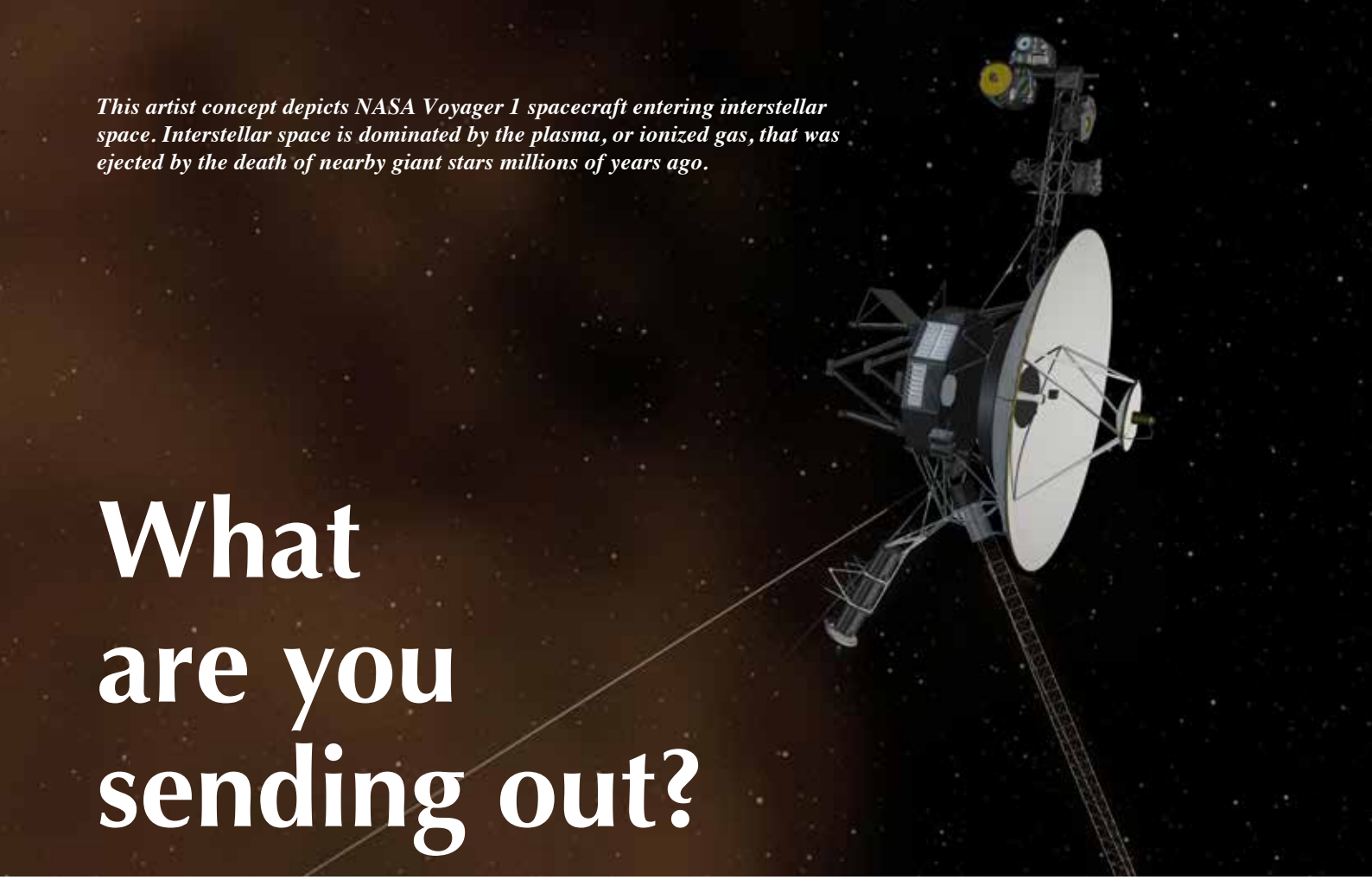

This artist concept depicts NASA Voyager 1 spacecraft entering interstellar space. Interstellar space is dominated by the plasma, or ionized gas, that was ejected by the death of nearby giant stars millions of years ago.

What are you sending out?

By Richard Fowler

I would like to talk to you about something which is at this moment travelling at a speed of approximately 63,000 kilometres per hour! Not only that but it is the furthest man-made object from earth—some 20 billion kilometres away!

What am I talking about? Voyager 1, a spacecraft launched in 1977 to explore Jupiter and Saturn.

