

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Contact*

Is anybody out there?

ELLIE ARROWAY

Only four or five times in my life have I walked out of a movie theater feeling a sense of amazement. Amazed by the spectacular special effects I had just seen. Amazed by the profound implications of the story. And amazed by the off-screen drama that must have preceded the one on-screen.

*Contact* amazed me.

The 1997 film is based upon the book of the same title published more than a decade earlier. Significant differences exist between the two versions—there usually are when Hollywood adapts a story to fit the limitations and potential of the big screen. But this provides one of those rare instances when, in my view, the adapters actually improved the story. Carl Sagan wrote a novel only a scientist could love, complete with more technical details than most care to know. Still, the book is worth the effort for those willing to endure stretches of tedium. The film, on the other hand, moves along quickly, thanks to a director who won a few creative wrestling matches with the author. It paid off in what became a powerful and entertaining movie.

The opening scene marks a stunning achievement for computer generation, convincing the eye that it is traveling through

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the cosmos. On a journey with sound waves launched from Earth, you move out farther and farther into space, passing every planet before leaving our solar system, which shrinks to a small subsystem of the Milky Way—itsself becoming a tiny member of a vast network of galaxies. Within seconds you see galaxies absorbed into greater constellations until what we consider immense appears microscopic. Not even two minutes into the film, and you have experienced the reality of just how small you are!

The story opens with a very intelligent nine-year-old girl who is consumed by a passion to make contact, starting with ham radio buffs a thousand miles south. Ellie Arroway adores her widowed father. When asked whether he thinks people on other planets might exist, he feeds her obsession. “If it is just us,” he says with a twinkle in his eye, “it seems like an awful waste of space.” When asked whether he thinks Ellie’s radio could reach her deceased mother, he dispels any seed of faith. “I don’t think even the biggest radio could reach that far.” Like her beloved daddy, Ellie dreams of life on other planets—but not life after death. Hers will be a universe defined by material rather than spiritual realities.

Decades later, we meet Ellie as Dr. Arroway, a woman consumed by a passion to make contact, to discover intelligent life beyond Earth. Despite the ridicule of peers for using her considerable gifts to chase after “little green men,” Ellie spends years looking and listening for any trace of distant neighbors. One day, that search pays off. She hears a message that must indicate intelligent life. The form of the message is mathematical, the only truly universal language. The substance of the message surpasses her wildest imagining. Someone has sent instructions for building a machine that will transport one human being into space and enable face-to-face communication, face-to-face contact.

Events unfold rapidly. World leaders fund the machine’s development. A panel of representatives screen potential candidates for

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the trip. Ellie makes the short list and appears the sure choice. But when asked about her spiritual beliefs, she confesses that she does not believe in God and that she cannot represent the majority population who believe in some sort of supreme being. Authorities pass over Ellie because, in the words of friend and panel member Palmer Joss, "I just couldn't in good conscience vote for a person who doesn't believe in God. Someone who honestly thinks the other ninety-five percent of us suffer from some sort of mass delusion."

Ellie had accused Palmer, a popular spiritual leader, of believing in God because he needed to believe it. She pointed to a scientific principle known as Occam's Razor, that all things being equal, the simplest explanation tends to be the right one. Ellie found it hard to believe that a mysterious, all-powerful God created everything but left no proof of his existence. It seemed simpler, in her mind, to believe that "we created him so as not to feel so small."

In the end, however, fortunes change. The first attempt fails due to a crazed religious zealot who condemns the entire scientific establishment for meddling in matters that belong to the sphere of faith. His followers mindlessly chant "Praise God" while waving signs that read, "Science is not our God." Their leader literally calls down fire from heaven by strapping a bomb to himself and destroying both the transport and its team. Now the way opens for Ellie to go.

Her trip furnishes us with another stunning film sequence. Ellie feels overcome with emotion as she journeys to distant places more beautiful than words can describe. "I had no idea," comes her awestruck response. "No words. . . . They should have sent a poet."

In those few dramatic moments, Ellie encounters something profound. "For as long as I can remember," she says, "I've been searching for something, some reason why we're here. What are we doing here? Who are we?" Her search ends.

Back home, Ellie finds herself with no evidence of the trip or the things she saw. She has to describe an experience that she cannot

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prove but that has changed her forever. Hard questions come, very much like the ones she had asked religious friends whom she considered mere wishful thinkers. “You come to us with no evidence, no records, no artifacts. Only a story that, to put it mildly, strains credibility. . . . Are you really going to sit there and tell us we should just take this all on faith?”

Ellie’s tearful response fails to satisfy those at her inquiry but touches a deep longing of those in the film audience—words that just as easily could be heard in a hanky-waving, revival tent meeting.

