

What void?

“Our lives, our past and our future are tied to the sun, the moon and the stars We humans have seen the atoms which constitute all of nature and the forces that sculpted this work and we, who embody the local eyes and ears and thoughts and feelings of the cosmos, have begun to wonder about our origins star stuff contemplating the stars, organized collections of ten billion billion billion atoms, contemplating the evolution of nature, tracing that long path by which it arrived at consciousness here on the planet earth Our loyalties are to the species and to the planet. Our obligation to survive and flourish is owed not just to ourselves but also to that cosmos ancient and vast from which we spring.

We are one species.

We are star stuff harvesting star light.”

–Carl Sagan

We were asked recently how we fill the void in our lives left by the lack of religion. We don't see it as a void, as a lack, at all. We are sustained by our curiosity, our interest in other people, our relationships with family and friends, just as most humans are. We live knowing that we have one life, that we need to make the best of it, and we both think it is important to have a positive influence on the lives of the people around us.

I was lucky enough to attend a lecture given last week by Neil DeGrasse Tyson, a well known astrophysicist. The talk he gave was about looking at the world through the lens of scientists. He went through several views, including a chemist, a biologist, a mathematician, and, of course, an astrophysicist. Each of the views showed the world in a different way.

Chemists see the world in terms of atoms, molecules, bonds, and interactions. They see the world as a combination of elements. The history of chemistry is intertwined with the history of the world. Elements were primarily discovered by countries with money and power that set great store by science and supported the scientists. Some elements were named after planets, some after places, and some, like Technetium, were named because of what they are – “tech” means “man made”, and this element does not appear in nature.

Biologists look at the world in terms of life, how we fit in, and how incredibly small a part we play, as well as how complex and fascinating life can be. They’ve recently found organisms that not only survive but flourish in extreme conditions, everything from ice to volcanic heat. When you look at a diagram of the [tree of life](#), you can see the huge diversity of organisms on our planet. What was even more amazing to me is that this diagram only shows about three thousand species. Just to be clear, that is out of about nine million species that could have been shown. We are one tiny branch of that tree. The diversity around us is astounding and beautiful.

Would you like to know how to make a mathematician twitch? Take one onto an elevator where the floors go 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15. Mathematicians want the world to make sense, want precision. In much of Europe, the ground floor is zero, the first floor is 1, and the basement is -1. That makes sense. Some of the people quoted by Dr. Tyson were things like a Congressman saying “I’ve changed my views 360 degrees on that subject!” Every day, walking through the world, experiencing the headlines and silliness that so many of us spout, mathematicians are subjected to inaccuracies and assumptions that are not reflected by reality. How about “Eighty percent of the passengers who survived had studied the locations of the exit doors on takeoff”? The correct answer to this is “So what?” We can’t ask the dead people. Maybe one hundred percent

of the dead people studied the locations of the exit doors, but there is no way to know that now. Mathematics can be used to slant how people perceive the world, and that is deeply frustrating for those people who really know what the numbers mean and, more to the point, what they don't mean. Mathematicians see beauty in numbers, in order and in chaos, in the patterns surrounding us.

Astrophysicists look at the world as a tiny speck. We are a mote, surrounded by billions of stars in the sky, more galaxies than I, at least, can imagine. They see the possibilities of all of those stars, many of which have planets called "Goldilocks" planets (planets that are just right), which are planets which are earth-like enough that life could develop there.

Every one of us is made up of pieces of stars. Every molecule, every atom of our beings used to be part of a star that exploded and provided the building blocks for more stars and planets. Some of those eventually became the goo that held the beginnings of life on earth.

How do we fill the void left by religion? How is there a void? We are surrounded by billions of stars, other galaxies, all of which are made up of the same stuff we are. We have families and friends who are very dear to us. We have jobs that make a difference in the world. We are good, caring, loving people, and we are in a stable relationship. We enjoy each other and the life we share.

What void? There is no void, for us. We are made of star stuff. We are part of the universe in a very real way.

30 Days of truth: Day 14

Day 14 → A hero that has let you down.

When I was little, I suppose you could say the Christian god was my hero. I thought he could fix anything as long as I believed hard enough. I thought that I had to do as much as I could, but, at the end, when everything was on the line, god would step in and make it all better.

Somehow that never worked.

