

# The Pale Blue Dot: 25 Years Later

By Chip Hartman



On February 14, 1990, one of the most haunting photographs of planet Earth was taken by Voyager 1, a robotic probe launched by NASA in September, 1977 to explore and photograph the distant outer planets of our solar system: Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune. After completing its Neptune encounter, Voyager 1's cameras swung back toward the Sun one last time to take the photograph above: Earth from a distance of 4 billion miles bathed in a beam of sunlight. Soon afterward, Voyager 1 reached the edge of the solar system and plunged into the forever of interstellar space.

The noted astronomer Dr. Carl Sagan was so moved by this image and its mind-numbing implications that he wrote a book entitled *The Pale Blue Dot*. The book captured his thoughts about the age-old question, "Are we alone in the Universe?" It quickly became required reading for astronomers, mathematicians, philosophers, theologians and just about anyone else with a burning curiosity to know the answer.

Dr. Sagan's fascination with the photograph was not purely astronomical. He saw it as jaw-dropping evidence that the human race still had a long way to go in refocusing its existential priorities.

One particular extract from *The Pale Blue Dot* offers a telling insight into Sagan's bewilderment and frustration about the human condition in a so-called "civilized" world:

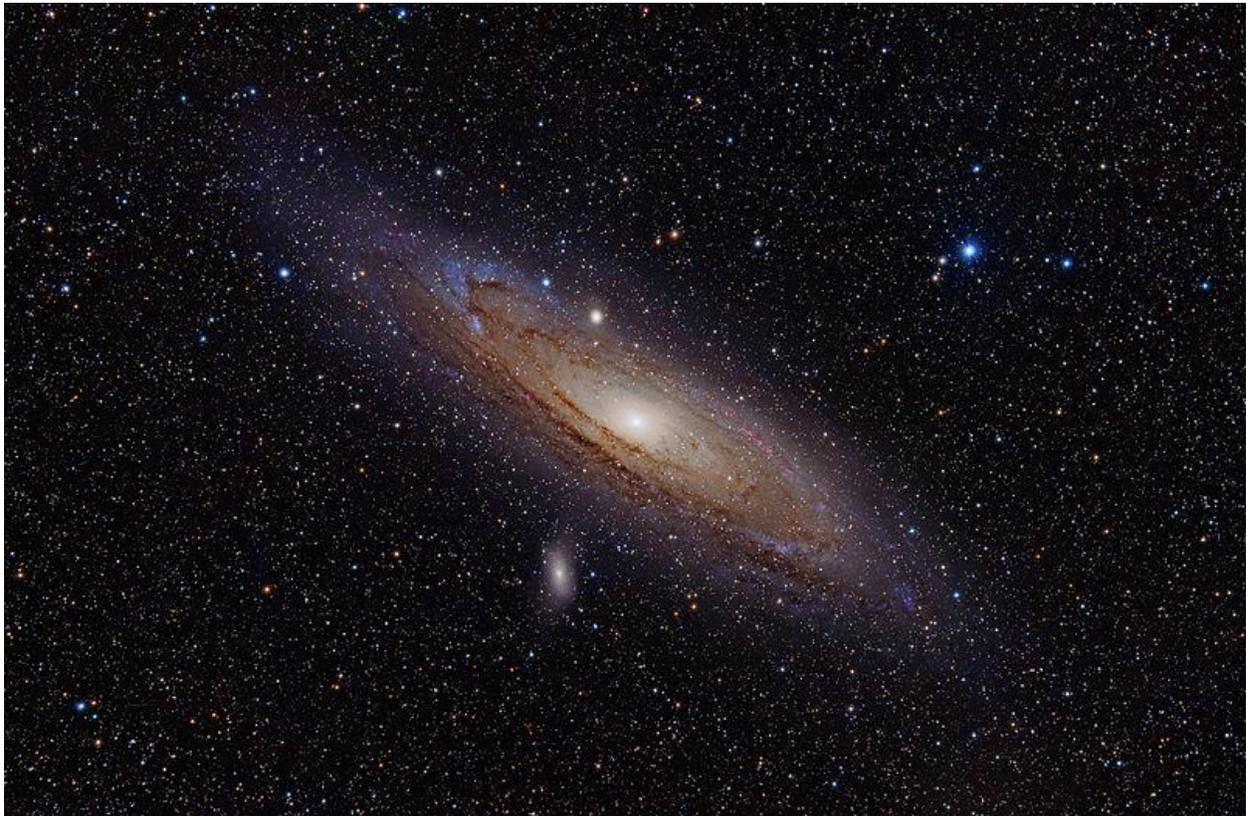
*"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every 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. "*

### **Intelligent Life Elsewhere?**

It's interesting to note that the Voyager 1 image stirred both sides of the debate regarding the likelihood of finding intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe.

Organizations like [SETI](#) (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) claimed that the enormity of the Universe in and of itself made the likelihood of extra-terrestrial life an almost mathematical certainty. The flip side of the argument stated that, while the Universe is indeed enormous, it takes a staggering array of factors, each of which must be present, in order to produce the conditions required to sustain complex life. When viewed through the prism of statistical mathematics, both camps make compelling arguments.



### **The Humility Factor**

As someone who spends most of his workday helping clients figure out their business or personal brands, writing about astronomy is a real departure. But I've had a fascination with it ever since one cold October night many years ago when a neighbor and I used his high-power telescope to search for the Andromeda Galaxy, the closest spiral galaxy to our own Milky Way (about 2.3 million light-years away).

There is no way to adequately express the sensation of thrill and awe when you first lock your eyes on this dazzling sight through a telescope. What makes the moment even more sobering is the fact

that it has taken light leaving Andromeda 2.3 million years to reach our eyes – which in turn means that we are literally looking **back** in time! We are seeing what Andromeda **used** to look like – 2.3 million years ago!

Visual imagery such as the Voyager 1 photo and the Andromeda Galaxy can have a very humbling effect on the viewer especially if it's experienced in real-time. At the very least, images like these should give us pause to re-assess our cultural priorities and maybe even scale down some of our self-ascribed importance given that "the grand scheme of things" is undoubtedly larger and grander than we can possibly imagine.

It's no coincidence that today is Valentine's Day. It's a great tradition for celebrating the wide range of love and affection we have for each other. Today marks the 25th anniversary of an image that's not typically associated with love at all ... but with some genuine introspection, perhaps it ought to be.

Carl Sagan was right about that pale blue dot: That's here. That's home. That's us. Since it's all we've got, let's treat it with as much love as we can.