“I had an experience. I can’t prove it. I can’t even explain it. But everything that I know as a human being, everything that I am tells me that it was real. I was given something wonderful, something that changed me forever. A vision of the universe that tells us undeniably how tiny and insignificant and how rare and precious we all are. A vision that tells us that we belong to something that is greater than ourselves and that none of us are alone. I wish I could share that. I wish that everyone, if even for one moment, could feel that awe and humility and hope.”<sup>63</sup>

Ellie’s testimony mixes such emotion with spirituality that you can almost hear the crowd shouting back at her, “Amen, sister. Amen.”



When I was a kid, I loved watching *Lost in Space*. Nearly every episode included a scene where the bubble-headed robot waved his accordion tube arms while shouting, “Danger, Will Robinson. Danger!” at the sight of approaching aliens. As a teenager I gravitated toward *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or the harmless adventure of an odd-looking little guy named ET who wanted to phone home. In recent years we enjoyed the eerie mysteries of the *X-Files*, a series that gives one the sense that Area 54 and alien

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abductions might just be more than fiction. An irreverently wacky show called *Third Rock from the Sun* gives one the sense those aliens might not be so frightening after all.

For as long as I can remember, mankind has felt fascinated by the idea of alien beings making contact with us or us them. Be it *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, we have enjoyed fantasizing about what and who might be out there—taking comfort in or scaring ourselves with the notion that we might not be alone in the universe. Like young Ellie Arroway, we want an answer to the nagging question, “Is anybody out there?”

Carl Sagan wrote *Contact*. Fitting, since the die-hard skeptic pioneered exploring the possibility that life on earth originated on another planet. After decades of trying to explain the wonder of our cosmos without its Maker, he eventually became like the mindless religious fanatics he considered intolerable. Sagan could no more bear the idea that we are alone than anyone else, to the point that he embraced an idea far less science than it is science fiction.

He’s not alone. A growing field of study in the scientific community called Directed Panspermia postulates that life was originally “planted” on Earth from another planet. After years observing the incredible complexity of life and codiscovering the genetic software commonly called DNA, 1962 Nobel Prize winner Dr. Francis Crick finally threw up his hands trying to make what he observed line up with the theory that life spontaneously evolved. He described the improbabilities as so staggering it seemed more likely that life arrived here from outer space. I guess Sagan’s novel was his way of shouting back, “Amen, brother, Amen.”

I don’t mean to belittle Sagan, Crick, or other scientists trying to find intelligent life in outer space. They simply want an answer to the question we all ask: “Is anybody out there?” But as they busy themselves listening for a distant message that may never come, they ignore a message so close that it can be heard every moment

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of every day. The heavens indeed declare the glory of God. So does the wind and the water and DNA.

I try to help my children observe the tangible evidences of unseen realities. Ultimate acceptance of God requires faith, but not blind faith. I want them to experience what we believe as reasonable. “How could God be real if we can’t see him?” I ask my then five-year-old Kyle.

“That’s a good question, Dad!” he responds.

“Well, is there anything else we know is real but we can’t see?” I ask.

Gravity and sound waves make the list, illustrated by jumping off a chair and turning on the stereo.

“How about air?” suggests Mom, prompting me to pull out several balloons.

“Air is real enough to expand these balloons. I bet air has power too,” I say while releasing the balloon. We spend the next ten minutes in intense competition to see who can make his balloon fly farthest. After the fun, we memorize a little jingle that Kyle and my other children remember years later: “Just like air, God is there.”

Imbedded into the fabric of our universe lies a simple message. We are not alone. Somebody is out there. He can’t be seen. But then, neither can the gravity keeping our feet on the ground or the air giving our lungs what we need to survive. The message seems so simple to a five-year-old—so why does it appear so hard for the rest of us? Perhaps because we have never truly embraced Occam’s Razor.

William of Occam was a fourteenth-century philosopher and theologian who developed a principle that underlies all scientific modeling and theory building. Ellie Arroway summarized his emphasis well: All things being equal, the simplest explanation tends to be the right one. In other words, keep it simple, stupid. His work on knowledge, logic, and scientific inquiry played a major

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role in the transition from medieval to modern thought because he based scientific knowledge on experience and self-evident truths.

William of Occam was a deeply religious man who worshiped a God of order, a God who created a world that follows certain rules. That world, he surmised, could therefore be deciphered. Thus, Occam planted a seed that would bloom into centuries of scientific exploration and discovery.

I wonder how William would react to a story like *Contact*. What might he say to those who claim his principle yet ignore its foundation? How would he respond to people desperately reaching for some sort of transcendence and awe, to the point of accepting notions anything but simple and that Sagan himself admitted have no evidence?

*Contact* cannot escape suspicion number one. We know we are made for more. While we don't want to be top dog, we yearn for something bigger than ourselves. Having grown too big for our britches, we want to be small again. We want to be put in our place, perhaps so that we know we have one.

All things being equal, the simplest explanation is still the best one.

INKLING

JUST LIKE AIR, GOD IS THERE.