

First Contact will be life-altering

BY MAUREEN ARGES NADIN

ONE DAY, in the not too distant future, you will go to bed assuming, as you do every night, that you will wake up in the morning and life will be much the same as it was the day before. The sun will rise, the newspapers will tell the same stories of bickering politicians, far away wars, tax increases and other things that you will distance yourself from before getting on with your daily business. Aside from the periodic unexpected twists of fate, life goes on as usual and the world that we live in, for all its beauty, foibles and flaws, follows its comfortable and predictable patterns.

Except that one day it won't. One day, you will wake up and the world you live in will have changed forever and everything that you have believed to be irreversibly true will be shaken to the core. And the life altering event that will precipitate this is "first contact"—news of the first signal to reach our planet that originates from an intelligent civilization elsewhere in our galaxy. The proverbial cosmic "hello" that answers once and for all the universal question that is part of our human consciousness — are we alone?

To help you visualize how this dramatic discovery might unfold, Discovery Channel has produced a compelling documentary called *Alien Encounters: The Message and the Arrival*. Part fact, part fictionalized speculation on how the world would respond to the news of first contact, the film was produced in partnership with the SETI Institute (Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence). It offers a plausible and thought provoking rendering of how



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the message would be received and decoded by a team of dedicated and visionary scientists. The story unfolds with a dramatic tension that is supplemented by informative commentaries by some of the world's leading scientists. We learn that, based on the rate that the Kepler probe has been detecting exo solar planets that may be similar to Earth (over 1200 and still counting) scientists are speculating that the number of planets in our galaxy may exceed the already known 200 billion stars in our galaxy. That's a lot of potential earths. We also learn that the SETI Institute is no longer a handful of scientists with their ears to the sky but a well organized corporation of over 150 employees consisting of astronomers, astrophysicists, biologists, chemists, geologists and even a psychologist, whose services will surely be required on the day after the world changes forever.

The documentary poses the soul searching question of how humanity will respond when we learn we are not alone — will we embrace the knowledge or run away in fear? It portrays the range of anticipated reactions: fear and mass panic on one end of the spectrum to a loving welcome on the other. Governments will

scramble to establish who will be in charge but SETI director Jill Tartar reminds us that the first message "is the property of all humankind" and will transform us all, regardless of race or creed.

First contact with an extraterrestrial civilization will challenge all of our ideologies and inherent understanding of who we are. Even religious beliefs will be shaken and world religions should be prepared to examine more global dogmas. Sceptics must be prepared to consider Jill Tartar's conclusion that "we are not the pinnacle of evolution. We are just one evolutionary outcome." In a universe that is 14 billion years old, we have a mere 200,000 years of history, give or take a few years, and only 100 years of technology. It is reasonable to speculate that we may be the newcomers to a cosmos that is teeming with intelligent life.

We need to start thinking about how we will respond when the inevitable happens. If world governments are preparing, I hope that they can think beyond military considerations.

As for world religions, the Catholic Church has evidently learned from its persecution of Galileo and has already hosted an astrobiology (the study of life beyond Earth) conference in 2009 where religious leaders sat down at the same table with scientists. It's a good start.

On the day the world you knew changes forever, will you be ready?

Maureen Arges Nadin is a freelance writer and space enthusiast whose column appears on this page on the second Sunday of each month.

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