Society brings to people everywhere. If you want to participate in the next discovery, if you want to be part of the next remarkable, clever spacecraft design, then join the Planetary Society.

Carl Sagan, one of our founders and one of my college professors, often remarked that when you’re in love, you want to tell the world. So it is with us. We at the Planetary Society want everyone in the world to realize how fantastic our time is—this time, now, at the beginning of the 21st century.

The idea that we can understand much of anything at all about our place in space is almost beyond belief. Because the joy of discovery is what makes our species special, we’re investigating the possibility of life traveling between planets. It’s also why we’re building the first solar sail spacecraft maneuverable enough to tack in Earth orbit, yet be driven by the diminutive momentum of sunlight. It’s why we search for life elsewhere. It’s why we keep as many eyes as possible on objects that might be hurtling toward us, near our Earth. We are working to help humans everywhere better appreciate our place in space.

Let’s change the world.

Bill Nye 