As I grew older, I became something of a cynic where god was concerned. Why would some all powerful being let friends die? Why was my brother born with Down Syndrome, high functioning enough to be hurt by the knowledge of his difference? For those who say he was put on this earth to teach us how to be better people: go do something physically unlikely to yourself. If a god is mean enough to cause a child pain to make other people better, that's not a god I can believe in. Also, I'm not sure that the experience necessarily made us better. Different, yes, and our lives were unquestionably changed, but to be sure that our lives were actually better because of his disability would require the ability to look at different timelines to see what would have happened. Not something we can do. Don't get me wrong. I love my brother and I'm glad he was part of my life for as long as he was, but I would not have wished pain on him, and his differences caused him pain and unhappiness. That's really not okay with me.

I asked questions of friends, family, and priests, and none of them could answer with much other than "You just need to have faith." I saw too much hypocrisy among Christians to be able to accept that they actually believed. "You'll know they are Christians by their love" doesn't hold much water when you have a friend who grew up in a strongly Christian community, a part of the community, much loved and respected, who was shut

out completely when he came out as gay, or when I see people who figure they are good Christians because they go to church every Sunday hurting their animals, kids, or spouse because they can, because they have power over them.

God was once something of a hero to me. I think, once you learn too much about a hero, you find that they are not as amazing or wonderful as you thought. There are flaws. In this case, the flaws were so big that I eventually realized that there is no god, that we choose what we do and who we are.

Next: Day 15 → Something or someone you couldn't live without, because you've tried living without it.

Atheism

I'm an atheist. I have been for a while. I grew up Episcopalian, but it stopped making sense to me. I drifted to agnosticism and then, upon thinking about it for a while, decided I am really an atheist. I really only miss religion when I'm ticked off at something that happened that is completely not fair but not something anyone has control over. At that point, I sometimes wish I had someone to yell at. Other than that, though, I don't have any holes in my life.

I understand that a lot of people have problems with atheists. I have problems with evangelicals of any stripe, and sometimes atheists come in that mold, too. I believe very strongly that people should be allowed to choose their belief systems. I don't force my atheism on anyone (I know at least a few people who don't have a clue that I'm an atheist) and I really appreciate it when other people manage to avoid pushing their beliefs on me. I will respect your beliefs if you will give me room for mine, too.

I don't mind discussions, but people getting obnoxious I can do without.

So. The next question everyone seems to ask is "How do you know what is right if you don't have a god to guide you?" I was raised to think about everything. I understand that I don't like it when I get hurt. I do not see any reason why I should think it's a good thing to hurt someone else if I don't like it. Seems pretty basic to me. I think about how my actions and words affect other people. I would hope that people in general would be capable of doing that without the threat of an angry god or hell hanging over them.

Religion to me started feeling like the carrot and the stick. If you did everything right, you got into heaven. If you didn't, the afterlife was not a pleasant place to be. I decided that I will live knowing that this is the only chance I have to do things right. I don't believe that I am being judged by some omnipotent being. I believe that my life, if it is going to make a difference, will make a difference now. I can make choices now about what I want to do and how much of an impact I want to make on the world.

If I do something wrong, I have to make amends. I can't pray to some being and make it all better. If I hurt someone, I hurt a person. I didn't hurt something I can't see. I hurt someone standing right in front of me, and it's my responsibility to deal with it in this lifetime. Preferably quickly, too. If I'm wrong, I'll say so. I accept it. I make mistakes. Sometimes I stick my foot in my mouth and say things that hurt people. It happens to everyone. The difference is, I know this is the only chance I have to do this living thing right. I have to clean up my own messes, and no one is going to come along and fix things for me.

I am responsible for myself and my actions. I don't need a god making rules for me. I know what is right and wrong. Doing things to purposely hurt someone is not good. Trying to help

people is good. Thinking about the consequences of actions is very, very important. I can do that. I'm not always right, but when I did believe in a god, I didn't get feedback on right or wrong, so I'm not sure how that helps.

Don't even get me started on the contradictions in the Bible.

It's a different kind of life for me. I think, I like to think, I am more aware of the results of my actions. I try to be honest with myself about what I need and what I can handle. I try to think as much about the people around me as I do of myself. I try hard to live my life fully, so when I look back there are no regrets.

I have one shot at a good life. I have one stretch of time in which I get to be a conscious being. This is mine to fill with living a good life, and I will do my best, and I will try to be happy and enjoy it and not cause unnecessary pain to anyone else.

I'm happy to talk about it. I'll be adding links on the sidebar to atheists I read, so if you have any interest, you can follow links to their sites, too. Please come to the discussion with an open mind and we can have an interesting conversation. If you come in waving religion like a red flag, I'll have a harder time with the discussion. Reasoned arguments are never bad, though.

I hope this might help change, even if only slightly, the perception that atheists are bad by definition. Morality is not based on a god.