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Talking to the Aliens

"The alien man waved his arms up and down and noticed that he couldn't wave in the right language so he stopped."

- Henry Rollins, 1961 -

So often in literature, on radio, and in the movies we have depicted an encounter between people of earth and alien species. In some cases these encounters happen here on earth, and in other cases these encounters happen as humankind explores space. In most of these situations, with some notable horror film exceptions, we manage to find a way to communicate with these aliens or else they find a way to communicate with us. Yet, should we really expect to be able to communicate with an alien species?

In reality mankind has been very poor at developing the ability to communicate with highly intelligent life forms. There are a number of examples of just how poor we really are at this sort of thing. Dolphins are highly intelligent and far from being truly alien. We have cohabitated on earth for millennia and even share a lot of genetic material. However, we still are unable to really communicate. Of course we can make certain things known to them and they can make certain things known to us. Still, communication on an intellectual level is largely non-existent.

In regard to the great ape family we have done slightly better, but not by much. Within the great ape family there are life forms that share almost 99.5% of our genetic material. Clearly these creatures are far from alien but we still have almost no intellectual communication with them. This has only recently improved when attempts at verbal communication have been abandoned in favor of various forms of sign language.

Would we do better as explorers of the galaxy happening upon a planet teeming with alien life?

It is likely that the seriousness of our attempts at communication is driven by our perception of the relative intelligence of the species with which we might attempt an interchange. In the case of Dolphins or great apes our perception of the possibilities of communication may be driven

by our recognition of their lack of creating artificial things (buildings, tools, writing, art, etc.). We perceive that Dolphins don't really create anything and therefore we do not expect to be able to communicate about abstract concepts with them (love, joy, peace, patience, war, truth, mathematics, etc.).

In regard to great apes we have only recently recognized that there are members of this community that make and use rudimentary tools and teach the use of these tools to successive generations. Yet we are surprised when a member of this community mourns the loss of a pet kitty, or a young member of this community picks up sign language by simple exposure to it in its surroundings without being "taught" in a more traditional way. In such a situation the great ape youngster learned language much as human toddlers learn to understand and use language.

If human beings traveled to a planet teeming with life would we recognize and be able to communicate with our intellectual equals or superiors? Would we even recognize a high level of intelligence and communication within an alien context? What if intelligent communication on an alien world is done solely by smell? Perhaps we can postulate such an alien life form and consider how we might deal with it.

Let's assume an alien life form both emits and receives smells in much the same way we emit and receive sound waves. For the sake of argument let's also assume the alien life form also builds buildings, makes tools, produces art, and clearly manages to teach things to successive generations of its own kind. At the same time we discover that these alien beings seem to be relatively oblivious to sound and also do not produce any sound based form of communication. We also see no indications of any form of sign language. To make matters even worse the aliens "see" through the use of reflected electromagnetic pulses that they emit. These reflections are picked up by sensory organs distributed all over their body and "pictures" of their surrounding are formed in much the same way as we use synthetic aperture radar. The end result being that the aliens don't appear to have any eyes at all. Also, because of the frequencies used by their visual system, they see us about as well as we see the glass in a window (i.e., they essentially look right through us).

So now we have a truly "alien" alien as opposed to the garden variety of alien in most science fiction that is nothing more than a human being with the "forehead bump of the week." We have what is clearly a highly intelligent life form right in front of us and we find ourselves at a complete loss in how we can go about establishing communication with them. In fact,

they seldom even notice us unless they bump into us which appears to confuse them greatly. This leads to what passes for an alien tabloid story about troublesome ghosts that the aliens keep "feeling."

We have zero common ground except for the fact that the aliens exist and we exist. Of course there is a lot of doubt that we exist as far as the aliens are concerned because they can't even see us.

Let's give ourselves the benefit of the doubt and assume we are smart enough to figure out a few things. For example, we determine the alien's bodies have a high metallic content and we pick up their radar emissions. Putting two and two together, we finally realize they "see" by radar. So, brilliant thinkers that we are, we wrap ourselves up in tin foil like a baked potato and viola the aliens "see" us. Of course that scares them and it's a long time before we can coax any of them to come anywhere near us. When we finally get them to approach us they become convinced we are some kind of brainless dummies. After all, we don't "talk" (i.e., smell) their language so we must be stupid.

Not being the kind to give up easily, we wave our arms and try to make all kinds of sign language attempts which the aliens find endlessly amusing. Every time we point to something the aliens try to smell us the name of what we point at, but we just

never get the hint. We just think they are rather rude about their body odors and the way they blow the smell in our direction. In response we try to yell at them to stop but the aliens feel the way we cause their skin to vibrate is rather rude as well. To them, skin vibration in the normal voice range of 300 Hertz to 3000 Hertz "stinks."

The bottom line here is that humanity has never really considered how to systematically approach communication with a truly alien intelligence. If we had we might already be having some very interesting conversations with our own distant cousins right here on this planet. The truth is that we just barely manage to communicate within our own species and more often than not what we really do is mis-communicate. Even written communication is seldom totally clear except to the person who wrote it and sometimes even that is a stretch.

So, are we really ready to talk to aliens? Maybe we will be when we finally understand how to talk to each other.