

Saturday Review



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Have We Anything to Learn From Other Planets?

Recently, on this page, we reported on a proposal now before the government to build a microwave system capable of communicating with planets beyond the solar system. The proposal is based on the belief of a group of astrophysicists that sentient life exists throughout the universe and that signals from outer space are already falling on the earth. The scientists believe it is possible to develop the means both for sorting out these signals and for transmitting return signals.

At the heart of this proposal is the conviction of the scientists that a medium of communications can provide information of substantial value to life on earth.

Some of the letters received in response to that editorial have questioned whether creatures on other planets have anything to teach us worth the \$10 billion required for constructing and operating a microwave grid capable of transmitting signals across cosmic distances.

OUR PURPOSE is to suggest that not all problems on earth have been solved. After several hundred thousand years of existence on this planet, the human species is still bedeviled by unanswered questions that make life less rewarding than it ought to be. The most important of these questions have to do less with

technology than with behavior and philosophy.

Certainly it would be nice to know whether extra-terrestrial civilizations have been able to utilize forms of energy as yet unknown to earthly intelligence or to eliminate what we regard as incurable disease, to mention only two of our current and ongoing tangible problems. But it is only a matter of time before the human brain will develop new sources of energy—whether from the sun, tides, winds, fuel cells, hydrogen, or whatever—and also discover cures for all diseases. These, after all, are transient matters of a type that has yielded to human scientific intelligence in the past. Far more persistent and baffling, however, are the abstract problems—the values of life and the way people treat one another. We are still largely illiterate in the knowledge of human relationships.

If other galaxies have civilizations that are unmarked by brutality and violence, it would be useful to know how this came about. The inhumanity of humans to one another continues to be the most serious problem on earth. Overt slavery has been abolished, but exploitation of large numbers of humans by their fellow creatures seemingly knows no end. It would be useful to know whether other sentient creatures have been able to develop a philosophy of living that sees life as the highest value. Also, whether

they have been able to retain their sensitivity and respond compassionately to the lives around them.

Next, have other civilizations been able to organize for the widest good? Organizations on earth tend to be tribal. Despite the fact that all earth-dwellers share the same habitat and are dependent on the same conditions for their existence, most of their organizations are directed against one another. There is no organization of the whole that is acting adequately in behalf of the human interest. The human species is intelligent in limited matters, but its efforts to organize for world peace are puny and incompetent.

ARE THERE PLACES in the universe where intelligent creatures are primed psychologically and philosophically more for peace than for war? Places where war has been eradicated and where the emphasis given to a decent existence has a clear priority over the emphasis given to instruments of mass annihilation?

Are there places in the universe where the development of the creative potentiality of the individual is a basic function of society? Where social justice does not have to be fought for every inch of the way but is a source of pride to those who administer it?

Are there places where people have created communities that are not gross alterations of nature? Places where people are not pressed upon one another in tiny cells, inviting squalor and disintegration?

Are there places where people are strong enough to manifest tenderness and are brave enough to make known their trust? Places where people have no difficulty in finding precise words to convey their intent?

Are there places where sentient creatures can nourish themselves adequately without having to kill and devour other species for food?

Are there places where intelligent creatures communicate without ultimatums, where compassion and conscience are more readily summoned than temper?

In short, if there are places in the universe where people make genuine sense of their existence as a species and where they comprehend the delicate connections between the individual and collective existence, all the treasures on earth would be a small price to pay for the clues. We have everything in—and outside—the world to learn. N.C.

Letters From Readers

Teaching Tots With Toys

Regarding H. Robert Quilitch's article ("Can Toys Really Teach?" November 16), I was happy to see the qualifying statement, "Parents would be well-advised . . . to base their toy buying on . . . whether the toy, assuming it is safe to use, is one their children will enjoy." Upon first seeing the title, I wondered if it should read instead "Should Toys Really Teach?"

There seems to be undue emphasis in the commercial field, especially with the pre-schooler, on the child's intellectual development. This emphasis can result in frustrated children and frustrated parents who are constantly worried that their children are not up to the norm, when the norm should be dictated by the child's individual developing processes. . . .

Certainly, creating a stimulating environment is important, but pushing "educational" toys . . . on a young child may leave the child with a distaste for all forms of education later in life.

Cynthia M. Pease
Great Barrington, Mass.

Legends on the Playing Field

Legends are more abundant in sports today than in any other aspect of Western life. However, Dick Beddoes, in opening his mouth, has put his legend in it ("Two on the 55-Yard Line," November 2). I must even point out the anachronism in putting "soccer" into the mouth of Harvard's H. R. Grant. The word was first used around 1890.

The day the McGill players arrived in Cambridge, they met with the Harvard squad on Jarvis Field and made up two mixed teams. These played a practice game to familiarize one another first with the Harvard rules and then those of McGill. The Harvard rules *did* permit a player to carry the ball but only under rather tricky circumstances. What with this problem and the unfamiliar rubber ball, the Canadians managed to get themselves pretty confused.

The first match, on Thursday, May 15, 1874, was played under the local rules. Harvard won all three "games." . . .

The following fall Harvard paid its return visit to Montreal, and it was the game here, on October 22, 1874, which was played under both sets of rules. I cannot tell a lie. Even though we used

our egg-shaped ball, we lost 0-3. . . . In our centenary re-match, October 19, 1974, we did get our own back, 6-3 (rugby, of course).

Andrew Allen, Director, Information Office, McGill University
Montreal, Canada

Grievous Gaff

As a former United Statesian, I enjoyed your features about Canada, especially the Canadian west. . . . But though Frank Riley ("From the Prairies to the Pacific," November 2) may commendably have left his acquisitiveness behind, he should have brought along a few smidgens more of his inquisitiveness: His referring repeatedly to British Columbia's incumbent premier and government as "Social Credit" suggests that he went through the province with his eyes and ears closed. Dave Barrett and his New Democratic party "socialist horde" themselves *ousted* in 1972 the Social Credit government which, under a man named Bennett, had run the province in their own strange way since 1952. They may be

mere labels, but Social Credit right-wing conservatism and the NDP's brand of socialism are so far apart on the political spectrum, and their differences so fundamental, as to make Riley's egregious slips hilarious—and sad.

William E. Messenger
Vancouver, British Columbia

Frank Riley replies:

What can I say? After an incredible lapse happens on the way to the typewriter keys, you can only bow your head to the winds of wrath such as have come my way from Mr. Messenger and others. My sin is made more mortal by the fact that British Columbian events have been so closely interwoven with our personal lives since the late Sixties, when young friends, and then subsequently a near and dear member of our immediate family, moved there as a consequence of Vietnam and much else that was happening in the United States. I have heard them talk for hours about British Columbia politics. When I next hear from them, Mr. Messenger's letter by comparison will seem positively forgiving.

