

We Are All Riders on the Same Planet

Seen from space 50 years ago, Earth appeared as a gift to preserve and cherish. What happened?

By Matthew Myer Boulton and Joseph Heithaus

Mr. Boulton is a writer and a filmmaker. Mr. Heithaus is a poet.

Dec. 24, 2018



The "Earthrise" photograph taken by William Anders on Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve in 1968.

Credit

Credit

NASA

On Christmas Eve 1968, human beings orbited the moon for the first time. News of the feat of NASA's Apollo 8 mission dominated the front page of The New York Times the next day. Tucked away below the

fold was an essay by the poet Archibald MacLeish, a reflection inspired by what he'd seen and heard the night before.

Even after 50 years, his prescient words speak of the humbling image we now had of Earth, an image captured in a photograph that wouldn't be developed until the astronauts returned: "Earthrise," taken by William Anders, one of the Apollo crew. In time, both essay and photo merged into an astonishing portrait: the gibbous Earth, radiantly blue, floating in depthless black space over a barren lunar horizon. A humbling image of how small we are — but even more, a breathtaking image of our lovely, fragile, irreplaceable home. The Earth as a treasure. The Earth as oasis.

When the Apollo 8 commander, Frank Borman, addressed Congress upon his return, he called himself an "unlikely poet, or no poet at all" — and quoted MacLeish to convey the impact of what he had seen. "To see the Earth as it truly is," said the astronaut, quoting the poet, "small and blue and beautiful in that eternal silence where it floats, is to see ourselves as riders on the Earth together, brothers on that bright loveliness in the eternal cold — brothers who know now that they are truly brothers."

The message offered hope in a difficult time. Not far away on that same front page was a sobering report that the Christmas truce in Vietnam had been marred by violence. These were the last days of 1968, a divisive and bloody year. We'd lost Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy that year, gone through a tumultuous election, and continued fighting an unpopular and deadly war.

ADVERTISEMENT

For MacLeish, these images of Earth from space would help usher in a new era, overturning the old notion of humanity as the center of the universe and the modern view of us humans as little more than "helpless victims of a senseless farce." Beyond these two extremes, MacLeish suggested, was an image of the planet as a kind of lifeboat, "that tiny raft in the enormous, empty night."

Commander Borman himself compared Earth to an "aggie," no doubt recalling playing marbles as a boy, drawing circles in the dirt. The famous "Blue Marble" image — one of the most reproduced photographs in human history — came four years later, from Apollo 17. But for Commander Borman and MacLeish alike, what "Earthrise" revealed wasn't a marble made vast but a planet made small. A little blue sphere, a child's precious aggie, floating alone in the abyss.

Much later, Carl Sagan would pick up this line of thought in his 1994 book, "Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space," in which the Earth, as photographed in 1990 from the Voyager 1 from 3.7 billion miles away, became "a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam." For Sagan, this new image challenged "the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe," and at the same time "underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly and compassionately with one another and to preserve and cherish that pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

Since then, we've learned a great deal more. When Voyager 1 took that picture, we weren't yet sure whether there were any planets at all outside our solar system. But today, largely thanks to space telescopes peering out from Earth's orbit, we know we look up at night into a galaxy with more planets than stars. We may now perceive, as never before, the Earth's exquisite rarity and value. We live on a marvel to behold.

We also know how our own DNA links us to one another and to life on our planet in general. We need not imagine ourselves as brothers and sisters, because science tells us that we are one family of life that includes plants, animals, birds, insects, fungi, even bacteria. All of life rides on Earth together. ADVERTISEMENT

By the time Sagan delivered his message “to preserve and cherish” our planet, the awareness of our responsibility to care for the Earth had already taken hold. In 2018, it is virtually impossible to see “Earthrise” without thinking of the ways the planet’s biosphere — proportionally as thin as a coat of paint on a classroom globe — is not only fragile but also under sustained attack by human actions. It is hard not to conclude that we have utterly failed to uphold the grave responsibility that the Apollo 8 crew and “Earthrise” delivered to us.

Our precious “raft” is losing members — species are dying — as our climate changes and our planet warms. The very technologies that flung us around the moon and back, the dazzling industrial genius that gave us fossil-fuel-fed transport and electricity, animal agriculture and all the rest, have fundamentally changed our Earth, and they now threaten to cook us into catastrophe. We may be afloat in MacLeish’s “eternal cold,” but what MacLeish couldn’t yet see was how, even then, we were madly stoking the furnace.

It’s all there in “Earthrise,” if we look closely enough. Those spiraling ribbons of clouds foreshadow the extreme weather to come. In the foreground, the gray moon testifies to how unforgiving the laws of nature can be. And behind the camera, so to speak, is the sprawling apparatus of the modern industrial age, spewing an insulating layer of haze around that little blue marble, the only home we’ve ever known.

Today, against the backdrop of our enormous challenge in salvaging the Earth, MacLeish’s message almost seems quaint, if not dated. (He wrote of brothers, no sisters mentioned.) And yet, the poet still has a point. The vision of “Earthrise” is still one of awe and wonder. As we continue to venture out beyond Earth’s orbit, we citizens of Earth can at least hope that we will still be humbled by each new vision of our lonely planet from space.

[Below, watch "Earthrise: Riders on the Earth Together," a short, animated video by [SALT Project](#), produced and narrated by Matthew Myer Boulton.]

In the end, “Earthrise” is an icon of hope, not despair. That Christmas Eve 50 years ago, Commander Borman and his crewmates turned to another kind of poetry, some of the oldest on Earth. Broadcasting live from lunar orbit to what was then the largest television audience in history, the astronauts read the opening verses of the Book of Genesis, ending with verse 10: “And God called the dry land Earth. ... And God saw that it was good.”

“And from the crew of Apollo 8,” said Commander Borman, signing off as the ship slipped around to the dark side of moon and out of broadcast contact, “good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas — and God bless all of you, all of you on the good Earth.” In the silence of the moon’s dark side, they later recalled, the skies appeared brighter and deeper — all except for the ink-black disc of the lifeless moon itself, blocking out the stars.