

Seeing Sunspots with Blurred Vision

Written by Alex Baer

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In summer, around campfires, warming against the night chill, it is easy to stretch one's lower back in the flickering light, and look upward, launching one's higher mind, into the clouds of stars.

It is an always stunning notion -- looking up into the skies and into the view of stars, is gazing back in time, participating in time travel. That light took a long time to get here, but it went the top end of the speed limit, the whole way, as fast as light can go.

Sometimes, starlight can play havoc with more than just romantic dreams and futuristic daydreams. Take the current arcs and flares and solar prominences of our own star, the Sun, which is currently kicking up its heels, bombarding the Earth with radiation in the biggest storm since 2005.

Down here, on our home world, on Earth -- a seemingly rare place of breathable air and liquid water and three-bears-style climate that is not too hot, not too cold -- we can thank our atmosphere for taking the heat, so to speak, of this storm. We can thank that onionskin layer for standing between us and maelstroms, infernos, the inability to remain alive.

There are a lot of protons flying around out there, zipping along at 93 million miles an hour, and they won't fade quickly, say experts, which is why they stick around for a while, making communications iffy or sporadic or crackling now and again. Astronauts and pilots and satellites have the most challenges.

One report from earlier today noted Delta Air Lines was going to re-route a number of polar and other flights to be on the safe side, as a precaution.

These are huge phenomena, immeasurably powerful, unimaginably so to us down here, pattering around on the crusted skin of Earth. It's a fine time to catch a few minds, while they may still be open, before they snap shut again, to restate some really obvious notions, before they get lost again in the amnesia machines up on altars in our homes -- on the television sets, where the TVs outnumber people in U.S. households.

- * There is just this one planet we all share
- * It is big, but more fragile than we really know
- * We are burning through fossil fuels like no tomorrow
- * There are huge mats of non-biodegrading plastic in our seas

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* There are radioactive scars present, souvenirs from humans stumbling around in the dark with nuclear power, weapons, and both

* We have removed mountaintops to scoop out coal, poisoning lands and rivers

* We are blasting precious fresh water under pressure in an attempt to make Earth give up more burnable gases, regardless of aquifer harm

* The weird weather continues: Snow in the Western Algerian Sahara Desert while ice shelves retreat, and on and on and on...

Yes, you could fit a million Earths into a space the size of our Sun, if the former were marbles and the latter a goldfish bowl. Doesn't mean much, that magnificence of size and scope, if you can't breathe, if your skin is crisping because the atmosphere has boiled away.

As the solar storms have captured our attention and interest for a moment, it's an apt moment to count our lucky stars, and our lucky atmosphere, without which we are powdered charcoal.

In 2010, the emissions of carbon dioxide, that greenhouse gas we hear go past our ears now and again, went up six percent -- the largest-ever, single-year increase.

We fossil fuel addicts are microwaving ourselves quite a Happy Meal here -- and ourselves in the bargain.

Somehow, though, "Dancing with the Stars" is on, and, even though there is heavenly and celestial-seeming music on somewhere, in the background, we're still not in step with what needs to be done.

Makes one wonder how much of a trip and fall that will be, when it comes, in the rush to find a chair to sit in when the music really stops playing.

One president puts solar panels on the roof of the White House, while the music goes round and round, another one rips 'em off.

Allusions to grand theft and greased-skid, species genocide aside at the hands of the fossil fuel brokers, aren't we ready to stop fumbling around with the wheel, with fossil fuels, with something as hot and dangerous as ICE -- internal combustion engines, and invent something really, breathtakingly new?

A time of solar flares is a good time to say "Thank you" to the protective envelope we breathe in and out, all of us, a dozen times or so a minute, give or take -- and a good time to think what we could do to ensure it's still around, that thin onionskin, for everyone's grandchildren, not just the grandchildren of a few who can afford the SPF-nine-quadrillion lotion needed if the atmosphere shrugs off this world, out into space.

Don't accuse me, not just yet, of recklessly sawing away at the violins; I just happened to

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remember how far along we'd be by now, if we had kept going with the notions Jimmy Carter dragged into our reluctant view, how it might be, if those ideas had not been ridiculed and pulled out by the roots.

Not too late, but the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the group running the mythic "Doomsday Clock," since its inception in 1947, has just nudged us forward, closer by a minute to midnight, when the lights go out. We now have five minutes on the clock, until midnight.

Not quite so scary as when we had just 2 minutes to go, in 1953, true -- but it's nowhere near the breathing space we had in 1991, when we were up to a whopping 17 minutes.

So, while we consider these astonishing solar storms, and their power, it's a good as time as any to consider how we might best harness this all but immutable force, this ultimate source of all our subsequent energy here.

We could do worse, all of us, than absolutely insist we stop playing footsie with the future, and start trying to turn that future around, starting right now.

Like any ship of size, state or otherwise, one cannot just "hang a U-ey" willy-nilly.

Maybe we can catch up to Carter, where we would have been now, before we got hornswoggled and sideswiped by the Self-Centered, Self-Important Greed Barons and Influence Peddlers, masters of the short-term game in a long-term need.

We'll absolutely have to start now -- not even as late as next Tuesday at three o'clock.

Who knows -- someone might even get distracted and veer off a little from the main body of the massive project we'll create, away from the Manhattan-Project-for-Real-Atomic-Power, the one harnessing solar power, and tinker a bit with wave energy.

We seem to have a lot of water around here, on this one planet we all share, and it, like us, does one heck of a lot of moving around on the topmost part of the world, where it's easy to get at, simple to touch.

Just thinking outside the gas tank, now, for a sec -- could be some way we could tap into that, and without slowly killing everything in sight this time, including ourselves, maybe.

Might give us a while longer around the campfire, admiring the starlight, killing time.

Ya think?