In its 40-year journey Voyager 1 has passed the heliosphere (the bubble-like region encompassing the solar system) and has now reached interstellar space, the region between the stars.

Now, when this colossus of human endeavour was planned, someone asked the question: what if it finds intelligent life? Or, on the contrary, what if intelligent life finds it? This got NASA thinking. So, in anticipation of such an event someone suggested a bright idea: why don't we load it up with an audio-visual device with messages from and about earth?

But, of course, this begs the question: exactly what information do you put on the record to represent earth and its global culture?

After, I'm sure, a few coffee-injected meetings, it was settled. It was decided the record would have greetings in over 55 languages, pictures of Earth's life forms, various scientific knowledge, and recordings of pieces of music and earth sounds. I can just picture it, an alien listening to the dulcet tones of waves crashing onto a shore.

This was earth's attempt to send out information from our part of the Milky Way neighbourhood to represent its collective community—us!

But, if we stop for a moment, there is something for us to consider in this astronomical adventure: life is out there! In fact, it is all around us! It's there when we step out of the front door, when we drive on the roads, and when we're in our workplaces.

I may have just stated the breathtakingly obvious, but there is a lesson that Voyager 1 illuminates, which I think is worth bringing back to earth! What is that lesson? It is the fact that, as each of us travels through our celestial surroundings, we too are giving out an audio-visual representation of our personal world. Through our interactions with those around us, our words and actions tell a story about us. Simply put, whatever we do and say gives out information to be processed by other intelligent beings—humans—and this will define what kind of person people think we are!

So the question is: what are you sending out?

It is amazing that each of us will potentially meet a whopping 80,000 people in our lifetime. That equates to interacting with three new people a day. So what information do we give to those three people? It is estimated that we speak enough in one week to fill a book. What kind of books are we writing for those 21

new people? What is our life saying about us?

Surely communicating who and what we are to other intelligent life forms is not rocket science. It certainly does not take a NASA mission into interstellar space. It just takes three things, and they will not cost you a cent!

First, smile! We communicate primarily through the face. It can say a lot about us, so let's not underestimate the power each of us holds in our 43 facial muscles. I'm not suggesting you go around looking like the Cheshire Cat, but cracking the occasional smile, which lifts the cheek muscles a little, actually makes you look more attractive, and will have the effect of making others smile and feel better. Try it!

Second, say 'Hello'. Actually, for that matter, just say something. You don't know the conversations you are missing. Not speaking to people makes us less human. On one international flight, I had just taken my seat and was making myself comfortable when a man—much bigger than I—suggested I was in his seat. I decided not to argue the matter and moved quickly. As I positioned myself in my new seat next to a lady, I hoped, secretly, that she would not talk to me. It was a long flight and exiting conversations is always difficult when you are sitting next to someone. And then I heard those words which seem to be vanishing from public discourse: 'How are you?' My peace had been disrupted, but what I had not anticipated was that for the next two hours I would enjoy a conversation with a fascinating lady who shared so many of my passions and hopes.

Suzanne Dodd, Voyager project manager at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab, holds a replica of the golden record carried on NASA's Voyager 1 spacecraft on Thursday, 12 September 2013 at NASA Headquarters in Washington. Voyager 1 is officially the first human-made object to venture into interstellar space carrying the Golden Record intended to communicate a story of our world to extra-terrestrials.

Third, make room for one act of kindness a day. Before I sat down to write this article, something interesting happened on my weekly food trip to the supermarket. I happened to be on crutches at the time after an ankle injury, and as I 'crutched' down an aisle in the shop a man caught my eye, smiled, and said the heartiest 'Hello, how are you?' I immediately thought: 'Oh no! Someone who knows me but I can't remember who they are'. But as I scanned his face it dawned upon me that I had never met this man! His response to my obvious confusion was simply 'I know what it is like—your world changes'. It was a spontaneous expression of empathy, as he too had evidently been acquainted with my metallic arm extensions, courtesy of the Health Service. It's amazing how kindness can have an impact: I'm now writing about him and he has no idea.

Before we end...

The list of images that went up with Voyager 1 was a pretty comprehensive collage of human experiences. I think if intelligent life did come across the images, they (the aliens) would put earth on their bucket list of places to visit. After all, who would not want to visit such an interesting and beautiful place? But my worry would be whether they would get all that our 'brochure' suggested. You see, there were no pictures of what has characterised human history probably more than anything else: war, fighting, and division. Perhaps rightly, the images were a sanitised expression of what earth was, and is, all about—the best bits.

I would like to think that when we communicate with others, we are communicating those best bits. Who knows, maybe something, or someone, is watching?

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