

Following Our Childhood Curiosity

Science offers the privilege of maintaining our childhood curiosity and answering fundamental questions based on evidence, without pretensions.

By Avi Loeb on October 18, 2021

After my parents passed away a few years ago, it struck me that we live for such a short time and so we better focus on substance rather than on trying to impress each other by bowing to popular pretensions. We often go through life with unfulfilled dreams, wearing makeup that makes us look better but obscures our authenticity. We postpone doing what we really believe in, under the excuse that there will be time for it later in life. And then we all die like a pomegranate full of seeds that were never planted because the shell that enclosed them was never broken. The unfulfilled seeds of hopes and dreams remain sealed and buried for eternity.

The social isolation inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic allowed me to rethink my own path. I vowed to focus on my real passion as a scientist without worrying about what others think. I reasoned that humans resemble seashells on the beach. Each of us is born with different colors and shapes but rubbing too often against each other erodes us to an indistinguishable appearance. The tendency to mediocrity perpetuates when we lose our childhood curiosity and dismiss questions to which we have no answer, as we become adults and project an image of knowing more than we actually do.

The most pressing scientific question in my mind was: “are there neighbors in our cosmic block that sent equipment into space which we can find?” In July 2021, I decided to establish the [Galileo Project](#) and search experimentally for such equipment, despite the pushback from colleagues in academia.

I served three terms as [chair of the Harvard Astronomy department](#). The reason I decided to sacrifice precious research time to public service is because I realized that this is the best way to improve my immediate environment, rather than count on other leaders to do the right things. Similarly, I have been a theoretical astrophysicist throughout my entire scientific career of forty years, but I chose to lead an experimental effort in the form of the [Galileo Project](#) because this search for extraterrestrial relics would not have been done otherwise.

There were three facts that triggered my decision. The discovery in October 2017 of the unusual interstellar object, [‘Oumuamua](#), that [did not look](#) like any comet or asteroid we had seen before; the discovery in September 2020 of the object [2020 SO](#) that shared ‘Oumuamua’s qualities of being pushed away from the Sun as a result of reflecting sunlight without a cometary tail and was later identified as a 1966 rocket booster of artificial origin; and the [report](#) from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) to the US

Congress in June 2021, suggesting that some [Unidentified Aerial Phenomena](#) (UAP) are real objects of unknown nature, convinced me that rigorous scientific inquiry is warranted and research belongs to the mainstream of science. Even if these anomalous objects have a natural origin, like [hydrogen or nitrogen icebergs](#) for `Oumuamua or rare atmospheric phenomena for UAP, we will learn something new about nature by studying them.

We [had been searching](#) for extraterrestrial radio signals over seventy years but this search resembles a quest for a phone conversation in which the counterpart must be active. Most technological civilizations that predated us by billions of years might be dead by now or not using radio communication any more. Nevertheless, over their lifetime, they might have sent out equipment, like the [five interstellar probes](#) that NASA had launched. Such equipment accumulates in interstellar space like plastic bottles on the surface of the ocean.

Science offers the privilege of maintaining our childhood curiosity. As scientists we are given the privilege of seeking evidence rather than surrendering to the “adults in the room” who dismiss a fundamental question just because it embarrasses them to admit that they do not know the answer to it. If `Oumuamua appears weird and if government agencies admit that they cannot figure out the nature of UAP, then scientists should come to the rescue. Instead, the scientific search for extraterrestrial equipment in space received no funding while the search for [weakly interacting massive particles](#) as [dark matter](#) received hundreds of millions of dollars and did not find these hypothetical particles after forty years. Why do scientists ask for extraordinary evidence before engaging in the former search while cataloging the latter search in the dark as mainstream, even though it is far less impactful on humanity?

The prestige of being labeled as an “expert” attaches a scientist to what is known while resisting the risk of admitting ignorance. We would rather dismiss the question “are there objects of extraterrestrial technological origin near Earth?” than admit that we might have missed an important facet of our cosmic reality. The [Galileo Project](#) breaks this mold by engaging exceptional scientists in the study of objects like `Oumuamua or UAP. It is the first experimental project dominated by dozens of researchers from academia, unified by the desire to find an answer to a foundational question through telescopes without prejudice.

When I married my wife two decades ago, I promised her that I will not subscribe to social media. In retrospect, I am grateful for this vow. Social pressure steals our independent thinking and damages innovation and creativity, which propelled our civilization forward thanks to individuals like [Galileo Galilei](#) who pioneered modern science.

In a recent forum of the Harvard Alumni Association, I suggested to enhance diversity and inclusion by incorporating extraterrestrials into our scientific vocabulary, since distant civilizations are probably very different than ours. Encountering others will enhance our imagination for entirely new colors that are possible in the cosmic rainbow of life forms. If they are far more advanced than we are, then our small genetic differences will appear meaningless. Here’s hoping that recognizing extraterrestrial species out there will convince us to treat all people on Earth with respect as equal members of the [human](#) species.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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