

## **SHOULD WE SEEK OUT ALIEN LIFE?**

**William Oldendorf**

The prospect of intelligent beings on other worlds fires the imagination as never before. Daily, the media reassure us that they are out there. Many proposals, some of them alarmingly expensive, offer schemes to communicate with these other life-forms. But it seems to me, with all the human misery on Earth, great expenditures for seeking intelligence elsewhere are clearly unwarranted.

The search for extraterrestrial life has tended to sweep under the rug several important factors. First all, most stars are incomprehensibly far away. Only about a thousand fall within 50 light-years of Earth. This means that if we were to send a message traveling at the speed of light, it would spread out and pass these thousand stars within 50 years. If there were some creature able to receive, recognize, interpret and reply to it, the return message could take another 50 years to reach Earth. So to sample these thousand stars could require a century, and no one reading this would be alive to see the response.

There may be a few hundred or few thousand planets around these nearby thousand stars. But we are not likely to find the very specific requirements for even remotely humanoid life on any. To support water-based life-forms such as ourselves, a planet must possess great bodies of water, be at a very precise distance from its sun and rotate once on its axis in less than a few Earth days. Why? Our oceans and clouds act as buffers to solar radiation. As the planet rotates, water heats up, evaporates, condenses and freezes, evening out the enormous fluctuations in radiant energy occurring at any one point on the Earth's surface. Thus, we experience only a few degrees of temperature change between night and day. But if the Earth were 5 percent closer to the sun or 5 percent farther away, the solar energy it received would be either too strong or too weak for the water to cycle between solid, liquid and gas. Life as we know it would not exist.

Say a planet capable of supporting recognizable life did exist in our galactic neighborhood. Would its life be of interest to us? There are millions of species of life-forms of Earth, yet most people pay attention only to those few that pose a threat, can be eaten or are amusing. If somewhere there were another Earth identical with ours, but without humans, we would find it of only academic interest.

And consider this: on Earth, our recorded history of a few thousand years represents only about one-millionth of the planet's past. If we arrived on a planet identical with Earth but only 10,000 years younger or older, we would find little there of interest to ordinary people. If indeed we did find a planet capable of evolving humanlike creatures, the overwhelming likelihood is that our contact would have come too early or too late. The inhabitants might not yet have appeared or might already be extinct, leaving us to the archeological analysis of their artifacts.

But the most compelling argument against a search for life in space is our narrow view of what life is. We base our ideas on what we are familiar with. If there were another type of life far different from our own, how would we know what to look for or how to communicate with

it? On our own planet we unknowingly coexisted for untold ages with an unseen life-form--the virus. A case could be made that viruses represent extraterrestrial life that came to Earth and invaded the cells of all life-forms. In most instances, the invaders did not make their presence known. They might have gone forever undetected had some of them not caused detectable disease. Once man recognized the invaders, war was declared, and at least one of the enemy, smallpox, has been slain.

If science someday overcomes the limitation of the speed of light, then presumably the entire universe will become accessible. We may well find evidence that there is or (more likely) was human life elsewhere in the universe. But the vanishing small likelihood of finding recognizable extraterrestrial life within our lifetime, the great expense of the search and the pressing needs of humans here on Earth should give us pause.

As a physician, I am daily confronted with human misery. Starvation, cancer and drug addiction are everywhere. We cannot contain population growth, poverty or the arms race. Denying these realities while squandering precious research dollars to pursue extraterrestrial life falls, in my view, somewhere between irrational and immoral.

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**TOPIC:** What reasons does Oldendorf give for answering his question "Should We Seek Out Alien Life" as he does? What do you think of his views? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others or your reading--including "Should We Seek Out Alien Life?" itself.