

Savoring Space and Time

Despite its ravages, the pandemic gave many of us a pair of precious gifts.

LIKE MANY IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, I was furloughed for six months as a result of COVID-19. As a judge in the horseracing industry, I determine race winners in a high-octane environment in which errors with split-second decisions can cost millions. Governed by deadlines, schedules, and endless thinking ahead, I frequently disappear up my own tailpipe! But lockdown changed all that, and two priceless gifts emerged: space and time.

Instantly, “empty” days and nights stretched ahead. Freed from work, I had space and time to think about . . . space and time. Untethered from early morning starts and relentless pressure to be at the top of my game, my foot eased off the proverbial pedal. I stayed out late observing, occasionally all night, for when would such freedom arise again?

Night after glorious night I gazed into contrail-free, relatively unpolluted skies with tack-sharp stars. The Milky Way seemed more luminous and voluminous, its rarely visible dust lanes now clearly threaded through its star-spanned length. When the Moon emerged, she was brighter, her mare and craters wondrously defined. I delighted in the phase transitions, and in earthshine that was stunningly incandescent. I even pulled out my “trusty but dusty” TAL-1 telescope, cleaned it, and aimed it skyward to track the travelling planets, which, as with all else, stood out so much sharper than pre-pandemic.

There I stood in magnificent isolation in the field near our house, present in a way never permitted before, enjoying all the space and time in the world, in the universe even, following my own mantra, which is to “look up, live it, and love it.” It was magical.

But I couldn’t totally disconnect from the company’s “cyber hive,” and I monitored horseracing matters on

the workplace social media site. Here I read such comments as: “I’m bored out of my tiny mind” — “I’ve got loads of time and nothing to do with it” — “I just can’t walk the darn dog anymore.” Reading them, I grew more saddened by the day. *At last you have the space and time you’ve long lamented not having,* I inwardly screamed. *Look up!*

So, taking action, I began posting photos of the planets. I received instant feedback and questions: Where are they? Can I spot them now? How did they get there? Soon I was overwhelmed. My equine-absorbed colleagues, many immersed in homeschooling, fired questions from their kids, some of whom were working on science projects but had no idea about astronomy.

I moved from the Moon, planets, and constellations to how the stars came to be, suggesting that my colleagues spare

a thought for how small and transient their space and time are compared to the size and age of the cosmos itself! Families soon confessed to staying out late to watch the Moon rise or to seek out the planets. They posted their own images in a bid to share their awe and joy. The site became a much-followed hub for everyone to showcase their new-found time and space.

I’m now back at work and bemoan the loss of these two treasured gifts. Once again, schedules, deadlines, and constant low-level stress are the order of the day. But a glance at the night sky is a reminder for all of us that we should make the space and time.

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