

"Pale Blue Dot" Speech

Carl Sagan, 1996

In this speech, Carl Sagan, a noted astronomer, reflects on the deeper meaning of the image of planet Earth that was captured in a 1990 photograph taken from Voyager 1.

Look again at that dot. All human experience has taken place on this pin-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.

Imagine all the wars & cruelty of the past. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

We are tiny and alone. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.

We should change

Note: Carl Sagan's research is well known, but this speech gives us an additional gift—a pattern we can use to develop a new way of thinking about the deeper meaning of a photograph. In this piece, it becomes apparent to the reader that Sagan uses his scientist's eye to gaze not only at what is in the picture, but to also imagine what came before the picture. Then, Sagan takes his contemplation a step further, stepping back to consider a belief, and to think about how such a belief can lead to change. In this classroom exercise, students are asked to use the foundational structure of this speech—its focus on finding a truth within a photo, looking back to envision what came before it, and making a related life change—to craft their own essays on "New Perspectives From a Photo."