

## **Reflection: A Satellite Perspective** **Glen O’Grady**

[Show the picture Big Blue Dot] Who knows what this picture is?

After 13 years in space Voyager 1 came to the edge of our Solar System. NASA scientists on February 14, 1990, turned Voyagers camera away from the space it was exploring and turned it back to earth (which was approx. six billion kms away) and took this photo of our planet earth - the “Pale Blue Dot”

This telescopic perspective – prompted the following reflection by Carl Sagan (Video).

*Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.*

*The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.*

*Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.*

*The Earth is the only world known so far to harbour life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.*

*It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.*

In the previous CAULLT meetings I have invited us to consider the the different *frames* we can use to *reflect* upon our work as leaders in learning and teaching, we discussed the reflection we do on a day to day basis as leaders in learning and teaching– we agreed this reflection is more than just sharing “what we think” it is something more profound – perhaps it is an ongoing constitution and re-constitution of our practice and who we are.

In our last CAULLT meeting we used Glyn Davis’s book to engage in reflection using what is commonly called a *helicopter perspective* - wherein when we take a more elevated view of

our day to day work – to allows us to identify the historical, sociological, or psychological patterns that inform our ways of knowing and doing.

Today I want to introduce a satellite perspective, others may call it a telescopic or grand perspective.

Consider the picture the Pale Blue Dot? How did the perspective influence the nature of Sagan's reflection?

In a moment, I want to invite you on your table to address the question: *How would you "perceive" Higher Education (learning and teaching) from a satellite perspective?*

How would we see Higher Education if we reframe the microscopic issues of higher education against some satellite/grander view?

What would government higher education funding, student numbers, research output, sector revenue, student satisfaction, student engagement, academic performance, graduate employability, AQF, accreditation, pathways, academic development, assessment, micro-credentials, technology enhanced learning, learning spaces, professional recognition, disruption, academic skills, professional learning... look like when we take a satellite perspective?

Of course, all of these details are "important" but what do we lose if we relinquish a satellite perspective for the mundane, when a grand vision that which we aspire to be, as higher education, is defined by the most pressing microscopic issues of our time?

I imagine, there are those thinking, great, sit down and Glen and let me get on with answering this question. Others like myself, when I starting exploring this perspective, may feel perplexed. So, let me scaffold the task just a little more...

Hannah Arendt in critiquing Kant's notion of knowledge makes a distinction between meaning and truth. Her own work argued reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning (Arendt 1981). In the spirit of Arendt reasoning what is the abstract meaning of higher education that locates the details of higher education?

I have provided on your desk some poetry. I toyed with idea of also giving you quotes from various Australian higher education reviews, Cardinal Newman, Barnett and others (and I have these if you would like them) but instead I have provided some poetry with the hope this invites a "different" response. Poetry serves to ask questions that draw together both our cognitive and emotional (Quinlan 2016) capacities. Phillip Jackson in commenting on Dewey's posthumously published poems (there were more than 100) that they served as a natural bridge between Dewey's private life and his more public endeavours (Jackson 1982).

So, I hope these poems may allow you to explore your meaning higher education.

Now Hannah Arendt if she was still with us she might roll her eyes at the use of Poems. (Though recent work by Degerman (2016) suggest she might not be so adverse)

David Whyte said "poetry is language against which you have no defence" In his poem *Working Together* he proposes a value for poetry:

*Be taught now, among the trees and rocks,  
how the discarded is woven into shelter,  
learn the way things hidden and unspoken  
slowly proclaim their voice in the world.  
Find that far inward symmetry  
to all outward appearances, apprentice  
yourself to yourself, begin to welcome back  
all you sent away, be a new annunciation,  
make yourself a door through which  
to be hospitable, even to the stranger in you.*

In a seminar in Melbourne 2018 David Whyte invited the (corporate heavy) audience to consider the art of asking the “beautiful question”. *The ability to ask beautiful questions, often in very unbeautiful moments, is one of the great disciplines of a human life. And a beautiful question starts to shape your identity as much by asking it, as it does by having it answered. You just have to keep asking. And before you know it, you will find yourself actually shaping a different life, meeting different people, finding conversations that are leading you in those directions that you wouldn't even have seen before.*”

The focus on questions, that seek meaning, would resonant with Hannah Arendt's (1981) “*To lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking and cease to ask unanswerable questions [would be to] lose not only the ability to produce those thought-things that we call works of art but also the capacity to ask all the answerable questions upon which every civilization is founded.*”

Our questions and imagination of a grand perspective of higher education, that privileges meaning over truth does not deny the realities of what we must deal with on a day to day, but it does create space for big questions about Higher Education.

So how might we continue a conversation with our self and our future self? Can I invite you to write a letter to yourself...

## **References**

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